



**Experiences and
insights from the U.S.**

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

Part of the project 'Designing a Happier
Student Life for Better Learning: International
experiences and capacity building'

**INNOVATION
CENTRE
DENMARK**



**Ministry of Higher
Education and Science
Denmark**

DESIGNING A HAPPIER STUDENT LIFE

This case is a part of the project 'Designing a happier student life for better learning,' managed by the Danish Innovation Centres in Silicon Valley and Boston, and the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science.

About the project

"Designing a happier student life for better learning' is an internationally focused project on how to 'design' a better student life, increase student well-being and thus create optimal conditions for better learning. The project draws on the knowledge and experience of elite US universities working on the well-being agenda and leading experts in the field.

A growing body of evidence shows that student well-being is an essential element of education and overall student success. In a recent national survey of Danish students, 48% reported feeling stressed, and 22-26% felt that they were feeling lonely, which calls for action in both amending bad mental health and strengthening good mental health. Systematically working on improving mental health and building strong and healthy minds has a range of benefits for students personally and their learning, which is why the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science supports this project.

Via Innovation Centre Denmark in Silicon Valley and Innovation Centre Denmark in Boston, the international perspective and inspiration are integrated into the design of such initiatives by involving key US experts in the field and setting up partnerships for the Danish stakeholders

via:

- Capacity-building
- Knowledge-sharing
- Networks and partnerships

The project targets Danish Higher Education institutions, its students and relevant staff involved in student life and well-being, such as student counselors, faculty, and top management. You can read more about the project (in Danish) here: ufm.dk/designing-a-happier-student-life, where you can also find other cases (in English) and relevant material about the project's activities. If you like to get in touch with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science about well-being to discuss the project further, you can mail trivsel@ufm.dk.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

TAKE-AWAY POINTS

- How students think about their intelligence affects their performance
- Small daily interventions have the capacity to reshape how people make sense of themselves, the world around them, and society at large
- The happiest college students (the top 10%) have been shown to have high-quality social relationships
- Award-winning teaching Professor shares his three focus areas: setting the norm, facilitating teamwork, and keeping syllabi relevant

In today's classroom, lessons from psychology are beginning to be incorporated as a tool to better design teaching material that supports and engages students. Looking into the human mind and understanding how we process information and engage in social relationships is a tremendous help in the quest to create a better educational setting. *How to design a curriculum that gives the students the best learning experience?* As a professor, you not only need to be well-versed in the subject you are teaching but also consider human interaction and the class setup.

INSTALLING A GROWTH MINDSET

'Students who believe their intelligence can be developed (a growth mindset) outperform those who believe their intelligence is fixed (a fixed mindset)' writes Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford in an article in Education Week. Prof. Dweck and her colleagues have discovered that the way students perceive their own abilities plays a key role in their motivation and achievement.



“When students learned through a structured program that they could “grow their brains” and increase their intellectual abilities, they did better”

– Prof. Carol Dweck, Stanford University in Education Week

According to Prof. Dweck, intelligence is not fixed and educators can become better at fostering a growth mindset and encourage students to perceive their own abilities in a different light. Below is an example of how to engage with students based on Prof. Dweck’s research.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS

Growth Mindset

WHAT TO SAY:

"When you learn how to do a new kind of problem, it grows your math brain!"

Fixed Mindset

WHAT NOT TO SAY:

"Not everybody is good at math. Just do your best."

Source: Inspired by Carol Dweck model

THE BIG IMPACT OF SMALL INTERVENTIONS

Research has shown that people are motivated by seeing their behavior and actions as consistent. Often, psychological interventions try to support people into more adaptive ways of acting and perceiving the world. Designing a happier student life often entails some sort of change or intervention.

Interventions can sound like a big encounter and rather overwhelming, but according to Associate Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, Greg Walton, interventions do not have to be intense or theatrical. “Wise interventions” are small daily interactions that have the capacity to reshape how people make sense of themselves, the world around them, and society at large. For instance, shaping your feeling of belongingness or lack thereof. In this way, interventions are something that we do every single day maybe in every single interaction – like motivating your students to do their homework.

Interventions that originate in a basic understanding of social psychological processes and aim to help people achieve their goals achieve better outcomes. Prof. Walton has identified four methods of intervention that can be used to create positive behavior change, thereby improving health, well-being, and relationships.

FOUR TECHNIQUES OF INTERVENTION:

1. Direct labeling – label a group with an identity and the group is more likely to behave according to that identity. E.g. telling a class that they are “an active class” increases the amount they discuss more so than just encouraging them to participate more.

2. Prompting – “leading question intervention”. Giving people new information that provides a basis for reconsidering their answer but without directly telling people what the answer is. E.g. asking students to consider how specific course material might be useful in their next job, instead of telling them it is.

3. Active reflection – open-ended reflection exercises where students can reflect on their own experiences without being provided with new information. E.g. gratitude journaling.

4. Increasing commitment through action – giving someone information and making them explain it to a group of peers. When students share and explain, they become committed to that idea or information. In this way, they become active co-creators.

**“Sometimes we persuade ourselves the most
when we try to persuade other people”**

– Prof. Greg Walton,
Stanford University in an interview with Farnam Street

HOW TEAMWORK CAN IMPROVE HAPPINESS

Numerous studies show that happy individuals are successful across multiple life domains, including marriage, friendship, income, work performance, and health. In a meta-analysis by Pinquart, M., & Sörensen, S. of 286 studies, the quantity and quality of contacts with friends was a strong predictor of well-being, even stronger than that of contacts with family members.

“The happiest college students (the top 10%) have been shown to have high-quality social relationships”

– Lyubomirski, King & Diener, 2005

Teamwork in and outside the classroom is very rewarding and plays a large part in providing students with a comprehensive, well-rounded education. Teamwork is also a great tool to ensure that students are connecting with each other thereby creating these important personal relations.

Studies of students who have taken classes in which they engage in team-based projects show that learning about teaming is high on their list of key takeaways - both at the end of the semester as well as several years after graduation. Team or group work in a classroom teaches students fundamental skills associated with working as a collective unit toward a common goal.

ONLINE RESOURCES

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Teaming by Design is a free online platform for teamwork resources. The platform is developed by Dr. Sara Beckman and Dr. Rachel Dzombak from the UC Berkeley

www.teamingxdesign.com

Student teamwork introduces a variety of skills that will be valuable for students later on in the workforce, such as communication, compromise, and collective effort. In any type of group work, students must agree about who will handle various components of a project and work in tandem using each other's strengths to accomplish assigned tasks. This teaches time management, resource allocation, and communication skills.

NOTES FROM AWARD-WINNING TEACHER

Innovation Centre Denmark had the pleasure of talking to Teaching Professor in the bioengineering department at University of California Berkeley, Terry D. Johnson. Prof. Johnson is the recipient of the Golden Apple Award for Outstanding Teaching as well as UC Berkeley's Distinguished Teaching Awards.

A lot of factors go into designing a course, but Prof. Johnson highlighted three particular focus areas: setting the norm, facilitating teamwork, and keeping syllabi relevant. Setting the norm in the classroom from day one and sticking to it is the key to a well-structured class. Setting the norm involves getting the students comfortable with a professional norm, expecting active engagement, and teaching them how to deal with challenges. Active learning is key, that is, getting the students involved in the learning process instead of being passive recipients. However, active learning can be uncomfortable for new and insecure students and it requires more effort, so it is important to set as a norm from the beginning.

“Active learning is uncomfortable”

– Prof. Terry D. Johnson, UC Berkeley

Teamwork is another great tool to get discussions going, while giving the students a chance to relate to the subject together. Prof. Johnson highlighted the importance of facilitating peer learning, for instance, by using the resources provided by Teaming by Design. Finally, student engagement is higher if the syllabus is updated with cases that students can relate to and find inspiring. While this entails more work in the planning of the course, it has a big impact on how the course actually runs and how students engage with it.