An introduction to a lecture

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the first lecture of our new course in Positive Psychology. While some people may associate psychology with looking at what's wrong with us, and at what problems we have, there is much more to psychology than that. Positive psychology, for example, looks at how to help people become happier.

This lecture begins with a question: what makes a happy life?

Now, I'm going to give you one possible answer. A happy life is a life in which you are completely absorbed in what you do. Now, how does this compare with what you and your partner said?

This answer comes from the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and the theory of flow. Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist who has spent much of his professional life on the study of what makes people happy and how we can find happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests the theory that happiness is not caused by external events or things that happen to us. Our perception of these things and how we see these events either makes us happy or sad. In other words, if we want happiness, we have to actively look for it. However, this does not mean that we should always look for happiness! Csikszentmihalyi believed that our happiest moments happen when we are in a state of flow.

The theory of flow can be summarised like this: when we are totally involved in, or focused on, what we are doing, we are in a state of flow.

Csikszentmihalyi got the inspiration for this theory when he noticed how artists worked in a studio. They completely lost track of time, they didn't notice they were hungry or tired, and they could work for hours, even days, without stopping. Anyone I have spoken to who has experienced this state of concentration has said it's difficult to explain. The best way to explain it is that it is like being in a river and the flow of the water carries you away.

For the rest of this lecture, I will explore this theory of flow in more detail. First we will look at Csikszentmihalyi's life, and how it influenced his ideas. Then we will look at the conditions that go with a state of flow. What creates flow, exactly? Finally, we will look at activities that can help us achieve flow in our everyday lives. Will this course make you happy for life? Well, maybe. Maybe.

Right, let's get started. If you look at the next slide …

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Chatting about a series

Man: So, did you see the final episode last night?

Woman: Of course! As if I would miss that!

Man: And?

Woman: It was by far the best episode, definitely.

Man: Yeah, totally. The dragon at the end and all the special effects in that final scene were amazing.

Woman: I loved that part! But I still don't think this series was as good as the others.

Man: Really? But you said you wouldn't want to miss it?

Woman: I know, but still … it's a lot more predictable than it used to be.

Man: But that's because the story has been told so well that all the characters are reaching their destiny now.

Woman: I don't know … before, anyone could die at any time so it was exciting! But, this series, no key characters died and we all knew they wouldn't. When Jaime fell in the water after the dragon attacked him, we knew he would make it somehow. And … oh, surprise, Bronn jumps in and saves him.

Man: They did kill some characters in this series, though. What was that one's name …?

Woman: Exactly, see! You can't even remember who died!

Man: Hmm. The only thing I didn't like about this series was that it was shorter than the others. Seven episodes instead of ten. Maybe they spent all their money on that dragon!

Woman: Right! I don't understand why they did it, as all the fans would happily watch ten episodes.

Man: I reckon that now they're not using the story in the books any more, they don't have as many ideas.

Woman: That would explain why they're not being as brave with the story too. It's more like a Hollywood film than a TV show now.

Man: So, is Tyrion still your favourite character?

Woman: You know … surprisingly, I think my favourite might be Cersei.

Man: What?!

Woman: She's so interesting! All the awful things she's done and the way she's just aiming for revenge, even though it won't make her happy. She still surprises us because we're expecting her to have a happy ending where she sees her mistakes and becomes a good person. But she never does, no matter what it costs her. She's unpredictable because we just can't believe anyone would be like her.

Man: I guess. You don't have to like a character for them to be your favourite!

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b1-listening/chatting-about-series>

A team meeting about diversity

Nina: As you know, our team has grown a lot in the past year and we feel we need to address the diversity in the team.

Brenda: How do you mean, 'address the diversity'?

Nina: Well, we all know that diversity in teams is a good thing, but it can also be a challenge for some people to respect and value people's differences. We've got a really diverse team here – people of different nationalities, backgrounds, religions, ages … and sometimes I don't feel we make the most of this.

Stefano: Yes, and even if it isn't specifically challenging, many people are simply unaware of the isolation that some team members may feel because they are different.

Brenda: So, what does this mean? What are we going to do?

Nina: Well, we need to create a workplace charter. You know, one that promotes equality, diversity and inclusion.

Brenda: That sounds like a good idea. But will people just see it as something the management team has created? Maybe they won't even pay attention to it.

Nina: I know. That's why we're going to involve everyone in creating it.

Stefano: That's a good idea. We could run some workshops and get ideas from the employees about how we can create a more inclusive workplace.

Nina: Exactly. I was thinking that before that we could run some team-building sessions so they can experience the value of diversity for themselves.

Brenda: Yes, I like that. Many people see diversity as something negative, often because there are different opinions or ways of doing things.

Nina: Yes, I know, but if there's no diversity, then the risk is that we all work in the same way, think the same and see the world the same. This makes it hard to be creative and to innovate.

Stefano: I completely agree, Nina. OK. So, what do you want us to do?

Nina: Stefano, can you look for a successful trainer who specialises in running workshops and team-building sessions on diversity and inclusion?

Stefano: Sure. I'll be happy to.

Nina: And Brenda, can you find a fun venue? Somewhere that is quite diverse itself. Something that's not the usual seminar-style environment?

Brenda: Sure. That'll be fun.

Nina: And I'm going to do some further research into how other organisations are benefiting from their diversity. I can share this with the whole team.

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b1-listening/team-meeting-about-diversity>

Work–life balance

Presenter: Good morning, everyone. On today's show, we've got Chris Svensson with us, the author of No more nine to five, the new best-selling book about work–life balance in the current working world. Good morning, Chris. Thanks for coming.

Chris: Thanks for having me, Anna.

Presenter: So, Chris, tell us about your book and how the concept of a work–life balance has been changing?

Chris: Well, in the more traditional workplaces, people's working lives and their private lives are, or were, clearly divided. People often work from nine in the morning until five or six in the evening. People sometimes stay late in the office and work in the evenings. This is called working overtime.

Presenter: OK, and what else?

Chris: Well, in these environments it isn't common for people to work at the weekend or while they're on holiday. They can clearly separate their working lives and their private lives. And the evenings, weekends and holidays are free to focus on non-work areas of life, such as hobbies, interests, sports, spending time with the family and friends, and so on. It's important and healthy not to spend all your time just working, right?

Presenter: Right! So what has changed? How are things different now?

Chris: Well, for a start, most people can now access their work emails from their mobile phones. So they are more likely to quickly reply to an important mail in the evening or at the weekend. The same goes for laptops. It's easier to access your work in the evenings from home or even from your hotel when you're on holiday.

Presenter: That doesn't sound like much of a work–life balance. It sounds like all work.

Chris: Exactly, but this new mobility brings a lot of advantages with it. More people are now able to work flexibly, so if they need to leave the office early one afternoon to be with their family, they can catch up on work that evening from home or somewhere else.

Presenter: That sounds good. So, what you're saying is that although traditional divisions between work and life are fading, many employees now have more freedom to do their work from different locations and at different times.

Chris: Yes, that's it.

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b1-listening/work-life-balance>

A business interview

Presenter: Welcome to today's show. We're very happy to have Anna Oliveira as our guest today. Anna is the creator and founder of HomeworX – spelled with an 'x' we should note – an app which helps teenagers with their homework. Thanks for coming in, Anna.

Anna: Thanks for having me.

Presenter: So, tell us about your app. How does it work?

Anna: Well, teenagers and their parents have numerous challenges when it comes to homework these days. In many families both parents work and don't have much available time to help their kids with their homework. And even if they do have time to help, they may not be able to offer support with the content. What I mean is, they may not know, or at least remember, enough in any given subject to support.

Presenter: You mean they might not be able to remember complex maths or might have never studied certain subjects, such as biology or economics, themselves?

Anna: Exactly. So they might want to support their children with their homework, but have neither the time nor the knowledge to do so.

Presenter: I see. So the app helps solve this problem?

Anna: Yes, and more. The next issue is that tutors can be expensive, and there may be long waiting lists for specialist tutors in the town or region you live in. Our HomeworX app brings students and tutors together online. Students can search a database of pre-approved tutors and sign up for live online support. They don't need to be in the same town or city.

Presenter: That sounds really great.

Anna: It is. And this approach also enables us to offer the tutoring services at lower prices because there's no travelling time involved for the tutor to get to the student's home. And tutors who live in remote areas are happy to get access to more students, and be able to work from home, even at lower rates.

Presenter: This all sounds great. So, how did you come up with the idea?

Anna: Well, as you might guess, I was one of those parents I described earlier. I really wanted to help my son with his homework, but I was either too busy with work or I didn't actually know anything about the subjects he was having difficulty with. Also, we live in an area where there aren't many tutors and the ones that are there are either very expensive or have long waiting lists.

Presenter: Yes. I can understand your predicament. Well, it sounds like a very useful app that is clearly meeting a need. And its popularity obviously speaks for itself.

Anna: Thank you.

Presenter: So, do you have plans for the future?

Anna: We've just secured some funding and hope to expand the range of services we offer using the app.

Presenter: We wish you the best of luck. Thanks again for coming in. That was Anna Oliveira, founder of the tutoring app HomeworX (with an 'x', don't forget!), which is available for both Apple and Android devices. Join us again next week for another business interview. Have a great week, everyone.

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b2-listening/business-interview>

A design presentation

Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming to this short presentation on our new product design. As you know, we've already redeveloped our 'Adventure' shampoo to make it more modern and appealing. And we've renamed it 'Adventure Tech'. Our market research established the target market as men in the 18–40 age range who like to be outdoors and also like technical gadgets, such as smartwatches, drones and things like that. We needed to create a bottle which appeals to that market.

So, today, I'm happy to unveil our new bottle design. As you can see, it's designed to look like a black metal drinking flask, with some digital features printed on it.

I'd like to talk you through the following three points: the key features, sizing and our timeline for production.

Firstly, you'll notice it has an ergonomic design. That means it fits smoothly into your hand and can be easily opened and squeezed using one hand. And, it looks like a flask you might use when hiking outdoors. The imitation digital displays are designed to remind the user of other tech devices they may have, such as a smartwatch or smart displays in their home.

I'd now like to tell you about the sizes. It comes in two sizes: the regular size and a small travel size. The travel size is the same type of design – a flask, also with imitation digital displays on the bottle. We were thinking of starting with one and following with the travel-size in a few months, but we've worked hard and both are ready now.

Finally, I'm going to talk to you about our timeline for production. You've probably heard that we're launching in two months. In preparation for that, we're starting the marketing campaign next month. You can see the complete overview of all phases in this Gantt chart.

In summary, the bottle's been designed for men who like adventure and technology, and it comes in two sizes. The marketing campaign is starting next month and we're launching the product in two months.

OK. So, any questions? Feel free to also email me for further information in case we run out of time.

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b2-listening/design-presentation>

A lecture about an experiment

In today's lecture we're going to be talking about experiments, and I thought it might be interesting for you all to learn about the world's oldest continuously running laboratory experiment that is still going today. In fact, it holds the Guinness World Record for being the longest-running experiment. This experiment began in 1927 and has been going ever since.

It's called the 'pitch drop' experiment and it was created by Professor Thomas Parnell at the University of Queensland, Australia. Parnell was the university's first physics professor, and he wanted to show in this experiment that everyday materials, such as pitch, can have quite surprising properties.

You see, when pitch is at room temperature, it feels solid. You can easily break it with a hammer. However, it isn't in fact solid. At room temperature, pitch is many billions of times more viscous than water, but it's actually fluid.

In 1927, Professor Parnell took a sample of pitch. He heated it and poured it into a glass funnel. He allowed the pitch to cool and settle – for three years. He then turned the funnel upside down and cut the top off it.

Since then, the pitch has slowly dropped out of the funnel. How slowly? Well, the first drop took eight years to fall. It took another forty years for another five drops to fall. Today it's been almost 90 years since the experiment started. Only nine drops have fallen from the funnel. The last drop fell in April 2014 and the next one is expected to fall in the 2020s.

The experiment has a tragic story associated with it. Professor Parnell died without seeing a pitch drop. His replacement, Professor John Mainstone, became responsible for the pitch drop experiment from 1961. He held the job for 52 years, and missed seeing the drop fall three times – by a day in 1977, by just five minutes in 1988 and finally in 2000, when the webcam that was recording the experiment suffered a power outage for 20 minutes, during which time the pitch dropped.

The pitch drop experiment is something we can all participate in now. There's a live web stream that allows anyone to watch the glass funnel and wait for the fateful moment. A similar experiment to the Queensland pitch drop was set up in Dublin, and the video of the moment the pitch actually dropped went viral on the internet. It's interesting to see how a very slow event can spread news so quickly.

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b2-listening/lecture-about-experiment>

A talk about motivation

So, we think we know how to motivate people, right? Offer them a reward. Do this and you'll get this. Do this faster, earn more money. Do this better than everyone else, here's a promotion. We offer incentives when we want people to do things. We do it at work, at school, even at home with our kids. Tidy your room and you can watch TV.

But when social psychologists test whether incentives work, they get surprising results. Sam Glucksberg, from Princeton University, America, set people a problem to solve and told them he was going to time them to see how long they took. Then he put them in two groups. He offered one group a reward for finishing fast. Five dollars for anyone finishing in the top 25 per cent and 20 dollars for the person who finished the fastest of all. To the other group he offered no incentive, but he told them he was going to use their times to calculate an average time.

The first group, the ones with the reward, solved the problem faster, you'd think, right? Well, no, they actually took three and a half minutes longer than the group who just thought they were being timed. Incentive didn't work. In fact, it made them slower. This experiment has been repeated, with the same results, many times. But in business we still offer bonuses, promotions and rewards to staff.

That's fine if we want them to do something simple, like chop wood. We'll pay you more if you chop the wood faster. An incentive works then. But if we want someone to do something complex, something creative, something where they have to think, rewards don't work. They might even have the opposite result, and make people perform worse. Another study, by Dan Ariely, showed that the bigger the reward, the worse the subjects performed on a complex task. The reward made them focus so hard on the result that they couldn't think creatively any more.

And this all matters because more and more simple jobs will become automated. We'll be left with creative, problem-solving jobs that computers will never do. And we need to find a way to motivate people to do those jobs when we've proved the traditional incentives don't work.

So what does work? Giving your workers freedom; freedom to work on the things they want to work on, freedom to choose when, where and how they work. Want to work from home three days a week, get up late and work into the night instead? Fine. Just do the job well. And evidence shows people who choose the way they work get results. Companies that give employees time during the week to work on things that interest them and are not part of their regular job achieve amazing things. Some of the big tech companies are good examples of this, with ping-pong tables and areas to relax in …

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b2-listening/talk-about-motivation>

Business news

The first item in the news today is the recent elections that took place across the country. This was a crucial vote, which may see a dramatic change in how the country develops over the coming years. Overall, a 54.5 per cent voter turnout was registered. This represents an increase of 11 per cent over the previous election and six per cent above the average for the past 50 years. There has also been a slight change in demographics, with an increase in youth turnout in the 18- to 24- and 24- to 29-year-old brackets. Despite this increase, young people are still less likely to vote than older people; 84 per cent of voters in the 70 plus age group came to the polling stations.

Moving on, the global digital powerhouse ONK today posted quarterly results which were above forecast. Back in March, Tim Bolling, CEO, issued a profit warning over fears that there would be losses following the recall of their leading product, the 40d device. In fact, the company posted quarterly revenue of US$14.8 billion which represents an increase of 11 per cent from the same quarter a year ago. They also announced that they had sold 21 million 40d devices over the quarter. The company has provided the information that with this level of revenue, there will be a gross margin of 34 to 35 per cent, ultimately leading to a US$1.20 per share cash dividend awarded to shareholders.

And in our final news item we ask, will we soon be saying goodbye to coins and notes forever? The nationwide trend of using cashless payment options is increasing. There are a number of reasons for this development. A key reason for this is a growing interest in reducing the number of items people need to leave their homes with. As almost everyone carries a smartphone with them, and many people also have smartwatches, the ability to pay for things using one of these two technologies is particularly appealing. More and more retailers are accepting cashless payments and in some cases they've stopped accepting cash altogether.

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/listening/b2-listening/business-news>