

# **Desiree Tahiri**

## **Happiness reflective journal**

**CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”**

**Autumn session, 2013**

**Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong**

**Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin**

### ***Assignment***

Choose an activity that research says increases personal happiness, such as expressing gratitude, helping others, being optimistic or practising mindfulness. (See Lyubomirsky for ideas.) Undertake this activity for at least 5 weeks, keeping a personal diary of your observations about your experience, with entries once a week or more. You can keep the diary on a blog or as typed or handwritten notes.

During the time you undertake the activity, you should also read academic and popular writing (such as news stories) about it. In your diary, you can comment on the connection between what researchers and popular writers say about the activity and your experience of it.

Your submission is in two parts:

1. A 1000-word reflective journal
2. Your diary.

In the reflective journal, you should report on 3 or more pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) and 3 or more pieces of popular writing (newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.) that recommend your activity as enhancing happiness.

For more details see [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST\\_13outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_13outline.pdf)

*Desiree Tahiri's* reflective journal starts on the next page.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/happiness-journal-tops/>.

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– **Reflective Journal** –

*Flow Experience ~ Learning to play Jazz Mandolin*

The ‘pursuit’ of happiness through the improvement of one’s external circumstances is, as Lyubomirsky discusses, one of an illusory, ephemeral nature; it is overwhelmingly through the effortful and conscious training of thought that one may flourish and create wellbeing (Lyubomirsky, 2010, pg. 15). To focus the mind and live in the present, learning to savour moments and make deeper meaning of experiences are significant dimensions of happiness, one method of practicing this being the encouragement of the state of ‘flow’. Over the past five weeks, I have worked to increase my happiness through extended flow experiences by undertaking the new and challenging project of learning to play in the jazz style on mandolin. Once a regular player, I decided to re-engage myself with a once enriching musical pastime – an activity I value and feel contributes meaning to my life. With a plan to practice at least 4 times a week for an hour each session, I set myself attainable goals such as memorising two tunes and developing skills by practicing jazz chord progressions. Many challenges arose over the period along with strategies for overcoming them and I found the happiness activity to have a variety of lasting benefits.

As Csikszentmihalyi explains, flow refers to “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter”, where great attention is paid to the details of an experience and there occurs a transcendence of self (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pg. 4). Describing evidence outlining the patterns of enjoyable experiences, he refers to “long interviews, questionnaires, and other data collected over a dozen years” from thousands of respondents both ‘ordinary’ and who invest significant time undertaking challenging activities, (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pg. 48). Concentration and effort to develop skills and reach goals within a meaningful, productive activity such as playing music encourages flow, which was found to evoke a happiness that Csikszentmihalyi refers to as ‘optimal experience’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pg. 48). The process of perfecting skills through flow develops “a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life”, creating a sense of purpose and meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pgs. 4 & 3). My own

musical experience reinforces this connection between optimal experience from flow and wellbeing. During many sessions I became engrossed in what I was doing and the music created, my full attention paid to such details as the position of my fingers, keeping in time and memorising. During these moments time froze, rumination ceased and self-consciousness dissipated. A feeling of elation accompanied these transcendental moments; a “natural high”, as Lyubomirsky describes, derived from the fun of the activity and the awareness of improving technique (Lyubomirsky, 2010, pg. 187). Often during such moments I observed that I was playing more smoothly – allowing more space for expression. As I discovered, moments of flow and optimal experience were sustained by the balancing of boredom and anxiety through variety and engaging challenges which required all my skills and attention, in a sense productively competing with myself, elements Csikzentmihalyi’s studies demonstrate are necessary to facilitate flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 2008, pgs. 52 & 53). Within my activity, I maintained challenge and variety by dividing my focus between two different tunes and a number of chord progressions that I found difficult at first, requiring much repetition and attentive playing, and setting myself goals. The goals I set myself, from remembering a chord progression to playing smoothly through a small section, gave me a sense of purpose, leaving me feeling productive and satisfied at the end of a productive session. As Csikzentmihalyi explains and I have myself found, immersive flow is best sustained during the process of attentively working towards a goal and receiving positive feedback; occasionally over the 5 weeks of my activity I observed myself feeling as though it were a chore – prompting me to implement these elements of flow as effective strategies (Csikzentmihalyi, 2008, pg. 54). Disciplined routine and thought applied to a meaningful endeavour to facilitate flow and a subsequent satisfaction are notions similarly reflected in the sentiments of a popular article in a music magazine. In describing the shift from obligingly ‘practicing’ guitar to ‘playing’ and enjoying the experience, Charles explains that it was “through work and struggle” that eventually allowed for smoother expression – a realisation I also had, finding that the more effort I put in, the more it became a session of flow and optimal experience (Charles, 2009). Where at first I had some difficulty maintaining my routine, through committing to an hour of practice and remaining patient I began to look forwards to my session of music.

A 2012 Australian newspaper article highlights listening to music’s positive effect on wellbeing, recommending it as a means to happiness suggesting that music relaxes and “can reduce chronic pain and depression” (Conville, 2012, pg. 8). Reflecting these ideas, a scientific paper discussing the results of a study involving analysis of brain activity in relation to intense pleasure or ‘the chills’ in response to music by Salimpoor et. al. indicated that

“music-induced emotional states can lead to dopamine release”, dopamine being a known happiness-inducing chemical (Salimpoor et al., 2011, pg. 262). The key to being able to play an instrument well is in being able to listen with focused attention. Despite relating to the newspaper article’s claim in a more general sense while *listening* to music, I didn’t find my activity relaxing; practicing involved much repetition and concentration in order to play a piece correctly, although the momentum of flow certainly evokes a lasting sense of fulfilment. I recall many such instances of flow where I had developed enough skill to play smoothly and expressively and experienced intense pleasure from listening to the jazz I was playing, heightened I think by the fact that I was the one who managed to create it.

In an extensive analysis of previous research, Croom discusses evidence that “musical engagement can positively contribute to one’s living a flourishing life” as each of Seligman’s five categories – positive emotion, relationships, engagement, achievement, and meaning are enhanced by it (Croom, 2012, pg. 1). Flow and mindfulness while playing are regarded as central to musical activity’s relationship to a fulfilling engagement with life; those who regularly experience flow found to “typically report higher levels of well-being” (Croom, 2012, pg. 8). Flow is most powerful while undertaking an activity that has meaning to an individual and is sustained by the challenge of self-set goals, providing one with a “consistent sense of personal agency...structure...and purpose...in their daily life” (Croom, 2012, pg. 10). A post by Gaertner on a music-training blog reinforces the ideas presented in the study, speaking of the satisfaction one can attain from playing an instrument and recommending it as an activity for increased happiness. Gaertner refers to a 2011 study in which musicians were found to have ‘peak experiences’ and transcendences of ego when performing music, echoing Croom and Csikzentmihalyi’s notions of flow and consequent gratification (Gaertner, 2012). My own musical experience of flow reinforces the ideas concerning the creation of happiness within both the Croom’s study and Gaertner’s post. The almost meditative engagement with the music I was producing was deeply satisfying, the flow of these moments driven by progression towards goals and better-quality playing. Setting myself goals – with a vision of ultimately sharing music with others provided me a sense of purpose. Structuring a routine also gave me a sense of control and something to look forwards to. I attained most benefit during those sessions in which I played in the morning, as a positive way to start the day, and when I left no longer than a day’s gap between sessions in order to maintain skills and better facilitate flow – the challenge of playing smoothly not unmanageably difficult as during sessions in which I left too much distance between the last. Overall, I observed a growing

sense of agency regarding my own happiness, realising that the greater effort I made, the more positive flow experiences and a sense of meaningful life engagement I derived.

Reflecting on my own experience of learning jazz on mandolin as a flow-inducing activity, I found that the academic evidence and popular reporting on the topic of flow and music largely confirms my own observations. As I developed skills I experienced flow more frequently – which along with evoking a sense of mastery and inspired elation, also distracted me from negative ruminations. Following an uplifting session, I was often able to think with clearer perspective. Feeling in flow and mindfully connected to the present moment made me feel meaningfully engaged and in control of my life, providing me with a developing self-confidence and worth, motivation, accomplishment and a lasting sense of happiness.

***Word Count: 1446***

## **References**

### ***Academic Research***

Croom, A. M., 2012; ‘Music, neuroscience, and the psychology of well-being’, *Frontiers in Psychology – Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, vol. 2, article 393, pgs. 1, 8 & 10

Csikszentmihalyi, M., 2008; *Flow – The psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Perennial, New York, pgs. 3, 4, 48, 52, 53 & 54

Lyubomirsky, S., 2010; *The How of Happiness: A Practical Guide to Getting the Life You Want*, Piatkus, Great Britain, pgs. 15, 187

Salimpoor, V. N. et al., 2011; ‘Anatomically distinct dopamine release during anticipation and experience of peak emotion to music’, *Nature Neuroscience*, vol. 14, no. 2, pg. 262

***Popular Writing (magazine article, newspaper article and blog post)***

Charles, B., 2009; 'Play More, Practice Less, Find Happiness', *Making Music Magazine*, accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2013 at: <https://secure.makingmusicmag.com/columns/Charles-Play-More-Practice-Less.html>

Conville, N., 2012; 'Music: The Key to Wellbeing', *Sunday Herald – Sun*, printed: April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012, News Digital Media, Melbourne, Vic., pg. 8

Gaertner, T., 2012; 'Music Makes Us Happy', *Training the Musical Brain: A Neuroscience Perspective on Teaching and Learning Music*, weblog post, 16<sup>th</sup> February, accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2013 at: <http://trainingthemusicalbrain.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/music-makes-us-happy.html>