

POSITIVE LIVING INTERVENTION WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Paige Walton is a recent graduate from the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. The content of this article is based on student evaluations of a fourth year university course on Quality of Living taught by Dr Terry Orlick. This research focused on carefully examining student logbooks (or personal journals) to gain a deeper understanding of the students experiences, perceptions and personal applicability or implementation of the skills being taught in the course. We were also interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the students views on the potential universal value of teaching positive living skills to all university students.

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Part 1: Introduction

APA 4117, Quality of Living: Theory, Research and Application is a course offered by Professor Terry Orlick PhD that is designed to help students obtain the knowledge required to improve the quality of their own lives, and the lives of those around them. Dr. Orlick guides his students to a higher quality of living using various tools including relevant readings on Positive Living Skills, self reflective questions, interactive activities, guest speakers who have discovered positive ways to enhance the quality of their own lives, relevant video clips, focus enhancing tools and perhaps most important a Highlight Journal to increase their daily Highlights and their overall awareness of their current quality of life and what it takes to improve it.

Two of Dr. Orlick's books : Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone (2011) and Embracing Your Potential: Steps to Self Discovery, Balance, and Success in Sports, Work and Life (1998) are the primary reading materials for this course. Each week, chapters from one of the books were assigned for students to read and remember. Students were asked to reflect on the skills presented in those chapters

and attempt to implement the skills they found most important into their own daily lives.

Students were also presented with a Quality of Living Project. This project was assigned during the first class as a 'highlight journal'. Students were asked to record anything that they read, acted on or learned that was relevant to enhancing the quality of their lives. The guidelines of this project required a minimum of 3-4 entries in the journal per week as well as a two page typed reflection to conclude the journal after 12 weeks. This summary was designed to identify what each individual had learned, acted on, valued most and what obstacles he or she faced and worked through or overcame along their path to a higher quality of living.

Part 2: Positive Living Skills Project

The primary purpose of this Quality of Living study was to carefully examine each of the Highlight Journals (Logbooks) and lessons learned summaries submitted by each student in Dr. Orlick's Quality of Living course to determine which positive living skills were most commonly used by the students, which techniques were identified as being most valuable for stress reduction and to discover the extent to which the students felt this class had or

did not have an impact (positive or negative) on their overall lives. A wide variety of Positive Living skills were taught by Professor Orlick in this class. An in-depth analysis of each of the students journals demonstrated that several key positive living skills or positive focusing skills were universally applied by all students in real world contexts. The following summary provides the most universally used skills by the students in this unique Quality of Living class:

Fully Connected Focus:

Dr. Orlick describes a fully connected focus as “a complete, positive connection with an experience, learning opportunity, performance, action or interaction. There is a feeling of being totally absorbed in the experience, becoming the experience, or inseparable from it” (Positive Living Skills, p101). One student described the phenomenon as follows: “a fully connected focus does not dwell on the past or the future. It keeps you centered in the present – even when you are planning a new path or a better future” (student 32). The students in this class truly embraced the real world value of this skill and used it often. Virtually all students commented that they experienced positive benefits from being fully connected in the moment, whether it was related to increased appreciation of different parts of their life or personal performance enhancement. For example, student 2 noted: “I learned that I cannot benefit from the positive nature of my highlights unless I am fully focused on them.” Another student found that being fully connected in the moment aided in their school work claiming “whenever I was in a lecture or studying, I would always have Facebook and other distractions on my computer. Now after this quality of living project I almost never go on Facebook and I am really enjoying the freedom it is giving me. Also, my grades have gone up because I am focusing on the task at hand, and really living in the moment of each lecture and each assignment” (student 6). Both of the above students were able to use this skill in different parts of their lives to achieve a positive outcome that was important to them. Student 42 shared the benefits of a fully connected focus in regards

to his/her journal entries with the following statement: “My journals are a true testament to how to improve focus and how much being truly connected in the moment can improve the quality of one’s life. Using Dr. Orlick’s 8 pillars of focus as a guide, I was able to better connect with moments in my life and find appreciation and joy in the little things.”



Having a Positive Focus & Positive Perspective:

Much like a fully connected focus, a positive focus is also universal in its application. Dr. Orlick describes the value inherent in positive focus as relevant to all people and all areas of life; “It brings people up. One person with a positive, constructive and connected focus (especially with the help of other positive people) can raise the spirits, hopes, confidence, performance and lives of millions of people, families, teams, schools, organizations, communities and countries throughout the world” (Positive living skills, p.34).

The students in Dr. Orlick’s class found that living life through a positive lens aided in eradicating negatives and enhancing simple joys. From reading chapter 4 in the *Positive Living Skills book*, Student #19 learned to focus on the positive things that he/she was doing and to let go of the negative things; “this wasn’t easy but I know that having negativity in your life prevents you from living a truly positive life...There is a positive aspect in everything. Not every day is a

good day but there is good in everyday.” In another situation, a student discovered how to take control of their perspective. Student #40 was able to view life in a positive light consistently, by learning to find simple joys in various domains of their life. This in turn led this person to becoming a stronger, happier person even when things were not going well in one aspect of his/her life.

In all of Dr. Orlick’s written material as well as in his classes, there is great emphasis placed on the fact that we make choices. Whether you choose to do something or choose to do nothing, you are making a choice. As stated in his *Positive Living Skills book*, “If YOU want to make positive changes in your life, you have to stop long enough to think about your own life, reflect on what you would like to improve or change, and come up with a positive plan for action” (p.35). “ Then you have to ACT on the Plan! Otherwise nothing will change!” (Orlick comments in class). Many students were moved to action by this simple statement.

For example, Student 33 expressed that this course “completely turned things around attitude wise” ... and proclaimed “once I experienced the feeling that goes along with living a positive, joyful, fulfilling day. I knew I wanted to replicate that as much as possible.” In another student’s summary he/she affirmed that attitude is everything: “your attitude and outlook on life, situations and relationships is all dependent on what you CHOOSE to do...my attitude allows me to choose whether I want to be positive or negative. Once I chose the attitude to embrace positivity and embrace positive moments, and maintain focus, I was able to see this in a new and clearer light”. It seems evident that realizing the importance of choosing the direction in one’s outlook and in one’s life can have a major impact. Think to yourself, are you choosing to focus on the positive or negatives? Are you seeing your glass of opportunities as half empty or half full?

Embracing Highlights:

In the first class of the semester, students were given a Wheel of Highlights that outlines areas in which simple joys and highlights can easily be found. There are seven key Highlight Domains presented as spokes on the wheel of highlights: Play/Physical Activity, Human Interaction, Nature, Relaxation, Personal Discovery, Positive Sensations and Accomplishments. In previous courses on Quality of Living taught by Dr Orlick, when students were asked to reflect on their Highlights it was common for one or two Highlight categories to dominate their sources of simple joys. Everyone can learn to embrace Highlights or simple joys in any positive Highlight domain, however for long-term quality living (over the course of your lifetime) it is essential to help people discover and embrace meaningful sources of Highlights in as many Highlight Domains as possible. By creating a balance or diversity in your Sources of Highlights, if you are not experiencing any Highlights in one domain, you have six other categories in which to discover highlights for any given day. Multiple sources of Highlights also help to put negative situations (or lowlights) into perspective because you have multiple positive sources of highlights. Student 36 struggled with achieving balance at the beginning of this course and relied primarily on his girlfriend for all sources of Highlights. However, they were in a long distance relationship and sometimes she could not be a highlight for him which in turn led him to feeling negative about his life. He was able to resolve this situation by choosing to implement a Multiple Highlight reeling in method. He chose to begin reeling in highlights from other highlight domains whenever he began to feel the stress, strain or challenge of not having his girlfriend around. This helped him balance his life and maintain the best possible distance relationship with his girlfriend.

Another excellent example of the impact of learning to embrace Multiple Highlight Domains came from student 20 when he/she wrote “an important idea that I discovered in the first few

weeks [of this class] was the concept of ‘highlights’ and what they can do to improve the quality of my life. To this day I still challenge myself to find highlights through seemingly insignificant moments. Highlights are important and they have helped me learn to put a positive spin on almost any situation. ” Student 37 also spoke about challenging himself/herself to find highlights each day and was surprised with just how many occurred: “Another positive thing that this assignment has done to enhance the quality of my life is force me to ask myself at the end of each day ‘what was the highlight(s) of my day?’ and it was in those moments when I would ask myself this that I realized so many good things happened that day.”

Wheel of Highlights



Highlights seemed to be the most easily embraced real world action based component of this course and they seemed to be almost contagious once a student chose to start down this positive path. In one summary, a student shared that after an in class discussion session with Dr. Orlick, this student approached another and exclaimed “When you were sharing you’re highlights in class today, they instantly became a highlight for me! I was laughing and smiling the whole time!” In turn, this simple act of expressing one’s appreciation to a classmate became another highlight for the individual who had originally shared their highlight experience in class. A single highlight shared by one person had now become at least three separate highlights from the students embracing this

experience and finding joy and hope in other students simple joys.

Goal Setting:

Goal setting is a skill that can be helpful in all aspects of life. Whether your goal is to complete a list of chores, or strive to be a better person, simply creating your goals and writing them down is often a first step that leads people to achieving success. At the beginning of the first class, Dr. Orlick asked all students to write down what they believed their quality of life was at that moment on a scale of 1 to 10. Each week during class discussions, students were asked to share what they had tried to do to meet their goals or make some progress towards achieving them. Hearing peers (classmates) share their anecdotes in their quest for more positive living presented itself as a source of motivation and an outlet for innovative applications of the theories presented.

In Dr. Orlick’s class, the students’ goals could be as small as finding a highlight each day to as large as choosing a new life path. For example student 38 created a very simple goal of smiling at each individual he walked past in his day. By doing this, his goal was to bring a smile to all those he encountered. In a different environment, student 3 used goal setting strategies when dealing with school work; “when challenges were as big as a mountain, management skills allowed me to deal with small chunks at a time. As I completed those small goals, I made sure to reward myself with something positive, something that made me happy.” Student 2 embraced a similar approach by taking productive steps towards a large goal, by setting smaller sub goals along the way. This individual found that it allowed him/her to mark their positive progress along the way to see where they were in respect to the finish line.

Part of what the students seemed to gain from this course was that they have the capacity to make choices, positive choices that will direct the course of their lives in positive ways. Student 42 wrote, “Now that I have come closer to

realizing my potential as a person, I know that any goal I set for myself is within reach, it is an amazing and liberating feeling.” In addition to the relevant course material, the class discussions and interactive atmosphere allowed individuals to identify their strengths, weaknesses, sources of motivation, energy gains and/or drains, and support networks that could be useful in constructing and sustaining a positive action plan for the future. Most students already had awareness of things they could do or stop doing to live the life they would love to live. However, this course gave them an opportunity to take the time to pause and reflect on where they are now, where they would like to be, and what they can do or act on now to get to where they want to go. Tapping into the Quality of Living information data base and supporting each other on this life enhancing journey provided students with multiply opportunities to fully embrace their potential.

Relaxation Techniques:

Dr. Orlick outlines several key reasons why relaxation is so important in our lives: stress reduction, recovery from stress, more restful sleep, better focus, stronger immune system, and an enhanced quality of life. It was evident that relaxation was a major theme that the students liked, learned from and acted on over the duration of this class (in the classroom and outside the classroom). One effective technique often used was Dr. Orlick’s relaxation audio CD tracks. Students would pause, close their eyes, take a time out and listen attentively to a variety of relaxation audio CD’s for 5 to 20 minutes. The content consisted of relaxing music and/or relaxing sounds of nature such as a flowing river or quiet chirping of birds, muscle relaxation or relaxed breathing that permitted the listener to escape into a world of serenity. Dr. Orlick’s calming voice would guide the listener into taking long, slow, deep breaths, easing them into a state of complete relaxation. The controlled breathing relaxation also included a specific skill called one breath relaxation. This exercise taught students to take a single, long, slow, deep breath in and then release all tension and stress as they

exhaled, allowing them to shift focus and relax completely. Student 9 commented that one breath relaxation worked well for him/her in stressful situations or even “when I just need a moment to regain my focus.” Some students also found that inputting reminders on their mobile phones to remind them to breathe or relax reinforced what they had learned in class. Student 12 felt that having a relaxed focus was the most important strategy that he/she learned from the course because “it is the key to being successful in any domain.” This individual worked on achieving a relaxed focus from the very beginning of the semester and continued to use it before entering a classroom, game or any situation that required his/her full attention. Student 32 stated “I found that by using the one breath relaxation technique I was able to fully relax before bed or center myself on the task at hand and ignore outside stressors.” Finally, Student 7 took the time each day to relax and discovered that a few good minutes of relaxation “did wonders for stress reduction, increasing my quality of living, and harmony.”

Chapter 11 in the Positive Living Skills book presents moments of silence as an excellent source of pure relaxation and regeneration. Student #34 explained that this was “another new joy that continues to grow on me more and more each day is embracing moments of silence.”

Part 3: Sharing Positive Living Skills with Others

Willful sharing of positive living skills with others was one of the most valued experiences that students mentioned in their summaries at the end of their positive living skills logbooks. They clearly indicated that what they were learning in the Quality of Learning course was valuable not only to themselves but also to their friends and loved ones. They wanted to share what they were learning with their loved ones and almost all of them shared the positive skills they were learning and using with others. The following are a series of quotes from student testimonials to

exemplify the power of Positive Living Skills on the student's lives:

Student 1: “Learning such useful tools at a young age could be very effective in preventing many of the negative behaviors that become apparent in later years...not just for the delinquent ones, but it could also be beneficial to everyone who has had learning difficulties, attention difficulties, problems with self discovery...”

Student 13: “Learning how to deal with stress, cope with negative experiences, grow as a person - we all need these skills when we enter the real world. I have learned a lot from this class that I can actually bring with me after my university life”

Student 43: “Since I've acquired this positive perception of life, I am also able to transmit it to my relatives. I want to provide this opportunity for my family, girlfriend and friends to appreciate simple highlights in their lives”

Student 37: “Before this project I never really took the time to even care about my surroundings and I would constantly be texting while I walked or listened to music which made me oblivious to what's happening in the world around me.” Turning this around was definitely a result of the positive impact of this course

Student 35: “I learned one thing from this course that everybody can do, everywhere: stop being in a hurry to do things and take time to realize what's happening. Thus share this moment with other people and highlights will appear”

Student 41: I became more self aware as a result of this class “...this experience helped me gain more knowledge of myself and helped me gain further control on the road which I am travelling”

Student 29: “I can't help but feel that if everyone on the planet paused to reflect about a

single highlight every day, the world would be a happier place”

Student 4: “I enjoyed writing each and every journal entry because no matter how I was feeling prior to writing, I always felt better when the pen left the page”

Student 31: “The amount learned in this class is extraordinary, and to think that we are the only student population who has this opportunity seems unfair. Every student at every level should be learning about Positive Living Skills and improving the quality of their lives”

The Next Step:

It is our hope that this generation of students will pass along the message of positive living skills to their children, students, families, friends and successors. This process can begin most easily by choosing to lead by example. It can start with one person expressing their appreciation to another person for something as simple as listening to them, including them, smiling at them, thanking them or holding the door open for them. Every positive action leads to positive feelings and other positive actions. To impact positive real world change on a wide scale, it is essential that we begin teaching Positive Living Skills to children and youth – in our homes and schools. By teaching children and youth Positive Living skills at early age they will learn the essential skills, tools and positive perspectives that are required to live more positive, fully connected, compassionate and less stressed lives. This in turn will help build a better world for all children, all students, all adults and the future of humanity. This is our ultimate goal and we can begin this process at any time, at any age, in any context.

Terry Orlick Resources for Positive Action that can lead to Real World Positive Change:

Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone (2011)

General Store Publishing House: Renfrew, Ontario, Canada www.gsph.com

Embracing Your Potential (1998) and In Pursuit of Excellence (2008)

Human Kinetics Publishers: Champaign, IL
www.humankinetics.com

Audio CD's Positive Living Skills Audio CD's Series 1-4.

www.gsph.com or *i-Tunes*

<http://www.zoneofexcellence.com>

Facebook page:

<http://www.facebook.com/PositiveLivingSkills.PLS>