

*Teaching Positive Psychology: An Engaging Experience*

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column on the *PsychTeacher*<sup>TM</sup> *Electronic Discussion List* in September 2006.)

Little did I know that my first teaching experience would literally change my life. There I was, 22 years old, giving a coherent, yet lackluster presentation on positive affect to a group of advanced doctoral students. My mentor C. R. (Rick) Snyder said he thought I had the potential to connect with the audience and tell the story of psychological research. That feedback connected me to Rick for the next 15 years. During that time, he helped me discover positive psychology, and I became fairly adept at “giving it away.” With his many lessons in mind, I will share my thoughts about how teaching positive psychology can engage students and instructors alike. Along the way, I will describe 5 of my favorite strategies for bringing positive psychology to life.

Positive psychology, the rigorous study of what is right and positive about people and institutions, has drawn attention to existing psychological theories and research programs and has yielded many new findings and resources that have helped people lead better lives. Two major developments in positive psychology have attracted the public’s attention during this early part of the 21st century. First, the scholarship on psychological potentialities has led to the development of the Clifton StrengthsFinder (<http://www.strengthsfinder.com/>), which has been completed by over 2 million people worldwide; the Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer (<http://www.strengthsexplorer.com/>), a recently launched tool for 10- to 14-year-olds; and the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (available at <http://www.viastrengths.org/>). With the availability of these measures, programs designed to develop one’s strengths are becoming commonplace in schools, businesses, and places of worship. Second, we have learned more about how people respond to emotional experiences in productive ways. We now understand how to curb the effects of negative emotions and to make the most of positive emotions. Scholarly works (Snyder & Lopez, 2002; 2007) and mainstream coverage (Rath, 2006; Rath & Clifton, 2004; Seligman, 2002) tell a compelling story of the significance of focusing on the best in people. Indeed, positive psychology is a primary focus of scholars and practitioners in the ivory tower as well as on main streets across the country.

As teachers of positive psychology, our challenge is to demonstrate the relevance of what is discussed in the classroom and to enhance the rigor of what is shared in our broader community. By engaging our students and linking new positive psychology knowledge to what is already known about how we function, positive psychology teachers at all levels have an opportunity not only to educate in the short term but to enhance the quality of their students’ lives over time. The following strategies are time-tested and student approved; they are also a great deal of fun to implement (Lopez, 2006).

## Discovering Personal Strengths

Students' fascination with individual differences goes well beyond a focus on human abnormalities. Indeed, students are easily engaged in an examination of human strengths. Jennifer Teramoto Pedrotti of California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo has found this to be the case each time she has taught her undergraduate course in positive psychology:

“My favorite exercise is one where my students take a strengths measure and then share their results in class. I have them come up with ways they can enhance their strengths or just use them in their everyday lives. If students in the class know one another, they can add in their comments about each other or how they have seen each other use their strengths in the past. As an added piece, I sometimes ask students to go home and talk to someone they know well about these strengths and ask them for examples of how they (the other people) see the students use these strengths in their daily lives. This activity has worked the best in classes where students know each other to some extent. They are very caring toward, and offer many compliments to, one another, which builds a lot of positive affect too” (personal communication, May 15, 2006).

Knowledge of personal strengths becomes especially relevant for students seeking employment or preparing essays for graduate programs. Students who might otherwise struggle with question such as “What are your strengths?” and “What sets you apart from other applicants?” shine with their new found knowledge and language of potentialities.

## Expressing Positive Moral Emotions and Documenting Effects

Positive moral emotions (e.g., awe, compassion, elevation, gratitude) have the capacity to change us physiologically and bring us closer to other people. Manifestations of these emotions are often organic in nature, but in some cases, we can conjure up feelings that open us up to transformative experiences. Ken Hart of the University of Windsor has found that a gratitude party—a party in which positive psychology students invite a person to whom they are grateful to a social gathering and then, in the company of their peers, engage in an outward expression of gratitude—can bring about positive effects for many.

“One student who expressed gratitude was a 65-year-old gentleman who had returned to school 9 years after his life was shattered to pieces by a near fatal car accident in which his wife suffered traumatic and irreversible injuries. I had him in an earlier class, and now he was in my senior seminar in positive psychology. Shortly after the student stood up to read from a prepared text, he really took me by total surprise when he announced that he wanted to express gratitude to me (Dr. Hart). I am getting a lump in my throat as I write about his words. The student spoke about how the positive psychology class had transformed and uplifted his life to such a high quality, and he disclosed what had happened to him and his wife all those years ago. He also discussed what his life used to be like and how it was like night and day. As I teared up, I had to turn my back to the class, cupping my face with my hands. I had such a swelling in my chest and lump in my throat. It was powerful and wonderful to feel this sense of gratitude. I felt grateful. I felt thankful. Of the many thousands of lectures I've given over the past 20 years, that class on the topic of gratitude will always be remembered” (personal communication, May 20, 2006).

Expressing positive moral emotions can be particularly moving experiences; the changes brought about by gratitude and compassion can be tracked by physiological and interpersonal metrics (Fredrickson, 2002; McCraty & Childre, 2004). Quantifying the psychological changes brought about by brief emotional inductions can help students realize the potential of focusing on the positive.

### Putting Positive Psychology in Action

In some of my courses, I have struggled to demonstrate the real-world significance of psychological theories or the effects of particular interventions. In positive psychology courses, I have had much more success having students put knowledge into action. Perhaps my favorite assignments involve students transforming everyday experiences into meaningful moments of life. For example, I teach students a brief technique for capitalizing on positive events that others are experiencing. Specifically, I tell students to mirror another person's excitement and then ask the person two meaningful questions about the positive event. I encourage students to use the strategy later in the day. This immediate application helps bring to life some important findings associated with the psychology of close relationships (e.g., Reis & Gable, 2003). Without fail, a vast majority of students follow through on the assignment, and a good number return to class with stories of how they had more engaging and intimate conversations with their children, friends, partners, and parents.

Jeanne Magyar-Moe of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point also has enjoyed watching her students become more intimately knowledgeable of the role of positive psychology in daily life. Below I provide a brief description of her assignment along with some snapshots of the results.

"You will be required to come up with a group project to be conducted over the course of the semester in order to spread positive psychology to others outside the classroom. The goal of this assignment is to have fun applying positive psychology while working to generate positive emotions and happiness in the lives of others. All projects will need to be approved by the professor before being implemented."

"In one project, students took chocolates and hand written thank you cards to every custodian on our campus, and another group did this for all of the secretarial staff members."

"One student group went into a kindergarten classroom and taught the kids about character strengths by reading them stories and discussing the main character strengths of the people in the stories. After identifying at least one strength in each child, the group sent home information to the children's parents and asked if the parents had seen the strengths in their children."

"Students in one group went into a daycare setting just before Thanksgiving and taught about gratitude. They had the kids write gratitude letters to their parents to be read on Thanksgiving Day" (personal communication, May 15, 2006).

This type of exercise lends itself to critical analysis and to a group writing assignment that details how a particular theory predicted certain outcomes and how those outcomes could be enhanced

by minor changes in the exercise.

In addition to the preceding exercises, I have experimented with other activities to varying degrees of success. Next, I briefly describe two of these activities.

### *Exploring Positive Psychological Phenomena in Real Time*

For this exercise, I construct questions and prompts (e.g., Who comes to mind when you think about a particular strength? Tell me about the last time you exhibited that strength.) related to a particular positive psychology construct or theory, and I invite a facilitator and 6 to 8 focus group participants to share their insights at the front of the classroom. Then the facilitator, using my questions and some queries from the student audience, guides the participants through a discussion of their views of a particular strength or emotional experience. Real time examination of issues often is accompanied by personal storytelling that seems to enhance students' understanding of the material.

### *Photographing the Positive*

This exercise follows a detailed presentation and discussion of a positive psychological construct. Students are asked to use their personal cameras (or a disposable camera) to capture the positive. For example, following a discussion of hope theory, students were given a week to take pictures (or video) of hope in daily life. Students were asked to present the photos in a manner that told the story of hope and its associated outcomes. Submissions included photo collages, edited video, PowerPoint displays, and a song narrating the presentation of photos.

## Conclusion

Teaching positive psychology courses and giving hundreds of lectures on hope has affected me profoundly. I believe that interacting with students around positive psychology topics provides opportunities to touch people; you may also find yourself transformed in positive ways. I am engaged in my teaching and research like never before, and I believe it is because I spend a great deal of my time focused on what is right with people and the world. I hope you, too, are able to experiment with teaching a positive psychology course and to weave in lectures and activities that focus on human strengths and positive emotions. I think you will find that material on positive psychology will engage your students—and you.

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