

A Review of *Teaching What Matters: Activating Happiness, Kindness, and Altruism*

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Abstract

This book review of *Teaching What Matters: Activating Happiness, Kindness, and Altruism* by Steve Banno Jr. (2022) proposes that this book is a practical and applicable read for educators, particularly those who work with high school students and want detailed lesson plans on how to engage learners in thinking and reflecting on happiness and human goodness (character education). It provides a detailed road map of how to address social emotional learning in students. As the author points out in the intro and chapter 1, “An educator should connect one’s intellect with their heart” and “People should be mindful of how they live at every stage of their lives” (Banno, 2022, pp. XIX & 1).

Keywords: altruism, happiness, flourishing, human goodness, character education

A Review of *Teaching What Matters: Activating Happiness, Kindness, and Altruism* by Steve Banno Jr.

If you are looking for a way to make happiness, kindness, and altruism real and applicable for students, then this book is going to provide you with resources, information, and very detailed lesson plans on how to facilitate students’ work on their inner selves in relevant and connected ways. Students are pushed to reflect and grow their inner selves as they look at what is going on externally in their world. The author is very passionate about this topic and provides multimodal resources that can be used, such as videos, readings, and engaging hands-on activities. The author provides a wide variety of examples (both personal anecdotes

and examples from others), experiments, studies, and research, which he discusses at the beginning of each chapter and after each lesson in a series of questions answered about the topic for each lesson. What is clear from reading his commentary after each lesson is that the author has done his homework; he has used these lessons in his teaching at a high school. Having taught this class for over fifteen years, he entitled the course as follows: *The Love Course: Exploring the Art of Living*.

Summary of Representative Chapters

Please see the appendix for a comprehensive list of each section and a summary of its contents.

Chapter 1

This chapter is broken into seven sections by bold headings. Each section discusses many factors that influence happiness, living a good life, maintaining a healthy well-being, and being content. Living a good life is tied to life choices centered around good health and making good personal ties with others. The author reminds the reader that a good life doesn’t just happen on its own. In one section, he advocates the need for social emotional learning and provides documented examples to illustrate that education affects students inside and outside of the classroom. He defines what he means by flourishing or thriving in life. He states, “Flourishing is often found in some combination of finding meaning..., fulfillment..., purpose, and serenity both internally and externally. This leads to authentic happiness” (Banno, 2022, p. 7).

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Chapter 2

This chapter focuses on success. Playbook lessons are preceded by one of five precepts and continue with sequencing lessons that begin with lesson objectives, lead-in or guiding questions, and steps to accomplish what is in each lesson. The lessons consist of conversation, journal writing, and other activities for students to complete in multimodal ways.

Chapter 3

This chapter deals with the emotions and focuses on students' working on their inside (emotional) selves, optimism, and an attitude of gratitude. This chapter continues with the playbook lessons.

Chapter 4

This chapter focuses on time and students' attitudes about time. The author views the central issue regarding time as time poverty versus time affluence.

Chapter 5

The focus of this chapter is others and other-centered behavior. As Banno (2022) notes, "Helping students cultivate their own moral, ethical reasoning, and decision making is the ultimate application of education" (p. 109).

My Perceptions and Evaluation

The author provides a step-by-step guide of detailed lesson plans to assist educators to facilitate activities and conversations that lead students to improve themselves internally. In particular, he focuses on how each one can have and keep happiness and be kind for the rest of their lives. As a subject matter instructor, I think it would be difficult to incorporate some or most of the lessons in a class that was not designed for its intended purpose since the author specifically used these lessons as a new course that was created at the high school in which he taught. For someone who does not have a psychology background, I would be hesitant to try some, if not most, of the lessons as I am not comfortable with facilitating the concepts, which are not in my areas of expertise.

Four recommendations appear on the back of the book. One of those by Beth Kurland (2022),

clinical psychologist and author, expounds on my point of being able to teach this class in another subject matter course:

Steve A. Banno has written a groundbreaking book for educators that will surely transform the lives of their students. In *Teaching What Matters* he skillfully and comprehensively integrates what we know from positive psychology about how to live a happy and meaningful life and translates it into a ready-made course that may be the most impactful course one ever teaches. Through his careful weaving together of evidence-based research and thoughtful activities and reflection that invite students into hands-on experiences, the course laid out in this book inspires the best in students and empowers them to discover for themselves what it means to live an authentic, valued, and meaningful life.

Another recommendation on the back of the book by Amanda J. O'Hare (2022), director of neuroscience and assistant professor of psychological science at Weber State University, states how the lessons are geared toward K-12 students:

...Steve Banno Jr. provides a blueprint for educators and those who work with youth on how to teach the 'soft skills' of success in life: happiness and altruism. This book expertly intertwines the science of happiness, educational research, personal experience, and suggested lessons to provide a strong argument for teaching happiness in primary and secondary schools.

However, I do think the social emotional needs of students must be addressed in education. This book provides a detailed and thorough resource for those who are responsible for the character education of their students and want applicable, relevant lessons in their character education programs. This book is highly recommended for those who teach such content.

References

Banno, S. A., Jr. (2022). *Teaching what matters: Activating happiness, kindness, and altruism*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Appendix

Figure 1

List of Each Section and Summary of Contents

Section of Book	Main Point(s)
Preface	Banno discusses a common theme that he noticed listening to student speeches at graduation. The overriding factor was that students were not happy. The author includes data about teen attitudes toward school and explains he used to teach history courses in the high school environment. The author explains that having joy and being kind does not end. It is an ongoing goal that is never completed.
Disclaimer	The author stresses that this book is not meant to replace seeking assistance for psychological treatment.
Acknowledgements	Banno acknowledges friends, colleagues, supervisors, students, and family members, all of whom were involved in writing and publishing this book.
Introduction	The author notes that being happy has always been a concept explored in history. He has found that students want to improve internally while doing something to help externally.
Book Overview	This section provides the reader with a breakdown of what to expect in each chapter. This is followed by what the author calls “guiding principles” for teaching well-being in the classroom along with precepts (Banno, 2022, p. xx).
Chapter 1, “An Invitation to Teach What Matters”	This chapter is broken into sections by bold headings.
Chapter 2, “Redefining Success”	This chapter focuses on success and precepts 1-4.
Chapter 3, “Happiness As an Inside Job”	This chapter deals with the emotions and focuses on students working on their inside (emotional) selves, optimism, and an attitude of gratitude as well as precepts 5-6.
Chapter 4, “It’s About Time”	This chapter focuses on time, students’ attitudes about time, and precepts 7-10.
Chapter 5, “The Heart of Altruism”	The focus of this chapter is others and other-centered behavior as well as precepts 11-14.
Bibliography	Sources referenced throughout the book are provided.
Notes	Notes are divided by introduction and chapters.

Author’s Note

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