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The Impact of a Course on Good Work: Alumni Reflect on their Experiences

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Abstract

For the past decade Howard Gardner has taught “Good Work in Education: When Excellence, Ethics, and Engagement Meet” at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). This course, listed in the catalogue as H-175, is designed to give students detailed insight into the research and findings of a major line of research in which Gardner and colleagues have been engaged since the mid-1990s. The course is divided into two main components: class discussions of the theory and framework of “good work,” often touching on events in the news or on campus; and a research paper that explores good work concepts in an area of personal or professional significance for the student.

In the fall of 2013, in an effort to document any long-term effects of this course, former H-175 students were emailed and given a short survey about the course and any other comments or recollections.

Following the administration of the survey, a research team from the Good Project created a scoring rubric for responses that encompassed five overall themes: assignments/readings/discussions; research paper; professional influence; personal influence; and Good Work concepts. Two graders then scored each respondent’s survey on a 0-to-3 point scale. Overall, the feedback received indicated a positive experience on the part of many former students, with numerous students specifying that the course has had a positive effect on their lives.

Keywords: Good Work; long-term impact; feedback; influence

Introduction

In 1995, researchers Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon, and Howard Gardner began the Good Work Project, a study of a broad range of professions. Their goal was to explore how professions fare during a time of extremely strong market forces and rapid, often disruptive technological change. Through interviews with various professionals, the investigation indicated that good workers embody three principles: *excellence* (having requisite technical skills), *engagement* (finding meaning and enjoyment in work), and *ethics* (striving to fulfill ethical expectations of a professional role).

After the initial investigation was completed, the Good Work Project evolved in various ways and is now a component of the larger Good Project (thegoodproject.org), which also encompasses various other research initiatives, namely Good Play, Good Citizenship, and Good Life. More than 1600 individuals have been interviewed as a part of these projects. The Good Work Project in particular seeks to identify individuals and organizations that embody good work, with the goal of increasing the prevalence of good work in our society. The project has been the focus of numerous books and articles. Through targeted partnerships and the Good Work Toolkit, the study's findings have been synthesized and put into action in a variety of settings, including elementary schools, high schools, universities, and workplaces.

For well over a decade, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), Howard Gardner has taught a course entitled "Good Work in Education: When Excellence, Ethics, and Engagement Meet," also referred to as H-175. The course is an overview of the Good Work Project, exposing students to concepts and tools that facilitate the understanding and execution of good work as well as related ideas, debates, and dilemmas. For example, classes deal with thematic topics such as responsibility at work, professionalization, and good work in specific sectors like higher education or K-12 education. Topical readings provide students with a grasp of the issues, and current events are frequently introduced as a means of connecting good work theory to real-world situations. Classes are loosely structured, with much of class time spent on discussions rather than lectures. In addition, students are required to submit to

Gardner and teaching fellows a weekly response to the assigned readings, sharing their thoughts about the content as well as any particular questions or insights.

The most distinctive and demanding feature of H-175 is a research paper that students begin early in the semester and continue to develop over the course of several months. In their research, students are tasked with exploring a particular area of personal or professional importance and examining its relation to good work. For example, students have performed research on subjects ranging from work in the children's advertising industry to the professional status of various kinds of coaches and consultants. In writing the papers, students have the opportunity to apply key ideas and practices from H-175 and the Good Work Project. Findings are shared in class presentations in the last weeks of the course.

A key purpose of the course is to supply students with the tools necessary to become fluent in and ultimately carry out good work. Accordingly, in consultation with Gardner, researchers decided to contact former H-175 students and evaluate whether, and if so how, H-175's content has been utilized after completion of the course.

Methods

In the autumn of 2013, a survey was sent to 101 former H175 students. The survey solicited recollections and feedback about the course's content and impact. The eight survey questions were:

1. If you had to tell someone about the course in a few words, how would you describe it?
2. Are there any particular assignments, readings, discussions that stand out in your memory?
3. How about your research paper--was it a significant part of your experience as a student? Have you gone back to it in any way?
4. What are your thoughts about this course from the perspective of several years and life experiences?
5. Do you ever think back on any of the ethical dilemmas that were presented? Or any of the frames/terminology we used to understand the professions?
6. In general, do you feel that participation in the course has changed how you look at life situations?
7. Anything else you remember specifically about the course?
8. Any other reflections?

Of the 101 recipients, 47 individuals responded with usable feedback (a 46.5% response rate). Two individuals confirmed contact but did not participate in the survey. Thirty-three of the respondents (70%)

were female; conversely, 14 (30%) were male. (This ratio is consistent with enrollment figures at HGSE as a whole). A portion of the respondents mentioned the year that they took the course, which revealed a 15-year span in the dates of course completion, stretching from 1999-2013.

The 47 substantial responses to the survey were compiled. A scoring rubric was then created by a four-person team of researchers. Five content measures were assessed on a 0-to-3 point scale: assignments/readings/discussions; research paper; professional influence; personal influence, and Good Work concepts.

Figure 1. Scored Measures Defined with Examples

| | Assignments/Readings/ Discussions | Research Paper | Professional Influence | Personal Influence | Good Work Concepts |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| Content required to reach a score of “3” | Discusses assignments/readings/discussions in depth with specific examples and focuses on importance or applicability. | Discusses research paper in depth and how it was used after the course, possibly mentioning returning to it as a reference. | Discusses meaningful connections between the course and professional (workplace/education) experiences, calling upon course content in work situations. | Discusses meaningful connections between the course and general life experiences (not work-related), calling upon course content in personal situations. | Discusses how an ethical dilemma, frame, or terminology has been useful and applicable after taking the course. |
| Example | “One idea that particularly stuck with me was how people deal with, and in particular transition between, the many hats they wear... particularly in a field like education where you are trying to disseminate information while simultaneously providing support...” | “The research paper was one of the most significant products of my academic life... I have presented the paper in several forums... Discussions did ensue.” | “I am now doing a PhD... and am conducting a case study... I shadow and interview senior managers... exploring how they deal with alignment/misalignment.” | “I feel like I learned some actual tools that helped me parse out tricky situations... I am trying at least to take a ‘personal stand’ and talk about ethical dilemmas I face...” | “I do think back on both ethical dilemmas and frames of understanding professions... I frequently confront dilemmas related to the role of the United States in developing countries.” |

After an initial reading, two graders then independently scored all of the responses within the five measures. A 0 score was recorded if the topic was not mentioned, with 1, 2, and 3 scores recorded for increasing levels of depth, detail, and significance in answers. The two graders compared scores while grading until reliability was achieved and subsequently acted as sole graders. Additionally, tallies were counted of the number of students who mentioned the benefits of the weekly reading responses and the number who said that the research paper was significant.

Results

Analysis revealed that 13% of former students' responses received the highest score, a score of 3, for the assignments/readings/discussions prompt, 28% received a 3 for the research paper, 30% received a 3 for professional influence, 9% received a 3 for personal influence, and 11% received a 3 for Good Work concepts. Meanwhile, a total of 21% of responses received a score of 0, indicating that the response did not mention or refer to the content area. These percentages demonstrate that the research paper and the influence of the course on professional life were the two topics that former students were most often able to strongly describe and illustrate.

Figure 2. Analysis of Students' Responses (as Percentages)

| | <u>Assignments/Readings/ Discussions</u> | <u>Research Paper</u> | <u>Professional Influence</u> | <u>Personal Influence</u> | <u>Good Work Concepts</u> |
|------------|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| #0s | 19% | 2 | 21 | 21 | 40 |
| #1s | 45 | 34 | 21 | 47 | 32 |
| #2s | 23 | 36 | 28 | 23 | 17 |
| #3s | 13 | 28 | 30 | 9 | 11 |

Further examination showed that 79% of former students' responses at least mentioned, with many illustrating in anecdotes, how the course has been professionally and/or personally influential. One respondent even stated that, "This course is a lesson for life. While learning through real cases, daily situations and our own experiences, doing Good Work – work that is excellent, engaging and ethical, becomes a personal life standard." Moreover, 30% of students explicitly discussed the weekly memo

assignments, and 45% of students stated that the final research project was a significant or transformative experience that has continued to impact their life and career.

Discussion

Researchers decided to focus closely on student responses which received a score of 3, as these answers contained the richest content and tended to be the most enlightening. Upon further analysis of the responses which received a score of 3, researchers uncovered many illuminating trends. For example, several former students called upon specific readings and discussions. Two respondents recalled reading *The Dignity of Working Men* by Michele Lamont, while two other students cited the *Good Work* book as being a memorable text. In addition, two former students directly mentioned the class discussion on whether teaching is a profession and detailed the influence that discussion had on their careers in education. One respondent went so far as to state, “It changed how I look at teaching ... learning about qualifications for an occupation to become a profession has led me to be more outspoken about aspects that make teaching more respectable.” Overall, five former students discussed the connections that they were able to make between these readings and discussions and their own lives, whether professionally or personally.

The research project, however, was ultimately the most significant single aspect of H-175. In the responses scoring a 3, four respondents specifically discussed how the project taught them necessary research skills, thereby preparing them for both academic and professional endeavors. Seven former students stated that they have shared the research project’s findings with friends and colleagues, with some of these students having formally presented their findings at forums and conferences. One respondent mentioned receiving requests from colleagues to read the research paper. In addition, four students mentioned frequently reflecting on the findings of the research paper, while ten respondents have either revisited or continued to research the topic and related topics in either an academic or professional setting. Finally, 21 respondents stated that the research paper was a significant or transformative experience that has continued to impact their life and career. One respondent proclaimed, “I loved my

research project! I loved every single part of it, even the frustrating parts ... It may sound strange, but I continue to feel an emotional connection to my project.”

Respondents also clearly indicated that this course had an impact on their professional lives. Five former students currently use ideas and information that they learned from the course in their own teaching as educators, thereby passing on “the spirit of Good Work” to their students. In addition, three former students gave specific examples of times in which they were able to employ Good Work ideas in sectors other than education. As one respondent stated, “Today, as a young professional, I not only try to keep my daily practices excellent, engaged and ethical, but I try to see my managers and coworkers through a GoodWork lens.” Two former students reported that they have discussed Good Work ideas with colleagues in their organizations. Interestingly, two respondents stated that although they feel they are in professions that enable Good Work, they still think about the material from the course. Finally, three former students have used the Good Work course as a gateway into further research.

Extending beyond professional influence, this survey has also revealed that H-175 had significant personal influence on former students. Participation in this course has changed how several respondents look at life situations, allowing them to reflect on the importance of making ethical choices in everyday life. One participant recalled learning actual tools to help parse out tricky situations on a day-to-day basis. In addition, this course influenced how one participant conceptualized success in the context of personal and professional life, and where those two domains overlap. As one former student explained, “The course gave me confidence in standing behind my ethical values, because I am just better informed of the matter, and have vocabulary that I can utilize when discussing these issues.”

In discussions of particular Good Work concepts which received the score of 3, one student mentioned the Good Work Diamond (a visual mnemonic of the forces that contribute to or thwart good work); another student cited ‘disinterestedness,’ and a third recalled ‘Compromised Work.’ In addition, two respondents discussed ethical dilemmas within the Good Work Toolkit, while two more students brought up alignment and misalignment. Although “Good Work Concepts” was the category coded as having the most answers valued at 0 (40%), students’ responses still suggested that these concepts

(lexicalized or not) have permeated throughout their professional and personal lives. For example, one student stated, “I think the framework of Excellence - Ethics - Engagement is one that I'll never forget. I think about it often in relation to my own work and the work of others.”

Concluding Note

Overall, the detailed coding of the 47 student responses revealed significant and positive trends amongst former students, with many indicating that they have assimilated Good Work into their personal and professional lives. The responses clearly illustrate how H-175 has had an important and significant influence on many students' subsequent thoughts and actions. As one student noted, “As we strive to make ethical moral decisions that are ‘true, beautiful and good,’ not motivated by self-interest, or by fear and ignorance, we are more likely to achieve universal ethics, and establish a healthier society.” This study, however, focused solely on the opinions of the former students, not of the other stakeholders involved with H-175. Surveys completed by faculty, teaching assistants, or researchers could potentially reveal interesting incidents of misalignment amongst the various constituencies. What many students claimed were the most memorable aspects of the course, such as the weekly memos, are not necessarily the primary aim of the teaching staff.

In closing, it is worth mentioning that studies like this are quite unusual. In most cases, evaluations of a course occur at the end of the course or shortly thereafter. To our knowledge, it is rare, and yet important, to measure the effects of a course after a significant period of time has elapsed. Moreover, it is important to measure these effects in a way that allows one to compare the instructor's goals with what students designate as the lasting ‘takeaways.’ Certainly it would be possible to do such surveys in a more psychometrically sophisticated manner. Nonetheless, even a simple survey, conducted quickly through email and with minimal cost, can yield information that may help improve courses, and their subsequent positive impact moving forward.