

Towards a 'Positive U'

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You gaze around the classroom, recognizing that a number of students are on their cell phones. Others are on their laptops, maybe taking notes but most likely using social media. A few are blatantly working on homework or assignments for other classes. Several students in the back of the classroom are avoiding your gaze, anxiously hoping not to be noticed. One student even appears to be asleep. A small group of students at the front of the class is stressed about the upcoming assignment. Welcome to the college classroom.

Distractions, stress, anxiety, and social media plague the college classroom making it tough for faculty to teach, and even tougher for students to learn. Is there anything faculty can do to remedy the problems facing the college classroom, or are we to accept this as the new normal?

Much has been written about the academic, social, and emotional benefits of applying positive psychology to the elementary, middle, and secondary school classrooms, but there can also be some benefits to using similar strategies at the college level. Could positive psychology concepts such as mindfulness, positive emotions, strengths, gratitude, and growth mindset potentially improve the college classroom by enhancing the academic, social, and emotional functioning of the stressed-out college student?

They just might!

These concepts were recently implemented in one college classroom as a pilot study. Self-reports across a number of psychological and educational measures, indicated that students exposed to positive psychology reported experiencing significantly more positive emotions, fewer negative emotions, fewer feelings of anxiety, and more engagement (Myatt, 2016).

What does this mean for college students, faculty, or the institution?

Students who are stressed and anxious experience more difficulty concentrating. Reduced attention, memory, and

learning are some of the first noticeable casualties of stress. Strategies that decrease negative emotions and increase positive emotions will facilitate better learning. Increased engagement will help to combat the inevitable technological and social distractions afflicting this population. Plus, a more engaged class makes for a better teaching and learning experience for both faculty and students.

It's interesting to note that positive emotions are contagious and can spread up to three degrees of separation (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). The students who experience more positive emotions in the classroom can in turn influence the emotions of the instructor, the coffee shop employee at break time, or the peers they encounter in the hallway. Likewise, these individuals can now spread their own positive emotions, and so on. Thus, increasing positive emotions in the classroom has the potential to benefit the entire campus or community!

Creating a more positive classroom

There are many ways that faculty members could accomplish this 'positive shift' no matter their area of expertise, course content, or course structure. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- **Develop a “positive” syllabus or course outline.** Give students some control over how and what they learn. Think about using ePortfolios or eJournals that allow students to tell YOU what they have learned and to share their knowledge in a way that is meaningful for them.
- **Focus on student strengths.** As professors, we tend to offer feedback that focuses on how students can improve. But, helping students to understand what they already do well is a powerful strategy for increasing engagement and decreasing negative emotions. For every constructive criticism, offer three genuinely positive comments (Fredrickson, 2013). Alternatively, have each student identify a strength that they think will help them in your course. Then, look for opportunities to reinforce these strengths throughout the semester (e.g. during discussions, on assignments, in meetings with the student).
- **Teach students about mindfulness.** Mindfulness is not some “new-age mumbo jumbo”. There is scientific evidence that it leads to numerous psychological, physical, and emotional benefits (Zenner, Hermleben-Kurz & Walach, 2014). At the start of class, do something to help students focus on the day's topic: use a related song, picture, or image and have students explain how it connects to what you're learning. You might also try a mini (one-minute) meditation session at the start of class.
- **Build intrinsic motivation.** Students will be more motivated and positive if they learn how to set and attain their own goals. Have them identify 'big' course goals (ideally, learning goals instead of performance goals) and then in each class, have them set a smaller goal that contributes to their achievement of their bigger course goals.
- **Encourage a growth mindset.** Design activities and assignments that facilitate self-reflections on the process of learning. You could ask students to submit a personal reflection along with an assignment indicating how they completed the assignment, what strengths they used, how they could use these strengths in upcoming assignments, or what they learned about themselves (or their own learning) by completing the assignment.
- **Practice gratitude.** Increasing feelings of gratitude will help to combat the negativity bias in the brain, as well as to increase positive emotions. At the end of class, have students write down three things they are grateful to have learned or to have experienced that day. You can also encourage students to give a 'shout out' to a peer who helped them out during class.

We don't have to accept the distractions, stress, and anxiety as the new norm in post-secondary education. With research suggesting that positive psychology strategies can bring much-needed benefits to the college classroom, we should be willing to at least give them a try. There's nothing to lose and everything to gain by working towards a more “Positive U”!

References

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