Wisdom can be taught: A proof-of-concept study for fostering wisdom in the classroom

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

We undertook a short-term longitudinal study to test whether a set of methods common to current theories of wisdom transmission can foster wisdom in students in a measurable way. The three-dimensional wisdom scale (3D-WS) was administered to 131 students in five wisdom-promoting introductory philosophy courses and 176 students in seven introductory philosophy and psychology control courses at the beginning and end of the semester. The experimental group was divided in two ("Wisdom 1" and "Wisdom 2"), and each was taught a distinct curriculum consistent with theories of wisdom education. Results of repeated measures MANOVA showed that over the course of the semester average 3D-WS scores decreased in the control classes, stayed the same in the Wisdom 1 classes, and increased in the Wisdom 2 classes. To our knowledge, this is the first time that a wisdom curriculum has been demonstrated to increase wisdom in a traditional higher education setting.

1. Introduction

In psychological science, wisdom can be viewed as a personality trait (Noftle, Schnitker, & Robins, 2011), a cognitive ability (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990), or a combination of both (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990). Because personality traits and cognitive abilities have been shown to be remarkably stable over time (Conley, 1984; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006), it is natural to presume that wisdom would also be difficult to foster over a time span as brief as a school semester.

Recent research in positive psychology, however, has shown that personality traits can also be viewed as character strengths, and character strengths can be altered through targeted interventions (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The two most common methods of intervention are the identify-and-use method and the observation of exemplars. In the identify-and-use method, one learns how to identify a strength—such as kindness—by observing it in oneself and others, and learns under what circumstances it is most effectively employed; then one practices. In the exemplar method, one learns from others who already excel at the strength.

Although the science of character strength intervention is still in its infancy, there are in the wider literature theories of wisdom pedagogy—that is, fostering wisdom in a formal education setting (Bassett, 2011; DeMichelis, Ferrari, Rozin, & Stern, 2015; Levitt, 1999; Norman,

1996; Sternberg, 2004). There have even been attempts to deploy specific wisdom curricula and then measure the results (DeMichelis et al., 2015; Sharma & Dewangan, 2017). In what follows, we will introduce two prior studies of fostering wisdom in a formal education setting and then introduce our own study as a comparison case. Because the two prior studies are the only studies thus far in the literature and because both showed null results in regard to changes in overall wisdom scores, it would be understandable to conclude, consistent with viewing wisdom as a personality trait or a cognitive ability, that wisdom is intransigent to short-term modification. Our research tested whether it is possible to move the needle on wisdom by using specific pedagogical methods to foster wisdom.

2. A systematic approach to wisdom pedagogy

Schools teach a wide range of knowledge and skills, some of which are narrow and domain-focused, others of which are general and cross domains, some of which are morally neutral, others of which are intentionally pro-social. Traditionally, wisdom has been considered one of the highest of all virtues and applicable to a wide range of domains of pro-social activity, ultimately bettering self and society (Robinson, 1990). Despite the urgent need for more wisdom in an increasingly complex society (Russell, 1956), wisdom has escaped programmatic instruction in formal education. In recent decades, however, steps have been taken that set the stage for the introduction of wisdom into formal

schooling.

The first step was operationalizing wisdom as a legitimate topic of study in the social sciences (Ardelt, 1997; Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1991; Bluck & Glück, 2004; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Sternberg, 1998). Although a uniform definition of wisdom does not exist, many researchers and lay people define wisdom as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and pro-social components (Bangen, Meeks, & Jeste, 2013; Bluck & Glück, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). The concomitant second step was creating and validating methods of measuring and quantifying wisdom. Whereas performance tasks have been used to assess the cognitive and reflective aspects of general wisdom, such as wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) or wise reasoning (Grossmann, Sahdra, & Ciarrochi, 2016), personal wisdom, consisting of multidimensional personality characteristics, has mostly been measured by self-assessed scales, such as Webster's (2003) Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) or Ardelt's (2003) Three Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS). Because general wisdom-related knowledge and wise reasoning tend to depend on the specific situation and context and, therefore, are less stable than personal wisdom (Ardelt, Pridgen, & Nutter-Pridgen, 2018; Grossmann, Gerlach, & Denissen, 2016), teaching for wisdom should target personal wisdom rather than general wisdom to have a lasting impact. The third step was developing curricula and pedagogical methods to introduce wisdom into the classroom (Sternberg, 2004; Sternberg, Jarvin, & Reznitskaya, 2008). The next step is to test these curricula and methods to see if wisdom, as operationalized and measured, can be fostered in students through classroom instruction. In this study, we stood on the shoulders of previous scholars and made a first attempt at systematically fostering wisdom in the classroom and measuring the results. We used two discrete sets of curricula and pedagogical methods to foster wisdom in the college classroom and measured our results using a well-validated wisdom scale.

3. Prior studies of teaching for wisdom

3.1. Wisdom in English class

DeMichelis, Ferrari, Rosin, and Stern (2015) attempted to teach wisdom in an intergenerational high-school-English class. They adopted Webster's notion of wisdom (Webster, 2003) as a multidimensional construct involving the five components of openness, emotional regulation, humor, critical life experiences, and reminiscence and reflectiveness, which were assessed by Webster's Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), administered at the beginning of the study and again at the end of the study.

The pedagogy used for fostering wisdom involved one 1.5 h class period per week over three weeks. During these periods, 13 high school seniors gathered with 10 elders from the community to discuss a bestselling memoir (McCourt, 1999). The discussions were led by the students' English teacher. In addition to reading the book and attending class, all participants were required to keep a journal, write two reflection assignments, and write two autobiographical assignments.[1] Statistical analysis of pretest and posttest SAWS scores showed no change in scores from the pretest to the posttest in either the elder or the student group.

3.2. Wisdom in leadership class

Sharma and Dewangan (2017) measured students' wisdom levels before and after a leadership course. The wisdom model they adopted for the study was Glück and Bluck's (2013) MORE construct, a multidimensional model that consists of sense of mastery, openness to life experiences, reflective attitude, and emotional regulation and empathy.

The MORE dimensions and Ardelt's (2003) Three Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) were measured at the beginning and end of an 18-week college Leadership course of 104 students. The curriculum consisted of mindfulness training and case studies in virtues of leaders. The coursework involved mindfulness exercises, journal writing, and reading about case studies, which were also discussed in the classroom. The mindfulness training followed Thich Nhat Hanh's book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (2016), described in the study as follows:

> The module for mindfulness followed three sessions, starting with an anecdote followed by training of different elements in mindfulness practice, and then homework. The training in the first session includes "training to sit" and "focus on breath". The second session starts with queries and discussions about the previous session and homework, then the second anecdote followed by "training for being conscious to mind"; similarly, the third session includes "training to be mindful of each moment." (p. 7)[2]

Case studies were conducted through narratives of famous figures, with an emphasis on a single virtue per figure, as follows:

> (1) Deep honesty—James Burkey
> (2) Moral courage—Abraham Lincoln
> (3) Moral vision—Winston Churchill
> (4) Deep selflessness—Martin Luther King
> (5) Compassion and care—Oprah Winfrey
> (6) Intellectual excellence—Franklin Delano Roosevelt
> (7) Creative thinking—Herb Kelleher
> (8) Fairness—Dwight Eisenhower (p. 8)[3]

Journal writing involved reflection on experiences in mindfulness and on reading and discussing the case studies. Students were prompted with the following questions:

> (1) Retrospect your life, and look for the different instances where you have shown this virtue.
> (2) If not as "1" then, identify those situations in your past where you could have acted with this virtue.
> (3) Re-imagine your past and describe followings: Have you learned any important lesson from your life experiences?, How this lesson can also help others?, How this virtue will shape someone's goal, and how much these virtues will shape the world around you? (*sic*; p. 9)

Between the pretest and the posttest, students showed no significant movement in overall scores.[4]

3.3. Summary

There are three important things to note about the two studies described above. First, no control groups were used, so although no movement was found in pre- and posttest wisdom scores of the experimental groups, we do not know what that null result means. Second, in the literature review of both studies, neither displays an awareness of the literature on pedagogical methods for specifically fostering wisdom in a setting of formal education,[5] focusing instead on narrow items such as the relationship between studying narratives and the promotion of reflective thinking. This may reflect a tendency to see the fostering of wisdom more like an intervention dosed out by a care provider than as a course of self-development facilitated by a pedagogical guide. Third, in addition to comparing pre- and posttest wisdom

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[2] No mention is made of instructor training.
[3] The book used as a source for the case studies was Gini and Green (2013).
[4] The only items that changed at the level of statistical significance were emotional suppression on the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire and habitual action on the Reflective Thinking questionnaire, which by the numbers provided both fell (although the authors say in the discussion, "awareness toward habitual action increased" (p. 13)).

[1] No further details were provided about the pedagogical methods.

[5] See Bruya & Ardelt (2018b) for an overview.