Anthony Seldon

Lessons in life: Why I'm teaching happiness

The school has been developing a pioneering programme with Dr Nick Baylis, of the University of Cambridge, and it will be brought into the curriculum in the 2006 academic year as a new element of PSHE lessons.

Helping to produce happy young adults

When they leave the school at 18 is my highest priority as head. I have been saying this for 10 years, but only in the past year have I begun to realise this isn’t just an airy-fairy aspiration, but one can in fact learn happiness in classes. Hence my decision, announced recently, (18th April 2006), to teach happiness and positive psychology in timetabled lessons at my new school, Wellington College.

Positive psychology

Last year, I came across Dr Nick Baylis of Cambridge University, who lectures in positive psychology and the science of well-being, and who has just set up the “Well-being Institute” at the university. Then I started hearing about the highly popular and well-publicised courses on happiness at Harvard University, and I realised what might be done. I recognised the duty to do something about it at my school. Hence, the classes that begin later this year, which will be taught by our staff, to be overseen by the team at Cambridge.

Ill-balanced education

I believe that our education in schools is fundamentally ill-balanced. Of course exams matter greatly - they are the passport to an individual’s higher education and career. A healthy body is far more likely to lead to a healthy mind than one which has been abused with bad food, drink, cigarettes and drugs.

True happiness

The pursuit of true happiness is also a deeply spiritual quest: the heart of spirituality is about the transcendence of one’s own self and the forming of deeply loving and compassionate relationships with others. Neither do I see these lessons as selfless. Ask any parent. Would they sooner see their children happy and fulfilled, even at the cost of achieving slightly less, or stressed?
out and vexed in the pursuit of ever-higher goals which always seem to be beyond their reach? Happiness I believe lies in knowing one’s own limitations, accepting oneself for what one is, and being proud of what one achieves, at whatever level that might be.

**Happiness lessons**

The purpose of these happiness lessons becomes abundantly clear when one considers the lives of students at university. Once there, they will not each day enjoy the presence of loving parents, or caring teachers. They will no doubt have to cope with loneliness, depression and rejection in love. Yet schools send them off ill-prepared to cope with these eventualities, as they also mostly fall short in preparing their leavers to manage money, accommodation and looking after themselves.

**Purpose of schooling**

What is the purpose of schooling if not to prepare its young for higher education and beyond? It is not only at university that schools cover some of the positive psychology curriculum in existing classes. But the focus is on the acquisition of knowledge, about the effects of drugs, sexually transmitted diseases and so on, rather than on encouraging the pupils to reflect on their own lives and learn to understand themselves and their relationships better.

I would like to see all schools within five years begin to teach positive psychology and happiness. The Well-being Institute is becoming involved with advising the health service and businesses about the subject. Valuable though this will be, I believe it is almost too late to teach, and it is much better to put the whole subject over to individuals when they are still at school. Governments will not be able to boast of quantifiable improvements, and schools won’t be able to show off any tangible benefits for league tables (although I would say that happy children are more likely to do their best in exams).

But I do believe that by taking the subject seriously, schools will not only be doing a much better job morally for their pupils, but they will also help produce young men and women who will help to build a far better society than their parents did. This is a real challenge and it is one to which I believe all schools should rise.

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Dr Nick Baylis is Co-director of the newly created Well-being Institute, University of Cambridge, a Cambridge University Lecturer in Positive Psychology & the Science of Well-Being, a corporate consultant & trainer and a one-to-one coach & therapist. For further details visit [www.NickBaylis.com](http://www.NickBaylis.com)

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**Nick Baylis**

**The Well-Being Skills Development Course**

The Well-Being Skills Development Course that I will specifically be designing and teaching to a team of staff at Wellington College (and a number of other excellent institutions in the educational, health care and commercial sectors yet to be appointed), is not yet at a stage at which I can offer it more widely. It will be many months before I will have materials of this nature.

**Wonderful lives**

However, the core tenets of my Well-being training work are explicitly captured in my recently published hardback book, ‘Learning from wonderful lives: lessons from the study of well-being brought to life by the personal stories of some much admired individuals.’

Wonderful lives thrive even in the face of adversity - and this new field of research reveals how. 50 remarkable individuals bring the science to life as in the book they share with us the lessons they’ve personally learned. Individuals include: Dawn French • Nelson Mandela • Oprah Winfrey • Claire Rayner • Tom Cruise • Céline Dion • Jamie Oliver • Muhammad Ali • Alan Titchmarsh • Betty Boothroyd • Bruce Springsteen • Cathy Freeman • Eileen Collins • Ellen Degeneres • Bill Bryson • Mia Hamm • Madeleine Albright • Eleanor Roosevelt • Steven Spielberg • Kelly Holmes • Joanne K. Rowling

In ‘Wonderful Lives’, for the very first time, I explain some fundamental principles which have shown themselves to be guiding lights for lives that go well. I also describe the everyday skills that can put these principles into practice.

**Key themes**

The chapters explore 4 key themes:

- Partnering-Up with Good People - passion for life, lasting companionship, and a special sense of rapport.
- Becoming an Expert in Our Favourite Pursuits - getting really good at something, and performing under pressure.
- Choosing and Changing Our Journeys and Life Directions - career decisions, re-inventing ourselves, and making real progress.

I wrote ‘Learning from wonderful lives’ as a companion for anyone in the teaching and healing professions, as well as for every individual of 15 or over, where ever we might find ourselves: in full-time study or the working world, raising a family or taking retirement, team-leaders, home-makers or business-world mentors.

It’s not an academic book, but it is based on the all the best science I’ve been privileged to learn from these past 12 years at Cambridge while investigating how we can help lives to thrive and flourish.

‘Learning from wonderful lives’ ISBN: 0-9550503-0-8 is not available through bookshops nor Amazon and is sold and distributed by CounterCultureBooks via the webpage [www.nicksbook.com](http://www.nicksbook.com)
Online Teaching Materials. Virtual Exchange. What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness | Robert Waldinger. We forget vast amounts of what happens to us in life, and sometimes memory is downright creative. But what if we could watch entire lives as they unfold through time? What if we could study people from the time that they were teenagers all the way into old age to see what really keeps people happy and healthy? What are the lessons that come from the tens of thousands of pages of information that we've generated on these lives? Well, the lessons aren't about wealth or fame or working harder and harder. The clearest message that we get from this 75-year study is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Research demonstrates that happy people are successful across multiple life domains, including marriage, relationships, health, longevity, income, and academic and work performance. They are better able to multitask and endure boring tasks, and are more creative, trusting, helpful and sociable. Advertisement X Other studies have shown that the schools teaching happiness skills academically outperform the schools teaching a standard health curriculum. In other words, focusing on well-being can even contribute to the core mission of education. Here are my suggestions for teachers who want to share these lessons with their students. Teaching positive emotions. A few lessons that life teaches us: Money can buy you comfort but it can’t buy happiness. Everything in the world is a trap, they first attract you toward themselves and when you reach there you realize that you are trapped in it’s cage of attraction. Everything that you want is not that you need. To begin with, life don’t teach you any lessons but you learn that yourself. If you fail, the lesson repeats. Life in its entirety is mostly suffering. Why happiness in schools matters. It’s difficult to unpick the reasons for the current epidemic of mental health problems in children, but Andy Cope, a qualified teacher and author of books including the Spy Dog series and Be Brilliant Every Day and The Art of being a Brilliant Primary School Teacher (£10.99, Capstone), thinks the pace of modern life is partly responsible. The world has sped up since we were kids, and we all have busy agendas children included, explains Andy, who is completing a PhD in positive psychology. We’ve even had children taking happiness lessons out into other schools in their area. Whether or not your child’s school is teaching happiness, there’s a lot you can do to help them be happier on a day-to-day basis. These include