

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

February 28, 2014

Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

[The Cost of Happiness: Teaching Students It Costs Less Than They Think](#)

[Can Brief Psychological Interventions Really Work?](#)

The Cost of Happiness: Teaching Students It Costs Less Than They Think

by C. Nathan DeWall

“Make money.” This was John’s answer when his professor asked him to share his career goal. After college, John took a consulting job, ascended the ranks, and eventually became company president. Along the way, he purchased a summer house in Aspen, a winter house in Florida, and an 11-bedroom villa in the south of France. He drove fast cars, enjoyed rare caviar, and hobnobbed with celebrities and foreign dignitaries. But was John happy?

According to Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin, and Michael Norton (2013), knowing John’s wealth only scratches the surface for understanding his happiness levels. To comprehend why people experience happiness — and how to boost it — it’s important to understand how they spend their money. The price of a luxurious home and car dwarfs how much it costs to make a person happier. The cost of happiness hovers closer to the cost of a cup of coffee.

In one illustrative experiment (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008), participants reported their happiness levels and then received \$5 or \$20. By random assignment, participants were instructed to spend the money either on someone else or on themselves. The result of the experiment? Spending money on others, rather than on themselves, increased their happiness. The amount of the giving didn’t matter; who received the money did. The effect of prosocial spending on happiness appears universal. It pops up around the world and even among toddlers (Aknin et al., 2012, 2013).

Students love talking about money and happiness. To bring this research into the classroom, have

students watch Michael Norton’s wonderful TEDx talk, “How to Buy Happiness.” He summarizes research and includes many humorous examples. He also shows how prosocial spending increases productivity. To date, over 1.5 million people have viewed this talk.

After viewing the talk, have students form small discussion groups. Their job is to imagine that they are a boss in a company. Now that they understand how prosocial spending increases happiness and productivity, they need to design a company program that emphasizes how prosocial spending might benefit the company and that encourages employees to engage in prosocial spending. Give students 5 minutes to develop their ideas. Instructors can have discussion groups summarize their program by giving a short (about 1 minute) class presentation. Write down the names of each proposed program on the chalkboard or dry erase board. Ask students to vote for their favorite program by turning in a small slip of paper. Tally the votes and announce the winner. Discussion can then center on why students felt certain programs would have the greatest success.

Aknin and Dunn (in press) designed another teaching activity to showcase the power of prosocial spending on happiness. In this slightly modified version of the activity, instructors hand students individual envelopes that contain the activity materials. Half of the envelopes contain prosocial spending instructions printed on red paper, whereas the other half have personal spending instructions printed on green paper. (More about the different paper colors later.) To ensure random assignment, shuffle the envelopes before passing them out.

The activity has three parts. Instructors will announce that each section has a time limit, which they will enforce. The first part establishes a student’s baseline happiness level. In 1 minute, students answer the following question:

How happy are you feeling right now?

Not at All Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Very Happy
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The second part introduces the experimental twist. All students compose a short essay. Those assigned to the prosocial spending condition receive the following instructions:

Prosocial spending: Please take 5 minutes to describe the last time you spent approximately \$20 on someone else. While describing the spending event, you should re-experience the event as vividly as possible. In doing so, please think about how you felt at the time the event occurred and what led to those feelings.

Those assigned to the personal spending condition receive the following instructions:

Personal spending. Please take 5 minutes to describe the last time you spent approximately \$20 on yourself. While describing the spending event, you should re-experience the event as vividly as possible. In doing so, please think about how you felt at the time the event occurred and what led to those

feelings.

After writing their essays, students complete the third part, which will assess whether their happiness levels changed. In 1 minute, they must answer the following question:

How happy are you feeling right now?

Not at All Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Very Happy
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Now the activity becomes even more fun. Have students subtract their response to number 1 (baseline happiness) from their response to number 3 (post-feedback happiness). This method will give students their happiness change score (range of -8 to 8; higher scores indicate that students became happier). On a chalkboard or dry erase board, instructors will write “More than Zero” and “Zero and Below.” Next, have the students crumple their papers and throw them toward the side of the board that best describes their happiness change score. Don’t worry, this serves an educational purpose! More pieces of red paper, which contain the prosocial spending condition, compared with the green personal spending condition paper, should appear on the “More than Zero” side of the board because prosocial spending increases happiness.

A final activity involves having students watch and discuss the documentary, *Lucky: If Money Can’t Buy You Happiness, Can Winning the Lottery Come Close?* Students can ask two or three friends or family members to imagine that they purchased a \$100 million winning lottery ticket. Of their winnings, what would they spend on themselves and what would they spend on others? Ask them which purchases would increase their personal happiness levels. Finally, ask students to summarize Dunn, Aknin, and Norton’s (2013) research so they can educate their friends and family about the relationship between money and happiness.

Few people continue to fall prey to the idea that greed is good or that wealth is a key to mental health. Once a person earns \$75,000 per year, say Nobel laureate APS William James Fellow Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton (2010), accumulating money to improve happiness is a fool’s errand. But the effect of prosocial spending is theoretically limitless. In no study does the effect of prosocial spending on happiness level off. The more money you sow, the more happiness you reap.

Does this mean that the world’s most generous people are also the happiest? That’s a question for another day’s class.

Can Brief Psychological Interventions Really Work?

by David G. Myers

[Walton, G. M. \(2014\). The new science of wise psychological interventions. *Current Directions in*](#)

Have you, like us, felt skeptical of the seemingly too-good-to-be-true reports of brief psychological interventions? Consider:

Nouns and verbs: Voters asked survey questions framed with nouns (“How important is it to you to be a voter in tomorrow’s election?”) were 11 percentage points more likely to vote than those asked questions framed with verbs (“How important is it to you to vote?”) (Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011).

Third-person perspective: Couples asked (every 4 months for a year) “how a neutral third party” would view one of their marital conflicts, and how they might take that perspective, sustained their love, intimacy, and passion more than did couples that merely reported on their conflicts (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013).

Growth versus fixed mindset: When taught that intelligence can grow like an exercised muscle, eighth-grade students tried harder and showed superior math achievement (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Yeager, Paunesku, Walton, & Dweck, 2013).

Social belonging: African-American collegians, after being reassured that new students of all races worry about fitting in at college, earned higher grades than comparable peers over the next 3 years, thus halving the racial achievement gap (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Values affirmation: Compared with their peers, African-American seventh graders who wrote about their most important values (on three to five occasions for just 15 minutes) earned higher grades over the next 2 years than their peers (Cohen, 2006, 2009).

Really? Seriously? Is it plausible that minutes-long psychological interventions could increase voting, strengthen marriages, and boost school achievement? Is it believable that simple exercises could be more effective than expensive, intensive, extended interventions such as the 5-year-long Cambridge-Somerville youth intervention or the months-long Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program — both of which have been judged ineffective (McCord, 1978, 1979; Pan & Bai, 2009)?

As the APS Replication Initiative reminds us, these findings and more — all summarized in Gregory Walton’s (2014) fascinating paper — should be reproduced before we regard them as notable fruits of today’s applied psychological science. Happily, most of them have been replicated. The values-affirmation effect, for example, has been extended by Geoffrey Cohen and others to populations ranging from female college physics students to soup kitchen clients (Bowen, Wegmann, & Weber, 2012; Hall, Zhao, & Shafir, 2014; Miyake, Kost-Smith, Finkelstein, Pollock, Cohen, & Ito, 2010; Sherman, Hartson, Binning, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Taborsky-Barba, Tomassetti, Nussbaum, & Cohen et al., 2013).

Moreover, notes Walton, such magical-seeming interventions can work, given two conditions:

1) *Theory-guided precision.* In the spirit of Kurt Lewin (“There is nothing so practical as a good theory”), creators of “wise interventions” leverage specific psychological insights. Mindful of the need to belong, they help students make reassuring attributions for apparent social slights. Wary of

overjustification effects, they do not overpraise. Making use of the “saying-is-believing” effect, they sometimes have students convey the intervention message to younger students. Rather than just getting people to visualize a goal, such as getting a good grade, they get them to form *implementation intentions* (action plans for specific situations) and rehearse *process simulations*, such as effective studying by reading chapters, going over notes, and declining an offer to go out (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). Moreover, none of these are called “interventions” (which could be stigmatizing).

2) *Recursion*: triggering a virtuous circle. Wise interventions harness the power of self-fulfilling beliefs. If we expect someone to be nasty, we may behave in ways that elicit the nastiness we expect, which reinforces our hurt and anger, which compounds the other’s nastiness. Wise interventions aim to break or reverse such vicious circles by triggering constructive expectations and relationships, which further amplify positive outcomes. Believing that change is possible with effort — “*When you learn a new kind of math problem, you grow your math brain!*” — students may experience greater success, which discounts the sense they aren’t “gifted” at math and strengthens their self-efficacy.

To give your students an experience of these interventions — best offered *before* the class discussion (so as not to label them as “interventions”) — Gregory Walton has kindly made available to teachers of psychology some take-to-class materials.

A brief values-affirmation exercise that’s suited to college students is available [here](#).

A small-group discussion exercise that has been developed at Stanford as a variation on the belonging intervention is available [here](#).

The actual belonging intervention materials that improved minority student academic and health outcomes are available [here](#). ø

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