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**HOW TO TEACH HAPPINESS COURSES AT UNIVERSITIES?
‘SUSTAINABLE HAPPINESS’ COURSE CASE
Interview by Uliana Lushch-Purii**

Abstract. Dan Haybron’s “Sustainable Happiness” course integrates environmental sustainability with well-being, highlighting the connection between ecological care and human happiness. Delivered to a multidisciplinary cohort, it combines philosophy, biology, economics, and ethics with a focus on practical applications and local community issues. Students demonstrated notable growth through reflective exercises and collaborative projects addressing real-world challenges. Both Haybron and Uliana Lushch-Purii emphasize the value of interdisciplinary, practice-oriented philosophy courses that promote self-development and responsible citizenship beyond traditional exam-focused learning.

Keywords: Sustainable Happiness, Well-Being, Beauty, Interdisciplinary Education, Environmental Ethics, Practice-Oriented Learning, Social Responsibility

Uliana Lushch-Purii, PhD, Associate Professor, Post-Doctoral Fellow of Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Co-founder of The Ukrainian Institute for Happiness Research:

On behalf of the co-hosts and participants of our conference, I’d like to thank you for your partnership over the past six years. We are very happy to have you with us again this year.

I would like to ask a question on your very interesting course you had in fall semester 2024 which is called “[Sustainable Happiness](#)”. Can you please share how you created this course, what were the main ideas you wanted to outline in this course?

Dan Haybron:

It was 2 years ago when I co-taught this course with my colleague ecologist [Gerardo Camilo](#) for biology students. The course is about sustainability in the environmental sense and how quality of life and environmental responsibility can

often go hand in hand. The course is aimed at exploring ways to address both environmental problems and issues of well-being and happiness at the same time. This course evolved from environmental ethics. Much of my interest in the environment and in happiness is intertwined.

One of the things that motivates many happiness researchers is the trend to move beyond GDP — beyond a purely monetary focus. Even though some countries are getting richer and inequality is growing, we still enjoy a very high material standard of living by historical standards — and yet well-being is declining.

In 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 25% of young women aged 18 to 24 in the United States reported making suicide plans that year, and the rate of suicidal ideation was even higher.

I have colleagues at Harvard, and they reported to me that many of their students feel trapped. This is Harvard University — the most privileged students are being educated there — and yet they feel trapped, as though they don't have a choice. I ran a similar test with my students this fall in the “Sustainable Happiness” class here in the Midwest at a Jesuit Catholic university. It's a good school, and we have great students, even though it is not as intense as Ivy League colleges. However, many of my students — perhaps most of them — said they feel trapped too. And so, we are clearly doing something wrong.

Hurting the environment is also making life worse.

So, how can we pursue good lives more effectively? That is what motivated me to create this course: to help students see that taking care of the environment can actually be beneficial for their well-being.

Uliana Lushch-Purii:

What was the feedback of your students about the course? What conclusions did they share?

Dan Haybron:

It was an interesting experience. I don't think I've ever seen more growth among students in one of my classes. It was really satisfying. They had to write a number of just personal reflections about various topics relating to happiness and sustainability. A part of the focus of the class was also practice: how can you be happier? I suggested them several happiness exercises they could try their own, and they were supposed to write about their experience of practicing happiness at the end of the semester. Their conclusions were really. It was the most satisfying teaching experience I've had. They came out of it thinking very differently from the beginning.

The challenge was that there was a lot of material you have to cover because the course is interdisciplinary and includes the following topics: biodiversity,

climate change, economics, collective action problems, the philosophy of happiness, the psychology of happiness, and also more specific topics like, urban planning, which I think is very important, how we design our communities, the spaces we live in.

Within philosophy of happiness topic we read some ancient philosophy, more recent philosophy on happiness, and also, ethics and moral theory. Ethics and moral theory are crucial as they are the background for three pillars of happiness: 1) sustainability for the environment, 2) the others happiness or well-being, 3) morality and justice. I don't think we get to focus on being happy ourselves unless we're fulfilling our responsibilities to our neighbors.

We also decided to focus during the course on local issues in Saint Louis in area. We talked about climate change, the global picture, and biodiversity loss, but it's overwhelming, when you're talking about the whole world, and you just look at right here, just 2 or 3 blocks from our classroom is North Saint Louis, which is one of the poorest, high crime neighborhoods areas in the country. It's really awful. The root cause is in historical racism and segregation in Saint Louis. It's a shame but that also makes us a good laboratory for thinking about these issues.

So I'm happy with the basic structure of the course and that students have an opportunity of covering that many topics in one class. They were very engaged and they did a group project. They united into groups and each group had to take on a problem of sustainable happiness in Saint Louis, for instance, walkable neighborhoods or parks. The students just did some of the best work I've seen.

I think that the students are used to having a list of things they are supposed to have learned and pass the final exam. But I eliminated a final exam. I really wanted them to come out with a new perspective, and to kind of pick up what worked for them, what was most useful for them, not what they need to pass the exam. What I wanted for them is to come out equipped to lead better lives themselves and be better citizens of the world, and of the country. Their main goal in this course was to learn how to have a good life and be responsible. So indeed, it's a very satisfying course to teach.

That really sounds great, because indeed, particularly in the Ukrainian educational system, a large part of philosophy courses lacks practice-oriented and practice-oriented topics. They are often far too theoretical. So, when a philosophy course can actually integrate theory with practice and focus on applying this knowledge, that is really, really valuable. And this internal motivation for students, you've mentioned, not being exam-oriented, but driven by self-development and gaining new perspectives on happiness and on one's own life – that is truly wonderful.

When we first started teaching Environmental Ethics, the philosophical questions where: what is the moral standing of ecosystems, biodiversity of plants, if any? The literature covering these questions is really abstract. We studied works

of an ecologist Aldo Leopold that helped to start environmental philosophy and land ethics. The value of beauty was elaborated there.

I increasingly think that beauty, especially in American culture, is underappreciated, and I don't mean physical beauty. In my view, anything that's genuinely good has beauty. A person that isn't good, I don't think of as a beautiful person.

During our course, the students were talking a lot about beauty in nature especially and in their lives, and, that was really nice cause I thought they would just think that was matter of taste.

Also, we're very lucky to get a couple of guest speakers like John De Graaf, who's a filmmaker, also an author of a new book and a new documentary (which I'm about to watch any day now) *America the Beautiful*, and he's been really emphasizing the importance of beauty as something people can come together on.

Uliana Lushch-Purii:

In the last semester, were you teaching your course to biology students, or was it a different faculty?

Dan Haybron:

This time, it was a real mix this time.

The environmental ethics course was originally developed for conservation biology students. Because Doctor Camilo – my colleague, found that when you're actually out in the field doing conservation work, like he did a lot of work in Central America and South America – you have to engage with governments and persuade them to protect some forest, for example, and you've got to be able to make ethical and moral arguments. But you don't learn that with science. Scientific training is about data, even though everybody knows that ethics matters, but scientific training. So our course was intended to fill in this gap.

Last semester that was really a mix of students, and, in the group projects, what I tried to do is arrange the group so that it would be a mix: natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. So that they had different perspectives from the students all kind of feeding into how do we deal with this social problem that requires all three types of discipline.

Uliana Lushch-Purii:

That's truly fantastic! I'd like to briefly share that, in 2023, I introduced a course on the philosophy of happiness in the Faculty of Philosophy at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, where I'm currently completing my post-doctoral fellowship. This course was designed for master's students and covered interdisciplinary topics, including ancient Greek theories of happiness, the economics of happiness, moral philosophy, and forward-looking perspectives such as transhumanism and posthumanism. We explored how these different approaches

conceptualize happiness and what the future might hold for the notion of a happy person. Additionally, we analyzed films related to happiness, which added an engaging dimension to the course. I taught this course for two semesters, and it was a very rewarding experience. I strongly believe that academia should continue moving forward with more courses like this, offering students diverse perspectives and approaches from various professors. The initiative to develop courses on happiness is truly inspiring because it allows us to share our knowledge and motivate students to explore their own perspectives and gain practical insights that are meaningful for their lives — beyond just preparing for exams or meeting quantitative benchmarks, which is often the focus in traditional university education. So, I’m very pleased to see such courses being offered in different countries, and I believe they have great potential to enrich education globally.

Dan Haybron:

That’s great! One of the things I really like about our field is that most people work in it seem to be interdisciplinary, as you certainly are. I just think that’s wonderful and at the same time it’s hard to do in academic career because it’s difficult to publish an interdisciplinary paper in journals. But it’s great that in universities we have an opportunity to reach our students with interdisciplinary integrative approaches.