Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Linking Positive Psychology with Sustainability Education

Lesson By:
Michael Podmore
Yampah Mountain High School
Glenwood Springs, Colorado

Grade Level/Subject Areas:
High School/Social Studies Classes/Geography/Psychology/Economics

Duration of Lesson:
10-15 one hour class periods

Content Standards:
Colorado High School Geography Standard. Grade Level Expectations #2 (SS09-GR.HS.2-GLE.3) The interconnected nature of the world, its people and places.

Colorado High School Economics Standard. Grade Level Expectations #1 (SS09-GR.HS.3-GLE.1) Productive Resources – natural, human, capital – are scarce; therefore choices are made about how individuals, businesses, governments and societies allocate these resources.

Lesson Abstract:
The relatively new field of positive psychology offers some encouraging ideas which link positive psychology with sustainability education. Positive psychology, which studies happiness, is a high interest topic for most people. Educators teaching happiness can use this interest as a useful hook to eventually get students more interested in sustainability. Through studying happiness, students realize that their well being is linked to the well being of others, and the well being of the natural environment.

Guiding Questions:
What is the appropriate balance between sustainability and economic development?
Should communities limit their populations based upon available resources and environmental limitations?
How do social class and individual perceptions affect the definition of sustainability?

Content Essay:

Linking Positive Psychology with Sustainability Education

Like many teachers, I am all about sustainability education. I went into teaching to hoping to get students to learn about environmental issues, and become part of a movement of future problem solvers. I just assumed that they would care. However, years of high school teaching have left me somewhat frustrated. For whatever reasons, many students do not seem to care a great deal about topics related to sustainability. They often verbalize what they care about in more ego centric terms. Of course there are some students who do seem to a care about
sustainability and several even appear quite motivated, but many of the rest just seem disinterested. How can we light a spark under these disinterested students? The relatively new field of positive psychology offers some encouraging ideas. Studying happiness is a high interest topic to most people….even high school students! The good news is that studying what makes us happy will eventually lead us down a path toward studying principles and practices that align with sustainability education. It appears that over-consumption and material wealth do not make us happy, but things like family, friends, community, altruism, and finding meaning in life do. As sustainable happiness guru Catherine O’Brien puts it: “Our natural desire for happiness can become the entry point for discovering that our well being is inextricably linked to the well being of others and the natural environment” (O’Brien p.1). Bingo! Say goodbye to “gloom and doom” lessons that try to motivate students through fear and guilt, and start studying happiness.

Why Study Happiness?

The simple answer is because people want to be happy. Humans are truly interested in learning strategies to increase their happiness. This idea goes extremely far back in human history. Aristotle believed that happiness is the ultimate end and purpose of human existence. In today’s world, the Dalia Lama agrees with Aristotle stating that “the purpose of life is to be happy” (Tenzin, 2013). Wisdom, across history and culture, suggests that we should be studying happiness.

Positive psychology is a new branch of psychology that focuses the study of happiness. The website for the journal Psychology Today describes positive psychology as “a relatively new field that examines how ordinary people can become happier and more fulfilled” (Psychology Today, 2013. www.psychologytoday.com/basics/positive-psychology). Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describe positive psychology in the following way: “We believe that a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities” (Cherry, 2013).

The field of positive psychology is booming. People are interested in learning more about happiness. Over the past ten years there has been an onslaught of magazine articles, books, research studies, and academic conferences on the topic. Time Magazine has devoted multiple cover stories relating to happiness. The most popular class at Harvard today is “Positive Psychology” known unofficially as the “Happiness Course.” Harvard even chose to bring happiness to the masses, offering “Positive Psychology” as an online course in 2008 (Parker-Pope, p.1). The implications are clear, happiness is a high interest topic, and educators should take advantage of this enthusiasm and bring the study of happiness into the classroom.

What makes people happy?

Many people think that making more money will make them happier. Most research on what makes people happy disputes this belief. Positive psychology research tells us quite clearly that making more money does not make people happier. Obviously there are many wealthy people who are not happy, and many happy people who are not wealthy. In his 2002 book, Authentic Happiness Martin Seligman argues that once a certain basic income is reached, there
are no increases in happiness on par with increases in wealth. In effect, money can help to make us happy until our basic needs are met. After that point, more money does not mean more happiness.

Our consumer society leads us to believe that consumption of goods makes us happy. Research shows that most young people have been exposed to a half million ads by the time they become teenagers. We are bombarded with the idea that we can buy our way into happiness. As Tim Kasser states in his article The Goods Life or the Good Life, “many Americans' vision of ‘the good life’ may actually be ‘the goods life’”(Kasser, p.1).

In their book Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life authors Manel Baucells and Rakesh Sarin use mathematical models to examine what makes people happy. The authors clearly point out that consumption of material goods causes an initial increase in our happiness, but then we quickly get used to the new things we have and our happiness level returns to previous levels. Yet despite the research suggesting we should step off of it, many of us appear stuck on the hedonic treadmill where we continually want more money and material goods even though they do not lead to more happiness. Perhaps Gandhi’s “Renounce and Enjoy” philosophy hits the mark, could the path to a happier life be based on simplicity and non materialism?

If money and consumption don’t really make us happy, what does? Authentic happiness, according to Seligman, comes from relationships with family and friends, meaningful work, and community involvement rather than through an endless striving for material possessions (Seligman, 2002). Most positive psychology researchers agree that intrinsic goals and motivations lead to more happiness that extrinsic ones. Intrinsic goals include things like personal growth, connections with community, and wanting to help humanity and the natural world for altruistic reasons. Extrinsic goals involve wanting more things related to money, luxury, status, and power. In his article entitled Why Seeking More Money Hurts Happiness, Philip Moeller concludes that “personal growth and helping others are more likely to promote happiness than money and status.” Community, wanting to help humanity, caring for nature, altruism; these are topics which relate directly with sustainability education.

Linking Happiness with Sustainability Education

If pursuing true happiness ends up being good for the planet, that is a remarkably inspiring idea. Who would have thought that the solution to many of our global problems lies in individuals choosing to be happy. This has profound effects for educators and people concerned with sustainability education. Through the study of happiness we can move toward sustainability. Happiness is indeed linked with sustainability. A global vision of a future centered around sustainability should involve happy individuals making conscious choices to maintain and improve their happiness. Making conscious choices to improve well being on the individual, community, and global levels leads to what Gandhi called Sarvodaya, the well being of all (the awakening of all).

O’Brien’s idea of Sustainable Happiness actually links the two concepts together. O’Brien defines sustainable happiness as “happiness that contributes to individual, community
and/or global well being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations” (O’Brien p. 1).

The implications for bringing ideas of sustainable happiness to the classroom are exciting. Students start with a concern for their own individual well being, this is natural. Who doesn’t want to be happier? But by reflecting on the things that make them happy, students quickly realize that their individual well being is directly linked to community and global well being. Quality of life issues become important, and the need to protect the environment that sustains us becomes more clear.

O’Brien maintains that studying happiness invites reflection on issues of sustainability. Such studies could motivate changes in student behavior by increasing compassion for others and for the environment. “Sustainable happiness is a concept that can be used by individuals to guide their actions and decisions on a daily basis; at the community level, it reinforces the need to genuinely consider social, environmental and economic indicators of well-being so that community happiness and well being are sustainable; at the national and international level it highlights the significance of individual and community actions for the well being of all – now and into the future” (O’Brien p. 6).

Recently the kingdom of Bhutan has drawn attention for following a similar model on the national level. Bhutan has adopted GNH (Gross National Happiness) in place of GNP (Gross National Product) to assess itself. “GNH attempts to measure the quality of human experience and well-being in its totality. Along with living standards, GNH includes education, health, good governance, ecology, culture, time use, community vitality, and psychological well-being in order to measure the progress of a country” (Baucells & Sarin, p. 17). Bhutan’s culture and government are choosing to step off the hedonic treadmill, and move toward sustainability through valuing the things that make people happy. This is exciting stuff!

Conclusion

Benjamin Franklin said “the Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself” (GoodReads, Franklin Quotes). Old Ben was right, we have to understand what makes us truly happy, and act accordingly. Luckily, humans are interested in the topic. Education can play a big role in teaching us that more money and more stuff will not really make us happy. True authentic happiness comes from caring about things bigger than the self, it is about relationships with family and friends, it is about community and quality of life, and ultimately making conscious ethical decisions that respect the planet and all the life on it. It is clear that the pursuit extrinsic goals to achieve happiness is unsustainable for our world. Lifestyles based on greed and materialism, combined with global economic models based on unending growth have done much to harm our planet. We need a paradigm shift. Our natural desire to be happy can be the impetus to change. In pursuing happiness we find that our well being is linked directly to the well being of others and nature. Happiness education can lead to sustainability education, it is an inspiring and optimistic idea.
Bibliography:


Teaching Activities

- Discussions of Happiness (include quotes from Aristotle, Ben Franklin, Dalai Lama)
- What makes us happy? (What made us happy before modern civilization?)
- From Catherine O'Brien’s Sustainable Happiness Curriculum: Natural High -Free Writing Activity; Bliss List; Delightful Place –Free Writing Activity; Interdependence Map Activity; Gratitude Letter
- Self Care Assignment-how do we nourish ourselves?
- Introduce Positive Psychology and examine research
- Flow - discussion and free write
- Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivations for happiness (retail therapy, media lottery winners)
- Listen to “This American Life” episode studying the effects of winning the lottery on people
- Look at what Bhutan and GNH
- Films: Happy; I AM
- Interview: Happiest Person You Know
- Introduce altruism
- Importance of Caring (for self, for others, for nature)
- Sustainable Happiness Project: students create a project on the individual level, community level, or global level. (examples of ideas: personal boycott of disposable
water bottles, carpooling, healthy food choices, less fast food, cell phone free zones, car free days, fossil fuel free days, picking up garbage, phone free days, Buy Nothing Day).

- Ocean Robbins Organization (youtube Ocean Robbins talks)

**Materials Needed**
Film: Happy
Film: I AM
Sustainable Happiness Footprint Chart (O’Brien, 2009)
Interdependence Maps (O’Brien)
“This American Life” – Lottery Winners
Ocean Robbins video