

Positive psychology L4 Ho.1

URL <http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/courses/posl4.html>

My web page: the starting point for all course resources, with crucial pointers.

Student work on this course

Overall aim of the course

The aim of the course is to introduce you to positive psychology, and its distinctive position with roots in both the unevidenced self-help literature, and the scientific psychology literature. Critical thinking is, as you now know, a key criterion in most work in this department. PosPsy is a gift in this respect: it desperately requires it, it is particularly easy to apply it both because some claims are unfounded and because most topics are relatively new and the evidence could easily be improved upon; yet there are solid experimental results here too so we are not wasting our time. While original insights would be welcome, the main criterion I will look for (e.g. in exam answers) is a balanced critical assessment i.e. what is your best opinion of the work on a given topic, and what degree of certainty would you assign to your judgement?

Most of the material in this course will not come from lectures but from reading:

- fellow-students' wikis, introducing you to 19 or so PosPsy topics; and
- the further reading which that may lead to.

Reading the coursework produced by other students should provide everyone with a useful starting point on each topic, plus pointers for those who decide to study that topic more deeply. It would be wise for everyone, before the exam, to read all the wikis plus the one most recommended reference for each topic: that should give them a minimum breadth, allowing you to make at least a brief mention of any topic if relevant. Exam questions will be on general issues to be discussed with reference to some specific topics selected by the exam candidate. A student who only knew one topic well would look poorly informed; knowing 2 topics might or might not let you get by; knowing 6 topics well should put you in a strong position to tackle any question and illustrate it with 2-4 topics selected as particularly relevant illustrations (good and bad) of the question. While the coursework wikis are mostly about getting a first grip on a topic, and not (much) about the authors' deep analysis, students may well later develop their own particular views (and evidence for them). There should be room for such original argumentation in the exam questions.

Course and coursework (assessed) structure and rationale

Course work will be done in groups. Each group will produce a wiki web page on their allocated topic. The aims of this approach to a course include: giving students experience (for their CV) of producing something for this new medium; having practice in a different form of writing than psychology essays (see next paragraph); producing something useful for fellow students and conversely experiencing how useful other students' work can be for you. Students in this department don't really realise how good they are, that they are doing useful work. If I were starting a new topic, or had to look it up from scratch, I'd certainly start from a CR from a student if one were available. I'd hope eventually to go beyond it, but it would be a real time-saving boost to starting up: listing much of the relevant literature, alerting me to some of the critical questions. The wikis will also serve in this way.

Coursework (assessed): requirements

The objective for each group's wiki is to be as helpful as possible to other students in the class in getting started on that topic in positive psychology. The overall criterion is: being helpful to other students not in your group. If you can get a few students from other groups to comment on your wiki page, orally or by email, that would be excellent: what's the best thing about it, the worst, what they would find useful if it were added. Above all, this kind of writing is NOT a standard essay which (egocentrically and

unrealistically) assumes that all readers will read from beginning to end. This is not how you yourself read even a journal paper, and certainly not a web page.

My starting suggestion for format (but feel free to improve on this, and look at last year's wikis and think about what does and doesn't seem useful to you) would be:

- Title (reconsider whether the allocated name is best)
- If you were only going to read one paper: what would it be, and why. Preference: a key experimental result: best single starter reference that has an experiment in.
- A very short critique of whether there is a gap between the announced theory, and the empirical result
- An example of wild uncritical claims in this area
- One or more practical exercises an individual could carry out. (Many experiments contain these; others are only in books. Possibly some topics do not have any.)
- An old cultural connection. E.g. for gratitude, thanksgiving prayers in church; for exercise, ancient Greek olympics showing non-functional physical exercise being admired.
- If you were only going to read, say, 3 things: which would they be.
- History of the topic. And what area of (non-positive) psychology it derives from; what area would claim to cover it.
- Clinical applications: if there are any? are health measures relevant?
- A longer reference list of other possibly relevant papers, annotated by how good you think each is, and what it is about.

Outline timetable for the coursework

Here I use the classes as landmarks, but the important work is in between classes, to be completed by the next class.

- Session 1, 14 Jan.

Solo critique of past topics.

- Session 2, 21 Jan.

Organise your group's division of labour. Get cracking on reading and writing.

- Session 3, 28 Jan.

Get a full draft of your wiki up.

- Session 4, 4 Feb.

Critique other groups' wikis, give them the feedback receive feedback from others on your own wiki. I'll organise this. But you must have your own wiki complete for this to work.

- Session 5, 11 Feb.

Final editing, using the critiques you receive.

- <Freeze wikis>, tell yourself: 19 Feb midnight

Homework for week 1 (i.e. completed before session 2)

Aims:

1. To read many student wikis from previous years in order to familiarise yourself with them AND to develop informed opinions about what kinds of format were more or less useful to you as a student reader.
2. To decide as a group what topic you will select.

Download a wiki-critique form from the web page, and fill it in for several past student wiki pages to ensure you engage with aim 1 properly. Bring the completed forms with you to session 2.

Your group is allocated a provisional topic, but that is only a starting point so that the whole class does not start in the same place and end up doing the same thing. If you come up with a new topic not on the list that is OK (if it is part of PosPsy). If you take a past topic but reduce its scope, that may be very sensible (previous years have often used groups of about 6, this year you have groups of about 3).

Next week (session 2) I will ask each group to give me their provisional choice of topic in writing; and we must decide on topic allocation then i.e. avoid any serious duplications of topics, though without being fussy about topics which are somewhat related.