

# The High Schooler's Guide to Happiness

Sally Ventura

**By increasing students' self-awareness and self-reflection, we can help them become happier and more empowered.**

Even if I tell my high school students to research anything they want—enticing them with examples such as, "Why do people always think puppies are cute?"—inevitably, several will ask instead if I can assign a topic for them. Others will admit to Googling "research question," hoping to come up with something, anything.

Students like these are not generally empowered by choice. They are overwhelmed by the range of options and become frustrated, the sort of frustration which looks like apathy and ends with them saying, "I don't know what I'm interested in." For these students, the lack of a strong sense of self not only inhibits their ability to make decisions, but also can further reinforce their insecurities.

Their difficulties with decision making are evidence of a need for greater self-awareness and self-reflection. Fortunately, productive self-reflection is a skill that students can become better at. In turn, they can develop the agency that allows the choices offered to them in the classroom to become a source of empowerment, rather than frustration.

Ultimately, the ability to self-reflect, to construe meaning from experiences, is a life skill that correlates to the ability to be happy. I have tried to leverage this correlation in my teaching. Several years ago, after reading an article about positive psychology in the *New York Times Magazine* (Max, 2007), I came up with an idea for a "happiness unit" in my 11th grade English class. I began collecting the syllabi of positive psychology classes offered in colleges across the country, hoping to integrate components appropriate for high school-aged students into my language arts classes. I read *The End of the Rainbow* by Susan Engel (2015) and Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* (2009), both of which argue persuasively that an investment in our understanding of happiness and how to achieve it is a worthwhile endeavor.

I quickly found that when I framed questions about knowing oneself around the idea of being happy, students were highly receptive to exercises in self-reflection. As several students have reported during the happiness unit, "This is stuff that actually matters." The unit has been so successful in my classes, in fact, that it has become a major component in my curriculum, integrated into all the other units I teach.

## Don't Worry, Be Happy

Before I begin teaching the happiness unit, I slowly introduce the idea of happiness to my class. My students and I talk about what it means to be happy, considering definitions that include well-being, peace, contentment, joy, and fulfillment. During these conversations, students often allude to characters from literature they studied in earlier grades. When "happiness" is the lens through which they analyze fiction, I have found that they more open to seeing the relevance of literature in their own lives. As we discuss fictional characters we've encountered in our literature-based units, it is exciting for them to consider the complexity of what happiness looks like for different people. (Does anybody seem happy in *The Great Gatsby*? in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? in *My Antonia*? Who is happy? How do you know? What decisions do these characters make that contribute to their happiness?)

After talking about happiness in relation to fictional characters, we move into the happiness unit, which focuses on them, the students. Even though many of them are a little wary when I introduce the unit because of the amount of reading and writing expected, the end-of-year feedback they give me on the happiness unit assignments has been overwhelmingly positive:

"Thank you for giving us this assignment!"

"This assignment was really hard, but I am really happy you gave it to us!"

"I didn't think I would be able to finish all this work, but now that I have, I want you to keep assigning more!"

## A Positive Portfolio

The happiness unit is ultimately a portfolio, a large portion of which is a guided journal. I ask students to submit the various components of the portfolio electronically because word processing allows for easy revision, which is especially necessary when students write about sensitive topics. Many students have reported that their reflections and compositions were useful for writing college essays and scholarship applications, so electronic submissions also allow them access to their work after they are finished with my course.

The portfolio requirements include reading selections such as "How to Meditate for Beginners" on the Ten Percent Happier website ([www.tenpercent.com/how-to-meditate](http://www.tenpercent.com/how-to-meditate)), "The Case for Having a Hobby" (Saxena, 2018), and "The Science of Accomplishing Your Goals" (Lopresti, 2016). Students also take notes and comment on podcasts such as "You 2.0: Why We're Bad at Predicting Our Own Happiness and How We Can Get Better" (Gilbert, 2017), along with TED Talks such as, "What Makes a Good Life" (Waldinger, 2015).

The research component I include in the portfolio asks students to pair various topics with happiness or positive psychology, and then to generate a research question based on that pairing. Students delve into our high school library's subscription databases to discover answers to their questions such as, What country is happiest? What is the relationship between sibling order and happiness? What jobs do the happiest people have? Can people who have suffered trauma ever be happy? What is the relationship between happiness and wealth? They are genuinely interested in the answers to their questions and look forward to hearing other students' research findings, as well as sharing their own.

Additionally, students write goal statements, self-advocacy statements, narratives, gratitude letters, and various compositions about topics such as "The House of My Dreams" and "This I Believe" (inspired by the NPR series). Students keep one-sentence happiness diaries for several weeks, modeled on Rubin's (2009, p. 198) one-sentence journal. They also take surveys, such as Boyum's "Characteristics of a Self-Actualizing Person," (n.d.), Trapnell's "The Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire" (n.d.), and Argyle and Hills's "The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire" (2002). I do not collect their survey responses, but I do ask them to write about the generalizations they can take away from them, and to consider the kind of information these surveys can yield when administered to a sample of respondents.

To honor students' right to privacy, I also give the option on all assignments to write about observed experiences rather than personal ones (I use this opportunity to discuss first-person and third-person points of view). I promise my students that I will not share their work with anyone without their permission, reminding them of the single caveat that applies to all their writing assignments throughout the year: If they write anything that causes me to be concerned about their well-being, I will consult a school counselor to ensure their safety.

Students are often quick to raise questions about depression as a barrier to happiness, so we discuss the seriousness of this mental health concern, especially as it affects so many young people. Although this is a topic that we broach openly, students sometimes write privately about their own experiences with trauma and depression. Their willingness to share deeply personal stories sometimes points to a healthy processing of those events, but sometimes indicates that a student should be advised to seek professional counseling, and I rely on my school counselors for help with those determinations.

Over the course of the unit, students complete dozens of assignments, but the quantity of work is not the reason why the happiness unit can be challenging. Students realize what Rubin discovered during her own happiness project: "just how hard it was to know myself" (2009, p. 288). Teachers assign challenging work every day. We are responsible, for example, for teaching our students to develop their close-reading skills, and many students consider these the most difficult reading exercises we assign. Close reading demands multiple reads in order to discern the importance of detail, to analyze the use of rhetoric, and to discover underlying assumptions and biases. Self-reflection assignments ask students to closely read the text of their own lives. In developing an expertise on their own lives, they become more

willing to make future decisions. The ultimate goal of the happiness portfolio in my classes is to empower students to read closely their own stories so they can better write their own futures.

At the end of the unit, students are required to create a video inspired by any of the assignments. We share those videos, which, not surprisingly, are often beautifully creative and crafted productions. Several students usually celebrate their friends and family members in a video inspired by the gratitude letter they have written. Some create video narratives around their "best day ever!" compositions or pay tribute to a role model. One class suggested that we air one video each morning on the closed-circuit TV announcements, a suggestion which has inspired me to think about how I can expand this project to include opportunities for students to share their work, if they choose, more publicly.

Students are inspired to pursue creative endeavors when they are confident in their voices. Although some students are adept at video composition, others are not, and I plan to modify the culminating assignment to include other creative mediums. Asking students to choose how they would like to modify one of their written pieces into a different creative mode seems to be a fitting way to tie up the unit.

## Happy and Empowered

A single year's positive psychology curriculum is certainly not enough to make measurable gains in terms of identity formation, but the positive reception of this unit by my students has unequivocally demonstrated that self-reflection skills can be nurtured and can have a significant impact on increasing student engagement. Ultimately, I hope, students will have learned the important lesson that in coming to understand themselves, they will be empowered to make future decisions more actively and more joyfully. Learning about themselves can help students see that all learning is an affirmation of self-worth, as well as an essential component of growth.

One of the greatest benefits I discovered since implementing my happiness unit is that as my students have gotten to know themselves, I've gotten to know my students better. I celebrate their stories of resiliency, and I applaud the challenges they embrace in formulating goals. But most of all, I know this work is critical to our shared humanity.

### REFLECT & DISCUSS

- > What is the link between happiness and empowerment?
- > Does your school do enough to teach students self-reflection skills?
- > Are there any aspects of Ventura's "happiness unit" that you could replicate in your classroom?

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