Well-being and Humanities Education in Singapore

Mark Baildon

National Institute of Education (Singapore)

Introduction

In February (2014), I was invited to Nagoya University (Japan) to participate in a symposium on well-being and education in the ASEAN region. Participants from ASEAN nations shared the state of well-being in their nations and considered the role education can play to promote well-being. My participation in this symposium led me to think about well-being in Singapore and the relationship between Humanities education and well-being.

Most of my work has focused on preparing teachers to teach critical thinking skills that will help students make meaning of their lives and the society around them. In Singapore and elsewhere these skills are considered necessary for the development of human capital – to produce skilled workers – and they are seen as necessary for producing effective citizens in the future. Seldom, however, had I thought about the relationship between these skills and well-being.

Presumably, these skills translate into people creating better lives for themselves and others. However, the disconnect often seems to be that we fail to fully consider how the skills and understandings central to Humanities education actually help young people live well – to live rich lives full of meaning and purpose, to care about and for themselves, others, and the world.

In this article, I outline some frameworks for thinking about well-being and then draw on several studies to examine the state of well-being in Singapore. I then consider the role of Humanities education in promoting well-being before concluding with some general comments about how we, as Humanities educators, might give well-being a more central place in our curricula and teaching.

What is Well-being?

There is a range of views about what constitutes well-being. To begin with, well-being is distinct from happiness. Happiness is an episodic emotional state and is not necessarily a determinant of well-being (Raibley, 2011). For Burkeman (2012), focusing on happiness can actually create a great deal of unhappiness because it results in efforts to deny the negative aspects of life – the risk, uncertainty, insecurity, failure, and sadness that are an inexorable part of living.

For Seligman (2011) and others (e.g., Boarini, et al., 2012), happiness is also not easily measurable as a psychological construct. Instead, Seligman proposed the idea of well-being as consisting of five measurable components: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Each of these five elements contributes to well-being, can be pursued for their own sake, and can be

independently measured. These five constructs, what Seligman refers to by the acronym PERMA, are briefly summarized below with some questions we might ask ourselves:

1. Positive emotion is the positive feelings we have when we engage in certain activities. These include joy, happiness, inspiration, awe, gratitude, love, and hope. *What are the sources of joy, happiness, inspiration, awe, etc. in our work and classrooms?*

2. Engagement is similar to what Csíkszentmihályi (1990) calls flow, when we engage in an activity in a way that fully focuses our attention and effort or when we lose a sense of time and self in activity. During flow, one is fully immersed in the experience and the experience is seen as intrinsically rewarding, rather than conducted for external rewards (or punishments). *When, in our work or in our classrooms, are we or our students most engaged or in a state of flow, completely absorbed in the task at hand?*

3. Relationships, such as those we find in friendship, family and other social and collegial relationships, are important to well-being. Meaningful and positive social connections enrich our lives in innumerable ways. *What are the relationships we have with each other and our students that are most positive, productive and meaningful?*

4. Meaning, according to Seligman, is what gives our life purpose and typically means serving a higher or larger purpose than one's self. It often manifests itself in the goals we set and

the need to belong to larger communities and commitments, such as those found in political parties, religious groups, or professional and charitable organizations. *What opportunities do we have in our work and classrooms for honest exploration of meaning and purpose?*

5. Accomplishment points to the need to do something worthwhile, to do it well, or to create something that is of value. A sense of accomplishment is often felt as inner satisfaction gained from meaningful work and engagement with others. *From what activities and achievements do we and our students gain the greatest satisfaction and sense of accomplishment?*

Although each of these elements can lead to a sense of well-being independently, they also interact to support and reinforce each other. For example, meaningful work often results in or is accompanied by a sense of flow or total absorption in work, and the outcome of such work can lead to a sense of accomplishment. Seligman's theory of well-being is part of the broader positive psychology movement that aims to examine and understand the positive, adaptive, joyful and fulfilling aspects of high functioning individuals and communities. Positive psychology places greater emphasis on understanding the activities we choose for their own sake and that give our lives meaning and purpose.

Burkeman (2012) offers what might be considered a "negative approach" to well-being. In his book, *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, he argues that "trying to making everything right is a big part of what's wrong" (p. 9). A negative approach

to well-being consists of resisting the tendency to quickly resolve matters and not always feeling the need to doggedly pursue goals and deadlines but finding time to step back, reflect, and be more aware of situations as well as our own thinking, feelings, and judgments. Well-being from this perspective means that one is able to effectively deal with both negative and positive emotions and experiences by recognizing that these are merely the labels we give to situations.

Burkeman refers to Stoic philosophers, such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, who argued that life consists of hardship, struggle, and failure and that it is our judgments and our thinking that classify an experience as bad or negative, rather than the experience itself. In other words, this approach to well-being means having greater control over our judgments and thinking about the world. This view is similar to Buddhist thinking with its emphasis on non-judgmental awareness. It highlights the need for carefully thinking about matters, checking our own assumptions, and considering different perspectives or ways of thinking about experience.

A negative approach emphasizes the *having of* experience, rather than quickly striving to impose concepts, labels, classifications, or categorizations. As Kahneman (2011) reminds us, we often too quickly see patterns in randomness and this leads to a range of biases in our thinking. We tend to "see the world as more tidy, simple, predictable, and coherent than it really is" (p. 204). Instead, a negative approach means acknowledging, similar to a range of thinkers like Bergson, Kant, Polanyi, Kuhn, and Wittgenstein, that "there is something vital in cognition that cannot be accounted for by purely rational ways of knowing" (Roy, 2005, p. 445).

Similarly, Alan Watts (1951) argues that when we impose categories, concepts, and definitions on experience "for this purpose or that we seem to have lost the actual joy and meaning of life" (p. 51). Since all life is constant change and flux, "the only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, and join the dance" (p. 43). This view suggests that the arts (perhaps literally dancing), heightened awareness and appreciation, spontaneity, open-mindedness, imagination, and deep engagement can all serve to promote well-being.

Burkeman (2012) also argues that our obsession with setting goals for ourselves (and others) results in missing out on other things that might more naturally or organically emerge in particular situations or settings (like classrooms). Drawing on the work of Steve Shapiro (2006), Burkeman claims that "goal-free living simply makes for happier humans" (p. 95). This is probably especially true when we are expected to meet goals and deadlines that are set *for* us rather than *by* us. Burkeman calls for a "see what happens" approach to working and living that might lead to fruitful discoveries (or failure, of course, which Burkeman says we also need to learn to accept as part of the negative approach).

It's probably difficult to imagine letting go of our most cherished frameworks, concepts, or goals to "see what happens" but it means paying greater attention to the present moment, learning to accept that which we can't control, and being more realistic about what we can accomplish. It

means not being so invested in particular outcomes, being able to accept and learn from failure, not always seeking certitude, resolution or closure, having the confidence to follow leads to see where they might go, and being open to the world.

Determinants of Well-being

Many of these notions focus on an inner or individual sense of well-being. Researchers (e.g., Boarini, R. et al., 2012), refer to this as subjective well-being, which can be measured through evaluative measures (e.g., personal cognitive judgments about life satisfaction and well-being) and affective measures (e.g., experience of positive or negative feelings). However, well-being is not just a matter of one's inner state; there are social, economic, and political conditions that contribute to or shape well-being. For example, poverty, health problems, gender inequality, and unequal access to education each affect well-being.

There are several studies that examine the social and economic conditions that support individual and societal well-being (e.g., Gallup World Poll, 2006; Happy Planet Index Report, 2012; Human Development Report, 2013; World Happiness Report, 2013). Generally, there is a positive relationship between income levels, human development, and well-being (De Mel, 2014). However, other researchers, such as Boarini, R. et al. (2012), find that health, personal security, and freedom have a greater impact on a sense of well-being than economic factors. Diener, et al. (2010) found that income and living in an economically developed nation affect evaluations of well-being but that social psychological prosperity, such as whether or not people feel respected,

whether they have others they can count on, and the degree of control they have over their time, is also important for well-being. Based on these findings they argue that societies must pay careful attention not only to economic conditions but to social and psychological variables as well.

Looking at well-being in ASEAN countries, Yuen & Chu (2013) found that generally a high GDP per capita improved quality of life and resulted in higher rankings of subjective well-being and happiness. However, higher per capita GDP is usually associated with living in a more competitive society which tends to reduce experienced well-being in societies such as Singapore. They also highlight that being poor does not necessarily mean being unhappy because people tend to draw on traditional culture and religion as resources. They use these findings to argue that ASEAN nations should not solely promote economic growth at the expense of people's cultures and that ASEAN should do more to retain and protect the diverse cultures and traditions of the region to enhance well-being.

In their review of the literature on the determinants of well-being, Boarini, R. et al. (2012) highlight the following domains:

- Income and wealth;
- Jobs and earnings;
- Housing;
- Health;
- Work-life balance;
- Education and skills;
- Social connections;
- Civic engagement and governance;
- Environmental quality; and
- Personal security.

Certainly, having a standard of living in which basic needs are met (e.g., having enough to eat, adequate housing, access to decent healthcare), having a sense of personal security (e.g., from violence and humiliation) and belonging (e.g., social connections), and having the skills and opportunity to participate effectively in society and political decision-making are necessary conditions for well-being. People can also gain a sense of well-being through culture and the arts and by being able to exercise basic freedoms and rights, such as rights to move freely from place to place, free speech and political association, and freedom from discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and race (Sen, 2008).

Well-being in Singapore

Several studies of well-being have been conducted in Singapore or have included Singapore as part of a larger study (e.g., Gallup World Poll, 2012; Happiness Planet Index Report, 2012; Singapore Social Health Project, 2013; Swinyard, et al, 2000; Tambyah, et al, 2009; Yuen &

Chu, 2012). They provide a snapshot of the current state of well-being in Singapore.

Tambyah, Tan, and Kau (2009) report that most Singaporeans are concerned about their economic well-being and are generally happy. Good health, having a comfortable home, stable employment, and being able to spend time with family contribute to this sense of well-being. However, they found that Singaporeans do not feel a correspondingly high level of accomplishment. Their perceptions of the overall quality of life are largely influenced by their social relationships and family life.

The Singapore Social Health Project Report by the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (2013) offers a good assessment of well-being in Singapore. They report on the state of well-being in several areas and their report is based on a meta-analysis of multiple data sources (e.g., government sources and statistics, surveys, etc.) and research studies (both local and international). The summary of findings from the report is included below in Table 1.

Table 1: Singapore Social Health Project Report Summary of Findings (see http://www.nvpc.org.sg/Portals/0/Documents/Knowledge/Social%20Health%20Project/SSHP%20Report.pdf for full report)

Domain	Rating/Trend	Summary of Findings
Civil & Political Participation	Positive	Civil society has grown (e.g., in social media, White Paper protests, Pink Dot Sg, etc.) and there have been increases in the number of new charities registered, volunteerism rates, and charitable giving. There is greater diversity of views in Parliament and interest in politics, particularly among youth, has increased.

Culture & Values	Neutral	High pace of development and over emphasis on competition in society creates a "survivalist mindset" that compromises spontaneity and creativity. Growth in arts has been accompanied by continued censorship. While Singaporeans feel a strong sense of belonging, increased influx of foreigners poses concerns for national identity and loyalty. Despite some ungracious behavior, Singaporeans generally still value kindness and honesty. Greater interest in heritage and the arts.
Education	Neutral	Education sector performance has improved, with good results on measures such as PISA. A test-based culture results in high stress and growing private tuition. High international rankings, but education system promotes excessive competition, dampens creativity and perpetuates elitism.
Social Connectedness & Community Cohesion	Neutral	Not enough data in domain for clear analysis. Available data shows some encouraging trends of neighborly interactions and informal volunteerism. Some worrying trends are increasing numbers of neighborly dispute cases and low levels of trust.
Family	Negative	Singaporeans value family ties. While social attitudes towards the family are generally positive, critical aspects of family life have shown signs of weakening. Decreasing number of marriages, increasing divorce rates, cases of violence in families and eroding family values of trust and support are worrying trends.
Healthcare	Negative	Healthcare needs in Singapore are rapidly increasing due to ageing population and chronic illnesses. The cost of care in Singapore has increased with high private and out-of-pocket expenditure. Some sectors are struggling to keep pace with the growing demand for healthcare services. Healthcare is becoming more expensive for low-income groups.
Housing & Transport	Negative	Due to the rise in population density, housing and transport sectors are increasingly stretched. Commuter stress and cost of transport are on the rise. Housing prices have also increased rapidly over the last few years and is becoming unaffordable, especially for low wage earners.

Income Security	Negative	Declining trend in average monthly incomes and the increasing cost of living have made many Singaporeans feel vulnerable, especially those from lower-income families. The inadequacy of CPF for many who are retiring poses a threat to the well-being of the ageing population of Singapore. Lower income groups are finding it difficult to cope with escalating costs. The Gini coefficient has increased, reflecting greater income inequalities.
Individual Well-being	Negative	Singaporeans appear to be generally happy but there is a growing sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction. Stagnating incomes and increasing cost of living are key drivers affecting well-being. Individual resilience appears to be weakening while job engagement and satisfaction levels have been low. Desire for work-life balance contrasts with realities of high work demands and long hours.

The report includes working papers that provide more information about each domain with the sources used to support findings. The working papers can be found at http://www.nvpc.org.sg/knowledge/social_health_project.aspx.

The picture this report provides is one of Singaporeans being under a high level of stress, despite the high standard of living Singapore affords for most people. In fact, the high standard of living may be one reason Singaporeans experience so much stress. The emphasis on economic development and growth, competitiveness, high levels of productivity and performance, and the pragmatic results orientation set by the Singapore government and manifested in many of its policies may actually contribute to the dissatisfaction and anxiety many Singaporeans experience.

Uncertainties posed by foreign labor and a growing population, high levels of competition in education, changing family patterns, challenges managing work-life balance, and increasing costs of housing and healthcare were also found to contribute to a sense of unease and anxiety. Positive findings from the report, however, suggest that Singaporeans are developing the political will to directly confront these issues and have particular social resources, such as strong family and social ties and a high level of education that can be mobilized to promote well-being. The report also points to Singaporeans taking greater interest in politics and civil society, the arts and culture, and heritage.

Well-being and Humanities Education

Humanities education can play an important role to further develop these resources. It can also focus on issues central to each of the domains listed as determinants of well-being reported by Boarini, et al (2012) and highlighted in the

Singapore Social Health Project. Humanities education can encourage students to ask important questions about the quality of their own lives as well as the lives of others, the kinds of lives they want to live, and the kind of society desired. As noted by the editors of *HSSE Online* in an [earlier issue](), Humanities education "can provide spaces and tools for considering matters of individual well-being, social connectedness and cohesion, culture and values, and civic participation. It can provide opportunities for people to find meaning and satisfaction in a sense of the places they encounter (geography), their understanding of the past (history), deliberation over important social issues and policies (social studies), and in the inspiration and insights that literature offers" (Baildon & Ho, 2013, n.p.).

Seligman (2011) utilizes a signature strengths test to measure individuals' capacities for well-being. These signature strengths are strongly aligned with the kinds of qualities that we often associate with the best kind of Humanities education. They include scales of curiosity and interest in the world, a love of learning, the ability to use judgment and critical thinking, and open-mindedness. These strengths also include a sense of humility and kindness or generosity toward others as fundamental attributes of well-being. Seligman argues that these strengths promote well-being because people draw on these in ways that empower them to create meaning in their lives, connect with others, and engage with the world.

These dispositions or strengths are fundamental to the Humanities and can be developed in Humanities classrooms. For example, we can do a great deal to stimulate and encourage students' sense of

curiosity and wonder about the past, places, culture, and the social world. We can do more to encourage them to ask questions that are most meaningful and interesting to them and to take ownership of their own learning by being allowed to pursue these questions, find their own information sources, and explore different analyses and interpretations rather than those provided by their textbooks or teachers. We can envision PERMA classrooms where there are opportunities for students to experience joy and happiness in their learning, explore sources of inspiration and awe in their culture, and collaboratively engage in tasks they find intrinsically motivating and meaningful to them (rather than done for exam results). They can develop a sense of accomplishment by actually creating or doing something that has value outside of the classroom or that is highly meaningful to them as young people. Humanities inquiry in classrooms can provide many opportunities for students to develop the signature strengths that promote individual and collective well-being.

We might also consider the "negative approach" to well-being as providing other features to guide Humanities education. As Humanities educators, we can design learning experiences that are deeply engaging for students, that allow students to use their senses, observe carefully, and work things out for themselves. We need to consider how we can immerse students in social experience as forms of disciplinary experience (Dewey, 1902). This means not too quickly imposing disciplinary concepts, labels, classifications, or categories that will pre-define these experiences for students, but letting students *have* experience first with an opportunity to use their own sense-making capacities. *Then* they can be

guided to try Humanities lenses (e.g., disciplinary concepts, frameworks, methods, etc.) and other perspectives to support their sense-making.

A negative approach also helps provide a more balanced, realistic study of the human condition, warts and all. Humanities education must examine the struggles, failures, and tragedy that are part of the human condition. This includes critical examination of the hubris, the misguided and often self-destructive goals set by individuals and societies, and the violent impulses that have characterized so much of human history and culture and continue to do so. Humanities education can help students understand and address the issues that confront both social and individual well-being today, such as climate change and environmental degradation, poverty and inequality, war and violence, and human trafficking. They can see that like individuals, societies can either possess or lack the signature strengths that make for strong societies.

The many issues facing societies (outlined earlier, as determinants of well-being) are not simply matters that can be addressed by scientific, technological, or technocratic solutions. They are also humanitarian issues and issues of social justice. They require asking the right questions, public deliberation, critical reasoning, and the exercise of judgment to determine the best courses of action that are informed, reasonable, just, and humane. Humanities educators, therefore, have the important responsibility of teaching all students how to develop sound arguments based on evidence, weigh different arguments, and wrestle with issues of justice, ethics, and power. They can draw on the content and tools of the Humanities

to shape students' understandings of issues that affect well-being and to help them determine necessary courses of action. The Humanities provide the necessary intellectual virtues and humane values central to "hopeful, watchful caretaking [forms of] citizenship, neighborliness, stewardship" that enable people to live together and care for each other (Miller, 2010, p. xix). This requires helping students develop an empathetic understanding of others and the ways different groups of people have been impacted by particular events, issues or policies.

Humanities education, then, is unique in its potential to focus on issues and capacities central to individual well-being as well as the conditions that determine well-being. It is uniquely positioned in school curriculum to help students understand the inner life of the mind, human imagination, and different perspectives people may have as well as the historical, geographic, cultural, social, political, and economic circumstances that have shaped the human condition and their own lives.

Conclusion

Humanities education can help young people better understand the "humanness" of others who are different from themselves, due to national, cultural, religious, ethnic or class differences (Nussbaum, 2010). To a large extent, considering others' humanness means considering their well-being and the ways in which social and material conditions affect human lives. It means having the imagination and empathy to consider others' plight. Rather than merely preparing students for jobs or careers, the

study of history, geography, literature, and the arts can provide powerful opportunities for students to develop insight into their own lives and the lives of others that will enable them to create lives worth living, full of meaning and purpose. It can also help students be more conscious that the ways they live their lives also affects others. Humanities education can help students overcome narrow views that may only focus on their personal well-being to more fully consider societal well-being and the well-being of all of humanity.

The value of Humanities education resists easy measurement. Instead of the almost exclusive focus on economic productivity and the instrumental development of human capital, Humanities education prepares young people to think critically about social issues, political decisions, and public policy, and the impact they have on personal and societal well-being. And, it can prepare students to take on the hard work of social responsibility, in which responsibility is taken for the well-being of others who may be different, marginalized, less fortunate, and lacking in the basic conditions necessary for decent lives. These are commitments that can be enacted in Humanities classrooms. They require checking in with each other to make sure we're taking care of each other and our well-being. They require making our own well-being and the well-being of our colleagues, our students, and others more of a priority in our day-to-day interactions. These everyday commitments can "enlarge the humanity of all of us" (Boggs, 1998, p. 255) to create individuals and societies that are humane, caring, and just.

Works Cited

Baildon, M., & Ho, L.-C. (2013). A note from the editors. *HSSE Online: Research and Practice in Humanities & Social Studies Education*, 2(1).

Boarini, R., Comola, M., Smith, C., Manchin, R., & de Keulenaer, F. (2012). What makes for a better life? The determinants of subjective well-being in OECD

countries – Evidence from the Gallup World Poll, *OECD Statistics Working Papers*, 2012/03, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k9b9ltjm937-en

Boggs, G. (1998). *Living for change: An autobiography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Burkeman, O. (2012). *The antidote: Happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking*. New York: Faber and Faber.

Csíkszentmihályi, Mihaly (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper and Row.

De Mel, S. (2014). GDP still relevant in assessing well-being. *Straits Times*, May 8 2014, 27.

Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and curriculum.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Diener, E., Ng, W., Harter, J., & Arora, R. (2010). Wealth and happiness across the world: Material prosperity predicts life evaluation, whereas psychosocial prosperity predicts positive feeling.

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99(1), 52–61.

Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (Eds.) (2013). World happiness report 2013. Accessed 3 March 2014: http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/WorldHappiness Report2013_online.pdf

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Miller, E. (2010). *Hope in a scattering time: A life of Christopher Lasch*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (2013). *The Singapore Social Health Project Report*. Accessed 12 February 2014:
http://www.nvpc.org.sg/knowledge/social_ health_project.aspx

New Economics Foundation. (2012). The happy planet index: 2012 report. Accessed 25 February 2014: http://www.happyplanetindex.org/assets/h appy-planet-index-report.pdf

Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Raibley, J.R. (2011). Happiness is not well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13(6), 1105-1129.

Roy, K. (2005). An untimely intuition: Adding a Bergsonian dimension to experience and education. *Educational Theory*, 55(4), 443-459.

Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Sen, A. (2008). *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swinyard, W. R., Kau, A., & Phua, H. (2001). Happiness, materialism, and religious experience in the US and Singapore. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 2(1), 13-32.

Tambyah, S., Tan, S., & Kau, A. (2009). The quality of life in Singapore. *Social Indicators Research*, 92(2), 337-376.

United Nations Development Programme (2013). Human Development Report, 2013. Accessed 10 March 2014: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/repor ts/14/hdr2013_en_complete.pdf

Watts, A. (1951). *The wisdom of insecurity: A message for an age of anxiety*. New York: Vintage Books.

Yuen, T.W., & Chu, W. W. (2013). Happiness in ASEAN countries. The 8th Annual Conference of The Asian Studies Association of Hong Kong The Hong Kong Institute of Education 8-9 March 2013.