# Now I am a Teacher with My Way…: Integrated Happiness Pedagogy for Students' Wellbeing

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## Abstract

This study outlines the origination of a unique pedagogical approach termed as "Happiness-Focused Dialogical Phenomenology". This approach integrates elements of Constructivism and Transformative Learning Theory to create a holistic and transformative educational environment. Reflecting on the journey of a teacher, the study seeks to move beyond traditional teaching methods to foster a learning experience that prioritizes both academic rigor and student's well-being. Drawing on the concept of signature pedagogy introduced by Lee S. Shulman (2005), it emphasizes the importance of creating a methodology that is both distinctive and effective in nurturing critical thinking, collaboration, and happiness among students.

The proposed pedagogy is rooted in Constructivism, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences and social interactions, and Transformative Learning Theory, which focuses on perspectives that transform through disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection. The study combines these theories with dialogue-based learning and portfolio assessments to encourage students to reflect on their experiences, engage in meaningful discussions and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Key components include mindfulness practices, gratitude exercises, and happiness focused activities to promote well-being, alongside dialectical discussions and portfolio dialogues to foster critical thinking and self-awareness. This pedagogical approach not only claims to enhance academic achievement but also personal development and emotional health with more fulfilling and engaged learning for students.

Teachers training, potential conflicts in discussions and subjectivity of an individual's experiences are acknowledged challenges. However, it is believed that this innovative approach has the potential to revolutionize education by creating a learning environment that is academically rigorous and supportive to students. The study concludes with a call for further exploration and implementation of this pedagogy in diverse educational settings.
**Keywords:** Happiness-Focused Dialogical Phenomenology, Constructivism, Transformative Learning Theory, signature pedagogy, dialogue-based learning, portfolio assessments, mindfulness practices, gratitude exercises

## Introduction

Developing a signature pedagogy for teachers like you and me. If we remember our journey in educating ourselves, multiple people with the common name "teachers" visit our memory. We remember very few of them for smiling back at the past. As I play a similar role of performing as a teacher, I get to reflect on myself with those memories. I would like my students to remember me differently than how I do now as I remember my teachers. My new approach is my 'Signature Pedagogy'.

The concept of signature pedagogy came from Lee S. Shulman (2005) when he came across students from different faculties but learning with the same methodologies at the Carnegie Foundation. He conceptualized the choice among many alternative approaches to training aspiring professionals. Shulman (2005), as cited in Tan and Koh, (2018) defines pedagogies as "the types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions" (p. 52). Similarly, Davis (2002) defines signature pedagogy as an approach in which students and faculty in schools do not need to figure out how a class works or what the expectations are. He further adds that developing a signature pedagogy is a decision making process that includes selecting what is part of the learning model and what is not, and how included elements are expressed.
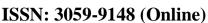
When talking about myself and my expectations to bring change in the educational approach of teaching and learning, I came across theories and practices that had been my way of teaching methods. Some worked at a place, some at times, but rarely did any of them worked everywhere, every time. Now, the change in pedagogy was under an obligation to form.

## Literature Review

Theories guide us in our practices. 'Constructivism' and 'Transformative Learning Theory' guide my practices the most. Constructivism is a diverse and multifaceted theory with several core concepts. As cited by Mcloed (2023) constructivism is an 'approach to learning that holds people actively construct or make their knowledge. That reality is determined by the experiences of the learner' (Elliott et. al., 2000, p. 256). Constructing a new pedagogy based on my prior knowledge and experience is what this study relates to now. Bada (2025) says that students learn by fitting new information together with what they already know, and as they perceive each new experience, they will continually update mental models to reflect. The
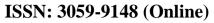
learners reflect new information to construct their interpretation of reality. This helps the learners to use active techniques and different practices helping them to become logical and critical thinkers. My experience of implementing this theory of making students critical and logical thinking still needed some additional perks to ignite the inner self of the students. Similar to my experience is the cognition theory of Jean Piaget which states about schema, assimilation, and accommodation. Schema is the pattern of learning that is imprinted, assimilation, the process of incorporating new information into existing one, and accommodation is to create something new that contradicts and does not fit the prior knowledge. Thus, expanding and extending the horizon of understanding and meaning- making (Wagle, 2003).

Cherry, (2023) illustrates that all children are constantly experimenting and investigating to understand how the world works for their intellectual growth. However, Bruner, (1990) explains that there are often multiple ways to understand and interpret information. Learners should be encouraged to explore different perspectives. Learning is enhanced through collaboration, discussion, and sharing of ideas with others (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea of Vigotsky is also found in an approach to dialogue. This is widely known as social constructivism to my knowledge. This believes in collaboration between learners and instructors, this social interaction is an active and lively way to learn. I prefer to use this in a new way. Here, learners construct their meanings through dialogue, collaboration, and guidance from the more knowledgeable others. Vygotsky (ibid) further emphasizes the four major factors: the zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding, mediation, and internalization. The gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance from a more skilled person is ZPD. This dynamic space is where optimal learning occurs. Scaffolding is a temporary support provided by teachers, parents or peers to help learners reach their full potential within the ZPD. This can involve modeling, questioning, prompting, and gradually fading support as the learner becomes more proficient. Tools, symbols, language, technology, art, etc., used to mediate interactions and understanding bridges the gap between self and the world around. Mediation and social interactions as well as experiences become internalized mental structures, shaping the learner's cognitive development. This process is internalization in my understanding. However, to conclude constructivism, Honebein (1996) summarize the seven pedagogical goals of constructivist learning environments that can be applied to everyday teaching learning activities in a classroom: to provide experience with the knowledge construction process ( students determine how they learn), to provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives (evaluation of alternative solutions), to embed learning in realistic contexts (authentic tasks), to encourage ownership and a voice in the learning process (student centered learning), to embed learning in social experiences (collaborative learning), to encourage the use of multiple models of representation, ( video, audio, text, …) and to encourage awareness of the knowledge construction process (reflection, metacognition).

Linking my knowledge of constructivism with transformative learning theory, the transformative theory contradicts traditional theories and challenges existing assumptions and frameworks. Transformative learning theory, pioneered by Jack Mezirow in 1991, delves into the fundamental nature of adult learning, emphasizing disorienting dilemmas and perspective transformation as central aspects of the process (Taylor, 2010). But what bothered me more was that transformative learning is not solely limited to formal education but can occur in various life experiences and contexts. If this concept could be applied to everyday classrooms to produce happiness in children, the shift can be visualized. The paradigm shift happens through transformative cores. "These are unforeseen events or experiences that disrupt our existing worldview, causing confusion and forcing us to question our previously held beliefs and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991)." So was mine. My confusion and questions regarding my teaching methods forced me to think beyond my beliefs of what I thought was best. Personal crises, societal upheavals, or encountering contradictory perspectives at school could be some examples of disoriented dilemmas. Mezirow conceptualizes transformative learning as occurring through four stages: triggering dilemma, examination of assumptions, new insights and roles, and reintegration into life (ibid). Furthermore, the core outcome of transformative learning is when individuals undergo a fundamental shift in how they understand themselves, the world, and their relationships within it. This involves reconstructing meaning systems, revising assumptions, and adopting new viewpoints as perspective transformation. Without critical reflection and analysis of experiences and perspectives, a transformation of knowledge is not acquired; so self-reflection is a crucial process of this type of learning (Taylor, 2010). Applying this notion of transformative approach I have coined the term "**Happiness Focused Dia Phenomenology**" with critical self-reflection and analysis of my experiences.

**Integrated Approach**

When these theories were implemented in my setting, a variety of strategies were used. A few modalities undoubtedly shifted as we moved from the teacher-centered paradigm to the child-centered one. As a teacher, I constantly experimented to find new ways to improve my lessons, but the results weren't always what I was hoping for. Every class faced unique obstacles and had unique experiences. Each child was unique from the others. This got me to reflect carefully on my responsibilities. I was not happy, and happiness is important. It matters so much that many of us make personal fulfillment and well-being the main aim of our lives (Scoffham & Barnes, 2011). As Das, et al. (2023) mentioned in a report study of happiness classes in Delhi what is essential to education is a sense of happiness and fulfillment, however, when asked, most people describe education as a means to acquire knowledge and skills. The choice of happiness as a key aspect of my pedagogy developed in this way. I can perform better when I am happy and 'children learn when they are happy' (Noddings, 2003). After the classroom environment is happy and thus ready for instruction, then I have to choose the best possible way to share the content and clarify the concept about the content. I find the dialectic approach most effective. In tandem with this, a portfolio which is a systematic collection of students' work that represents student activities, accomplishments, and achievements over a specific

period in one or more areas of the curriculum (manoa.hawaii.edu) is simultaneously prepared to support a dialogue between teacher and student and between peers. Sharing work and collaboration makes learning easy. Integrating dialogue with a portfolio is a fascinating concept with immense potential for fostering critical thinking and deep learning. This is very rarely found in the school settings around me. Through reflection and revision, students integrate these new perspectives with their own, refining their understanding and reaching a more nuanced synthesis. This synthesis becomes evident in subsequent portfolio entries and class discussions (Peters, et al., 2014). Learning becomes an active process where students engage with the world with specific goals and questions. The teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding students to explore their understandings (Smith, 2012, p. 23). So I as a teacher find the process close to phenomenology which is very essential to complete the learning. Thus, out of the box, the conclusion, **Happiness Focused Dia Phenomenology**, could be a new pedagogy that is transformative, empowering, and holistic.

This new pedagogy is different from the conventional ones in many ways. This pedagogical approach is designed in such a way that happiness pedagogy emphasizes the importance of cultivating positive emotions and well-being in learners. In our context, it has never been done this way as a pedagogy. Portfolio dialogues provide a structured space for learners to reflect on their learning experiences, articulate their understanding, and receive feedback from peers and teachers. Only being documented as assignments and exam paper portfolios are not even looked at later.  This methodology can be implemented to make proper use of such. Phenomenology added here helps encourage learners to focus on their lived experience and engage in critical reflection on the meaning and significance of their learning. Moreover, this method can engage learners in difficult areas of science, technology, or mathematics to relate to their experiences and real-life linkage. Which in my understanding gives a true meaning of educating. In my practice, different pedagogical approaches have different strengths and flaws, to overcome the flaws of one, another can be used to collaborate and these pedagogies help include all aspects of learning.

This new way has the potential to revolutionize education by creating a learning environment that is both academically rigorous and supportive of students' well-being. This offers a promising path toward creating a future where not only education but also other aspects such as self-awareness is not just about acquiring knowledge, but also about developing the whole person and fostering a life of happiness and fulfillment. Instead, the specific implementation of this pedagogy may vary depending on the context and needs of the learners and the learning environment.

**Practical Implementation**
When thinking of implementing this new pedagogy, three different aspects are to be considered. Personal development, emotional well-being, and academic success. A door to emotional well-being opens with happiness and happiness can be achieved through mindfulness practices, gratitude exercises, happiness hours, and activities that promote social connection and purpose. For example, making students write a gratitude letter to parents

thanking them, makes a difference in the perception of a child towards his parents and makes parents feel happy about it. Puiu, (2021) mentions that "Happiness must be learned. Happiness can be taught at school. The first experiments and "happiness lessons" in lower secondary education proved to be a success! ", says Ernst Gehmacher (2019, p 252).

Additionally, Main, (2021) says dialogues can be used for personal development through deepening learning, thinking critically, and promoting self-awareness skills as research reveals that children in control schools, where dialogic teaching is implemented, demonstrate significant gains in both their understanding and instrumental learning when compared to their peers in traditional classrooms. I can relate this to a classroom discussion where the exchange of perspectives occurs and an excluded student or a child gets involved and included. Phenomenology is connected to a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world along with the self-reflection of their everyday activities and achievements (Woodruff, 2018). Every achievement is to be celebrated in the classroom, whenever possible in the presence of parents and school management. This appraisal method enhances phenomenology as a part of a curriculum. Hence, this would increase students' engagement and motivation making learning activities more happy, effective, and complete.

Likewise, through the entries in the portfolios, which display how students interpreted their educational experiences, students first convey their viewpoints and comprehension. We have seldom encouraged our students to evaluate themselves and reflect on them. Employing peer evaluation, group discussions, and teacher prompts, students come across opposing perspectives and obstacles to their preliminary comprehension. This makes room for discussion, inquiry, and reevaluation of their viewpoints. Students can work on difficult lessons of historical or thematic problems by developing their case in the portfolio and then, with the help of their teachers and fellow students, come up against opposing viewpoints. Other examples could be students analyzing artworks not just in terms of technique or historical context, but also as reflections of their perceptions and emotions as Casey, (2001) says. This interactive process leads to a richer understanding of the issue. Students can even present their interpretations of a text from their book in their portfolio, then engage in dialectical discussions with peers and teachers, collaborate with parents and seniors at school, and consider alternative readings and contexts. This deepens their engagement with the text and fosters critical thinking skills. Reading becomes a dialogue between text and reader, with students exploring individuals' interpretations and connections to the story (Friesen, 2023). Students can document their scientific investigations and findings in their portfolios, then face challenges and refine their beliefs through feedback and experimentation. This mirrors the scientific process of continuous questioning and refinement. Instead of simply memorizing facts, students engage in inquiry-based learning, actively constructing their understanding through experimentation and observation. Moreover, learning through these integrations can further help students move beyond surface knowledge to grasp the nuances and complexities of the subject matter.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

The most important part of learning is to assess and evaluate the learning outcomes. Happiness is an individual phenomenon in which grading may not be possible. As such,  performance-based rubrics are to be formed with the dialogues between students, parents, teachers, and the school management together. Parents' satisfaction feedback and social support analysis can also be conducted. Dialectic portfolios may not be evaluated using conventional grading techniques. For the purpose of evaluating, criteria like critical thinking, communication, and self-reflection, new rubrics and assessment instruments may be required. Self-reflection and feedback are crucial parts of assessment and evaluation. Presentations and documentation are other procedures. Experimentation and observation go along with the learning process. Case presentations and reports could be the other measures. Hence, assessment is taken as the form of learning itself.

**Reflection and Adaptation**

My approach to teaching and learning definitely will have some challenges when it comes to implementing in the real world.  I can reflect on Smith (2012) that the shifting from traditional knowledge transmission to facilitating experiential learning requires training and active participation from both parties. Teachers' training and preparation before class for dialectic discussions and forming a ground rule for activities will be the major challenge. Discussions sometimes lead to quarrels and personal attacks which are to be handled very carefully. Making rubrics for evaluation is another hurdle. The focus on individual experience can make assessment and evaluation more challenging. Furthermore, also the misguidance of personal interpretations can lead to differentiation in evaluation. I do have concerns regarding the adaptations of the pedagogy as always, a new idea gets rejected several times in the beginning.

## Conclusion

Giving thought to my journey of developing a signature pedagogy, I continued to have my way of conducting teaching and learning. Happiness-Focused Dialogical Phenomenology as a signature pedagogy reflects a thoughtful integration of Constructivism and Transformative Learning Theory as my key learning theories. The proposed pedagogy looks forward to revolutionizing education. Combining the transformative learning approach that emphasizes perspective transformation through disorienting dilemmas with the ideas of constructivism, which emphasizes active engagement, collaboration, and the construction of knowledge by learners, I am determined to apply this pedagogy. The integration of portfolio dialogues in this approach offers a dynamic platform for fostering critical thinking, deep learning, and meaningful reflection. My emphasis on happiness as a foundational element recognizes the significance of well-being in the learning process. The practical implementation of this pedagogy involves multiple pragmatic practices with feasibility. I can visualize myself carrying this pedagogy to classrooms. Additionally, my assessment and evaluation process shift towards performance-based rubrics, dialogues, and self-reflection, acknowledging the individualized nature of happiness. While teacher training, potential conflicts in discussions, and the

subjectivity of individual experiences may arise as challenges, the proposed pedagogy holds the potential to mitigate impediments and create a holistic and transformative educational environment that prioritizes both academic rigor and students' well-being.

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