

How the post-secondary classroom can benefit from positive psychology principles

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ONE UNDER-UTILISED WAY that instructors can improve student outcomes in their classroom is to incorporate the principles of positive psychology. Both students and faculty using positive psychology in the classroom benefit from a stronger immune system, increased resilience, a better capacity to deal with stress, fewer feelings of depression, increased life satisfaction, better attention and awareness, increased creativity, better problem solving and cognitive flexibility, stronger social support, better relationships, and a longer, healthier life (Keyes, 2007). It may also enhance student wellbeing and classroom engagement (Myatt, 2016).

Positive psychology is based on the notion that we are motivated to develop into our best selves and reach our maximum potential. Martin Seligman, a pioneer of positive psychology, defines it as ‘the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play’ (Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania). Our students have these internal drives as well, which we can tap into as instructors. By using positive education (the field which applies the principles of positive psychology to encourage students to flourish), we can help our students to reach their full potential. Evidence suggests that we can do this by teaching skills related to wellbeing, including positive emotions, resilience, engagement, and a sense of meaning (Seligman et al., 2009; Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002).

Including positive psychology in your course

Educational wellbeing is founded on five pillars: social and emotional competence, positive emotions, engagement through strengths, positive relationships, and sense of purpose (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Developing each of these in your class can be beneficial to your students, leading to greater happiness, engagement, and academic success.

Creating classroom activities that help students develop respect, cooperation, compassion, consideration for others, connection to others, metacognition, and optimistic thinking develops a sense of social and emotional competence (Seal et al., 2010). These may include things like helping students set short-term and long-term goals related to the course, their careers, or their happiness by reflecting on their own thinking and how it relates to their goals (does their internal monologue impede progress or is it beneficial?) You can help them to develop empathy and compassion by having them complete an assignment using someone else’s perspective that is different from their own, such as a historical figure relevant to the course. You could also set aside the final minutes of class to allow students to recognise their classmates for moments of kindness (for example). Be sure to also model empathy and kindness in student interactions.

To help students develop positive emotions, ensure that your classroom encourages openness and respect, fosters a sense of belonging, and celebrates students’ successes (or other similar positive classroom moments). Ideas for the classroom include encouraging optimism and ensuring that you balance each negative comment (e.g.

feedback on assignments) with three positive ones. To encourage optimism, re-frame students' thinking by helping them to see positive events as permanent and pervasive and negative events as temporary and specific. Surrounding negative comments by positive ones extends to classroom discussions as well: ask students to offer three praises before every critical comment. Do this yourself when grading assignments. Yes, this can be challenging, but this 3:1 ratio appears necessary to overcome the hardwired negativity in the brain (Frederickson, 2004).

Students must first be aware of their strengths and then use them in their academic endeavours to develop their engagement; this will allow them to achieve better and learn more easily (Waters, 2011). By using their strengths to develop their skills and to pursue a more meaningful life, students will find their academic work more enjoyable, thus increasing their engagement (Waters, 2011). How can you engage students through their strengths in your classroom? First, ensure that your course outline reflects choice and gives students some control so that they can play up their strengths. For example, students may have the option of writing an essay or creating a video for one of the semester's assignments. To this end, many instructors use ePortfolios to facilitate the use of students' strength-based assessments. Students can also reflect on their own strengths and how they will contribute to their success in the course. If you are adaptable in the classroom, students may even suggest modifications to your current assignments that will allow them to better use their strengths. All of these approaches will increase their engagement.

Positive relationships (with family, significant others, peers and instructors) are paramount for student wellbeing and happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002) and these relationships predict the value students place on learning as well as their enjoyment of school (Guay & Senecal, 2016). This is especially true of their relationship with teachers (Guay & Senecal, 2016). To this end, instructors must

ensure that they create a positive climate in their classroom and manage the classroom effectively (Baker, Grant & Morlockl, 2008). One way to do this is to ensure you really get to know your students, be empathic with them, and show them that you care and that you support them in their academic needs (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Concretely, this means beginning the semester by setting an expectation of approachability and positivity (from the syllabus to the classroom); this includes offering students many ways to contact you, encouraging them to stop by to visit you during office hours, and sharing a few details about your personal life. You should also make a substantial effort to get to know all of your students. Greet them as they enter the classroom and use name tags to facilitate addressing them by name until you learn them. You can also ask students to complete short autobiographical questionnaires, which can also help you to better assess the needs and strengths of your students. For online courses, ask them to introduce themselves on the LMS discussion board and post a photo of themselves doing something that makes them happy.

Finally, having a sense of meaning or purpose refers to contributing in some meaningful (read: important) way; this is especially important in adolescence and young adulthood (Norris, Robinson & Williams 2011). To develop this in your students, make tasks and assignments that show how what they are learning in the classroom is meaningful beyond its four walls and even beyond themselves. Relate the course content to a movement such as 'Pay It Forward', or 'Random Acts of Kindness', or 'Feed the Deed' (or simply add this as a component of your course if it is difficult to relate it to course content). Make sure students report on how their actions have contributed to the wellbeing of others (or even the larger community). Another example is to devise an activity or discussion that allows students to see their chosen career as a calling instead of just a career. For example, have them imagine waking up for

work to the worst storm they have every seen. Then, ask them to think about what aspect of their future work would get them out of bed and off to their jobs in spite of the storm. In other words, you are asking students to identify the aspects of their job that will give them a sense of purpose, connectedness, and meaning. Focusing on these aspects highlights the significance of their career and makes students see it as more of a calling.

Are there benefits to instructors, too?

Sometimes, the motivation to implement something in the classroom that benefits students becomes somewhat more appealing if we, the instructors, also reap some benefits. Not only will implementing some principles of positive psychology in the classroom allow post-secondary students to flourish, but by implementing classroom strategies grounded in these principles, professors can significantly enhance their own wellbeing, following each of the five pillars described above.

Fostering the development of social and emotional competence in your students will also enhance your own skills in this area. Teaching from a positive psychology perspective is a reflective process, allowing you to further develop your own self-awareness, while focusing on an empathic approach in your teaching will enhance your ability to understand your students, and nurture your ability to relate to your colleagues, which will create a greater sense of meaning and purpose at work. Motivation and engagement will be enhanced, along with a greater appreciation for the intrinsic rewards of teaching. In fact, stronger social and emotional skills have been shown to cultivate more positive job performance, especially in careers which involve an emotional component (Joseph & Newman, 2010).

Positive emotions are contagious and can even spread to three degrees of separation (Fowler et al., 2009), so instructors can benefit from developing their students' positive emotions. Experiencing more positive emotions improves thinking, creativity, and attention, happiness, improves immune

functions, reduces rates of absenteeism, increases compassion, improves relationships and resilience to stress, and increases energy (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson et al., 2008; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005).

By helping to develop your students' engagement through their use of strengths, it allows you to reflect on your own strengths and how to best use them in the classroom. Being more engaged in your work increases your enjoyment, so use your strengths to meet the challenges you encounter in the classroom. Doing so regularly will lead to greater happiness and wellbeing (Seligman et al., 2009).

Research also shows that building positive relationships with students will increase your wellbeing and happiness (Noble & McGrath, 2008), as well as improve your cardiovascular and immune systems and reduce your levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Norrish et al., 2013).

Building positive relationships with students will also lead to a more meaningful sense of purpose in our profession as teachers. This should come as no surprise, as our feelings of purpose are tied to our students in the classroom. Developing a greater sense of purpose as teachers may be especially evident if your assignments allow your students to contribute to a larger whole (classroom, school, community). In turn, having a greater sense of purpose in the classroom increases wellbeing and resilience, reduces physical complaints, helps you to cope better with stress, and experience higher life satisfaction (Norrish et al., 2011).

Concluding remarks

Is it worth developing the principles of positive psychology in your classroom? The answer is yes. Empirical studies show that the principles of positive psychology are related to student wellbeing and academic performance in important ways which should not be ignored (Myatt, 2016; Waters, 2011). For all involved, this can lead to a stronger immune system, increased resilience and the capacity to deal with stress, fewer feel-

ings of depression, increased life satisfaction, increased creativity, better problem solving skills and cognitive flexibility, stronger social support, better relationships, and a longer, healthier life (Keyes, 2007). And, you may already be doing some of the things outlined here, but not know that they fit under the umbrella of positive psychology. So, include

more of these activities in your classes and get ready to increase wellbeing and happiness for yourself and for your students.

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