

## **Incorporating Positive Psychology into the Post-Secondary Classroom** **Beverley Myatt, Durham College (CA)** **Lynne Kennette, Durham College (CA), [lynne.kennette@durhamcollege.ca](mailto:lynne.kennette@durhamcollege.ca)**

**Abstract.** The principles of positive psychology have been studied for many years, but it seems to be only recently that the benefits of these techniques are being accepted by the wider community of mainstream educators. In this article, we first describe the principles of positive psychology, primarily through the work of Martin Seligman. Then we highlight the many benefits that implementing positive psychology in the classroom has for both students and faculty. Finally, we discuss strategies and tips for implementation within the higher education classroom, both in-person and online, with concrete examples that instructors can use in their classrooms right away.

**Keywords:** positive psychology, higher education, online, classroom.

As professors in the post-secondary sector, we often look for ways to enhance student performance, increase student engagement, and improve the classroom experience for both students and faculty alike. The term post-secondary, as it is used in this paper, refers to educational contexts beyond high school (i.e., over, and above approximately grade 12). In other words, it is a synonym for higher education. Although each generation of post-secondary students will be slightly different from the one which preceded it because of their unique experiences, they also share many similarities. For example, some research on Millennials (conducted at the time that they would have been post-secondary students) has shown that they described themselves as being more anxious, less competent, less responsible, less self-disciplined, less optimistic, less empathic, and less self-aware than the previous generation (Stewart, 2009; Twenge, 2006). It would seem that this trend towards increased narcissism has continued and that subsequent generations of college students also demonstrate similar characteristics stemming in part from cultural and modernity factors, such as amount and type of television viewing, (Lull & Dickenson, 2018; Paris, 2014; Gibson et al., 2014), as well as from choice of college major (Wood et al., 2021; Bergman et al., 2017). There is also a growing body of literature around the use of social media and narcissism in college students, as well as in the general population (Paneka et al., 2013; Walters & Horten, 2015; McCain et al., 2018).

Mental health diagnoses are also on the rise. As such, professors are confronted with a more perplexing classroom environment as they attempt to manage students who have difficulty accepting responsibility for their own learning, challenge their grades, berate faculty on social media, are distracted in class, and struggle to contribute to a positive learning environment (Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Stewart, 2009; Twenge et al., 2004). The pandemic has only exacerbated some of these issues. Mental health, in particular, has been significantly impacted by the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). With a complete flip to online learning, students also experienced additional issues such as being bored, anxious and frustrated in their

online courses, as well as difficulties adopting appropriate online etiquette and online behaviors more generally (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020). Yet, post-secondary institutions are criticized for not properly preparing these students for the realities of the working world, with many claiming that these students are not equipped with the social and emotional tools needed to successfully apply their academic knowledge (Seal et al., 2011). The answer to some of these challenges (e.g., generational changes, increased prevalence of mental health issues) can be partially addressed through the implementation of positive psychology into the post-secondary classroom.

Positive psychology is currently being successfully applied at the elementary and secondary levels to not only enhance student happiness and well-being, but to foster a stronger sense of resilience that is missing in the current generation of post-secondary students. These applied principles may be even more important for post-secondary institutions given that the high stress culture makes it easy for both staff and students to neglect the factors that contribute to their own happiness and well-being (Oades et al., 2011). Can positive psychology be applied to the post-secondary classroom to deliver similar outcomes? Although applied positive psychology research at the post-secondary level is not as vast, recent results do suggest similar outcomes (Myatt, 2016; Parks, 2011; Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2016).

### **What is Positive Psychology?**

The field of positive psychology is grounded in the principles of humanistic psychology, in which individuals are motivated to be their best selves. According to founding psychologist Martin Seligman, positive psychology is “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, n.d., para. 1). Positive education applies the principles of positive psychology, along with best practice teaching, to encourage students and academic communities to flourish and to reach their maximum potential (About Us, n.d.). Positive education seeks to promote positive mental health not only for the students, but for the entire school community. There is evidence from mostly experimental (or otherwise rigorously controlled) studies that skills increasing resilience, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning can be taught in order to encourage young people to become their best possible selves (Seligman et al., 2009). By supplementing academic teachings with elements of well-being, it is hoped that we can stem the increasing tide of depression and anxiety in our youth in addition to fostering better social and emotional development (Seligman et al., 2009; Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002).

### **What Benefits Are There for Students?**

Positive psychology research, in conjunction with research from other contemporary psychological and educational fields, suggests that there are five educational foundations of well-being: social and emotional competency, positive emotions, positive relationships, engagement through strengths, and a sense of meaning and

purpose (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Together, these concepts support flourishing within the education system, and help to promote positive mental health within the student population (Huppert & So, 2013). Each one of these foundations of positive education benefits the student.

Students are more likely to experience well-being in the classroom, and to behave in a manner that promotes a positive classroom community, if they have a sense of social and emotional competence (Domitrovich et al., 2017). The development of student well-being is of even greater importance since the pandemic given that college students are demonstrating increased depression, anxiety, negative emotions, panic, and anger (Zhang, 2022). Research suggests that the benefits of positive education can improve perceived student depression and stress, which may affect student well-being beyond the classroom experience (Goodman et al., 2016). There is also some evidence that ameliorated feelings of anxiety and depression persist long-term (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2013). Some research even suggests that improved well-being can persist for at least 3.5 years after intervention (Proyer et al., 2014) To promote well-being, students should develop greater self-awareness, consideration of others, connection to others, and influence of others (Seal et al., 2011; Seal et al., 2017). To accomplish this, students need to establish socio-emotional competencies such as an understanding of concepts such as respect, cooperation, diversity, compassion, and kindness, which is especially important for those students who will be working in field where they are caring for others after graduation (Gandía-Carbonell et al., 2021). Within the classroom, we need to promote the development of such skills as optimistic thinking, mindfulness, cooperation, gratitude, emotional regulation, metacognition, and empathy.

Students are also more capable of being productive and successful in the classroom when they are experiencing positive emotions, such as joy, gratitude, hope, and happiness. Positive emotions contribute to better problem solving, more optimistic thinking, greater resilience, and stronger persistence (Seligman et al., 2009; Norrish et al., 2013). The benefits of positive emotions have also been noted to persist, in that positive emotions precede many short-term and long-term outcomes (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). Given that positive emotions can broaden students' awareness of options and build their cognitive and emotional resources (Fredrickson, 2013a), in the long term, this will gradually lead to the development of persistent and supportive personal resources (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). In other words, "positive emotions help support efforts to change one's life and acquire new skills" (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010, p. 364). To help students experience more positive emotions in the classroom, we need to foster a sense of community and belonging, encourage an open and respectful environment, celebrate student successes, model a 'growth mindset', promote feelings of excitement and savor positive classroom moments and experiences.

Positive relationships are thought to be a key factor for achieving significant happiness and well-being. Many researchers believe that indeed, positive relationships are a necessary condition for great happiness in life (Diener et al., 2018). Relationships with significant others, as well as school attachment, have been found to predict student's enjoyment of school as well as the value they place

on learning (Guay & Senecal, 2016). In fact, it is the relationship with teachers, not with peers, that predicts a student's value of learning (Guay & Senecal, 2016); this relationship is also an important factor in classroom management (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Aligned with attachment theory, positive teacher-student relationships enable students to feel safe and secure in their learning environments and provide scaffolding for important social and academic skills. Students who report having supportive and positive relationships with their teachers are also "less likely to use drugs and alcohol, attempt suicide or self-harm, [or] behave in violent ways..." (Noble & McGrath, 2015, p. 9). Students need to feel that they are genuinely important to their professors and that the professor knows who they are, is respectful and friendly, shows caring and support, and displays empathy towards the students (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Some of this necessary connection with professors was lost during the recent pandemic, which affected student experience and engagement, resulting in increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Coman et al., 2020; Hehir et al., 2021). Also important is the professor's ability to create a positive social climate, manage the classroom, maintain a clear academic focus, and promote student engagement in the classroom (Baker et al., 2008; Suldo et al., 2015).

Students are also more likely to experience positive emotions in class, to behave in a positive manner, to learn more readily, to have a stronger sense of mastery, and to reach a higher level of achievement when they are aware of and utilize their strengths, especially their character strengths (Waters, 2011). Using character strengths in school or at work contributes to a sense of ease and makes tasks far more enjoyable. Having a feeling of 'flow' or being 'in the zone' can only come from being challenged to use your strengths, and this sense of flow clearly facilitates learning (Seligman et al., 2009; Noble & McGrath, 2015). From a positive psychology perspective, having a sense of importance also comes from knowing what your highest character strengths are and then using them to contribute to something you believe is meaningful and purposeful (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Specific character strengths are correlated with academic success and grade point average (GPA) above and beyond what would be predicted by IQ. These character strengths include perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty, hope, curiosity, love of learning, prudence, and self-discipline (Lounsbury et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). Moreover, the happiness effects of using your strengths, especially in new ways, has been demonstrated to result in sustainable changes to well-being (Proyer et al., 2015). With this in mind, students need to better understand their individual character strengths, as well as how to use those strengths, to close gaps in their skills, to develop their comprehension and to pursue a meaningful life.

Finally, having a sense of meaning or purpose predicts how satisfied students are with their lives, their risk for depression, their likelihood of experiencing physical symptoms, and their chances of developing strong relationships (Norrish et al., 2011). Almost everyone wants to feel that they are contributing to some higher meaning or purpose in life, and researchers agree that adolescence and young adulthood is an important time for developing this sense of meaning and purpose (Norrish, et al., 2011). Having a sense of purpose in life, or feeling like your goals are worthwhile, is associated with strong feelings of life satisfaction for adolescents

and emerging adults (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Moreover, having a sense of meaning and purpose in life can provide students with a strong foundation that can help to sustain them later in life, when they face inevitable personal and societal challenges (Smith et al., 2015). Post-secondary students require opportunities in the classroom to develop a stronger sense of meaning and purpose. They need to feel that the information and skills they are learning can be used to have a meaningful impact on others, beyond themselves. They need to be involved in more student-directed activities, service learning, peer mentoring, leadership opportunities, and spirituality training (Noble & McGrath, 2015). It should be noted that the pandemic negatively affected students' sense of meaning as a result of the loss of rituals that typically support students in finding their greater purpose in life (e.g. graduation, job hunting, moving away from home) (Sirrine et al., 2022). These shifts since the pandemic mean that it is even more important now to address issues of meaning and purpose in the post-secondary classroom.

### **What Benefits Are There for Professors? ("Why should I bother?")**

Considering that much of the positive psychology research is being undertaken by higher educational institutes around the world, it makes sense to examine the benefits of these applications and interventions on the professors themselves. Given the high-pressure nature of the professor's role in academia, and the historical lack of consideration for personal well-being, it would be beneficial for post-secondary faculty to participate in the creation of a campus culture that supports and promotes the determinants of well-being (Oades et al., 2011). Benefits for faculty can be best understood by examining the research around human well-being and flourishing, and specifically the pillars of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning or purpose, accomplishment.

First, it should be noted that emotions are contagious, and that positive emotions can spread up to three degrees of separation (Fowler et al., 2009). As a professor, promoting positive emotions in your students will in turn contribute to your own positive emotions and a greater sense of well-being. Increased positive emotions allow faculty to broaden their thinking and attention so that they 'see' more possibilities and have more thoughts (Fredrickson, 2013a). This benefit can be very powerful when faculty are engaged with students in the classroom setting. Positive emotions also promote the development of more resources that can lead to even more positive emotions (e.g. new skills, new knowledge, new relationships) in an upward spiral of positivity (Fredrickson, 2013a; Fredrickson, et al., 2008). Finally, professors who experience more positive emotion are more likely to be happier, to have better relationships, to be more resilient when facing stress, to experience fewer negative emotions, to be more mindful and to have more compassion (Fredrickson, 2013a; Fredrickson et al., 2008). Positive emotions also contribute to greater productivity at work, lower rates of absenteeism, better immune functioning, and higher levels of creativity and energy (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Ong et al., 2011).

Sometimes, faculty must perform work that they do not necessarily enjoy, such as filling out performance reviews or attending staff meetings. Finding engagement in

all tasks is the key to having a productive work environment. Being engaged at work, no matter the task, leads to increased enjoyment and positive emotions. Engagement is highly related to a feeling of 'flow' or being 'in the zone', and flow is most likely to occur when you use your character strengths to meet the daily challenges that come with being a professor (Seligman et al., 2009; Noble & McGrath, 2015). Helping students to learn about, understand, and use their character strengths offers faculty the opportunity to pause and reflect on their own character strengths. This reflection could be formal, such as through the completion of the VIA Institute on Character survey for example, or more informal by thinking about what they did well after each class. Regardless, learning about and using character and ability strengths, especially in new ways, is one of the best ways to increase happiness and well-being as a faculty member (Seligman et al., 2009; Noble & McGrath, 2015; Proyer et al., 2015).

Fostering positive relationships with students allows faculty to benefit from one of the most well-researched principles of positive psychology: good relationships contribute to great happiness and well-being (Noble & McGrath, 2015; Gander et al., 2016). Positive relationships have a protective factor and, in general, contribute to a decreased risk of premature death, improved cardiovascular functioning, enhanced immune functioning, decreased inflammation, a reduction in the stress response, decreased feelings of anxiety and depression, and an increased sense of meaning in life (Norrish et al., 2013). While faculty will need more positive relationships than just those that they share with their students, considering the amount of time spent working during the course of a day, these correlational benefits are bound to positively affect faculty's health and well-being.

Meaning or purpose gives faculty a sense of direction for their work, along with a sense of where they 'fit' in the academic world. The more that we see our work as meaningful, the greater our feelings of well-being (Turner & Thielking, 2019). Teaching from a positive psychology perspective allows faculty to better 'see' their gifts or strengths and to more clearly understand how they can share these gifts with their colleagues and students in order to bring more meaning and purpose to their lives. Moreover, developing activities and assignments that allow students to contribute to the greater community offers faculty a more diverse perspective on the meaning of the work that they do. In fact, developing and using such classroom activities and assignments transforms their classroom into an 'agent of change', providing faculty with a sense that they are contributing to something much bigger than themselves (Cooperrider, 2016). For faculty, having a sense of meaning or purpose is associated with greater well-being, less physical complaints, lower risk of cardiovascular disease, fewer risk-taking behaviors, increased resilience, better coping with stress, and higher life satisfaction (Norrish et al., 2011). Benefits for the organization, as well as the faculty, include increased workplace motivation, greater professional commitment, improved work performance, greater job satisfaction, and increased engagement at work (Turner & Thielking, 2019).

Finally, part of our sense of accomplishment as professors comes from the successes of our students. Teaching from a positive psychology perspective has been found to contribute to greater student success (Noble & McGrath, 2015) which

would, in turn, contribute to increased feelings of accomplishment for faculty. Moreover, the greater sense of engagement faculty experience when applying these principles to the classroom makes their work more enjoyable and allows faculty to apply themselves more fully to their work despite challenges they may face. Our work becomes more intrinsically motivating. In turn, applying ourselves to our work contributes to achievement of greater accomplishments as we build our personal and professional skills and resources (Norrish et al., 2011). Setting and achieving goals for our achievement increases our happiness and well-being, although the process of working towards our goals is as important as our ultimate accomplishments (Norrish et al., 2013). Working towards accomplishments increases our sense of purpose, creates more feelings of autonomy, increases feelings of confidence, enhances our daily lives with more meaning, and generates better coping skills and more engagement with others (Norrish et al., 2013).

### **How Can We Implement These Principles in the Classroom?**

At the most basic level, bringing the principles of positive psychology to the post-secondary classroom simply starts with the approach and attitude of the professor. Beyond that, there are many positive psychology strategies and skills that can be implemented and/or embedded into the post-secondary classroom. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

First, try to develop a 'positive' course outline or syllabus for your classes. Give students some control or choice over how they learn and what they learn. It is well established in the literature that students who believe they have more control over their learning achieve greater academic success than those who believe others control their learning (Gifford et al. 2006; Hrbáčková et al., 2012; Nordstrom & Segrist, 2009). Moreover, giving students choice in the classroom is in line with universal design for learning (UDL) principles which aims to remove barriers to learning, making it accessible to all through multiple means of representation, action, and engagement, all of which include some element of choice (CAST, 2018). Include assignments and activities that are meaningful and that allow students to see the value in their work, which also aligns with UDL and is motivating to students. This could include assignments that relate to their future career or assignments that foster a sense of personal growth and development. Include several ways for students to reach you, setting a positive and approachable tone from the start. Even the wording you choose to use for assessments can be given a more positive/less punitive tone such as renaming a test to a 'celebration of learning' or 'celebration of knowledge, as one of the authors of this paper does in her classroom.

Also, make an effort to know all of your students, starting with the first day of class. Greet them at the door with an authentic warm welcome. Use name tags to help you remember names. Ask students to write short autobiographies and use this information to help you better understand the strengths and needs of your students. And don't just collect the information- let them know you've looked at it and actually care about what they've communicated about themselves (perhaps sharing summary data with them, such as the proportion of students in the class

with cats vs dogs as pets). Building this rapport with your students is important because the literature leaves little doubt that these positive relationships result in positive outcomes for learners, including better learning outcomes, greater student satisfaction, higher motivation, and more perceived learning (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Cuseo, 2018; Demir et al., 2019; Granitz et al., 2009; Swan & Shih, 2005).

Another important way to incorporate positive psychology principles in the classroom is to help the students to set and achieve goals, not only for the overall course, but for each of the weekly classes in the semester. This could be a formal part of the introductory class in your course, or it could happen weekly, at the start of each new lesson or topic. Help them to understand how the course material can help them achieve their overall and weekly goals, either in the classroom or with individual student feedback. As noted above, students achieve greater academic success when they take ownership of their own learning. As an example of setting goals for each weekly class, have students review the agenda for the lesson and then ask them to write down something *specific* about the content that they want to learn about, as well as *how* it will benefit them personally and/or professionally. Ask them to also think about *how* they will achieve their goal in that class (e.g., taking good notes, participating in discussions, asking the professor questions if their specific learning goal is not mentioned in class). Emphasize that they are the ones who are in control of their own learning through the goals and strategies that they choose (for a discussion on student ownership in learning, see Christian et al., 2020). Remind them throughout the class to check their progress towards their goals, and maybe even ask students to indicate (through a show of hands or polling software) once they have met their goal for that class.

Similarly, identify the personal and professional strengths needed to do well in the course and have students reflect on the extent to which they possess these strengths. Discuss how these strengths can be developed throughout the course and how the assignments and activities contribute to this development. This kind of metacognitive thinking is a skill that students need to practice. Thinking about their own learning and thinking processes is important for their academic success (Brown et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2017; Eskandari et al., 2020; Rivers, 2020). Also be explicit and intentional in pointing out the soft skills (or transferrable skills) that they are developing (such as communication, time-management, interpersonal and intrapersonal, creativity, critical thinking, etc.) which will serve them well in their future career. Explain how these skills can be transferred to multiple other contexts (e.g., job interview, condo board member, traffic court). Assignments can highlight the skills that are being assessed or the skills that are required to do well, so that students feel more connected to the assessment and more motivated to fully engage in completing it.

Another option is to give 'growth mindset' feedback to your students on both formative and summative assessments. Growth mindset, a term coined by Carol Dweck, is the belief that intelligence is not 'fixed'; that effort and perseverance will lead to personal and academic growth (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). To offer feedback from a growth mindset perspective, provide comments that highlight the process of learning, as well as the final outcome. In your comments, focus on

changeable skills and behaviors and offer suggestions for personal and professional growth. Look for the strengths in their assignments and suggest ways to use these strengths to close gaps in their skills or knowledge. As a first step, you might want to consider adding some 'yet' statements, where students require improvement (e.g., 'You haven't mastered this style of writing *yet*, so consider seeking additional support from the writing centre.')

Look for opportunities to create upward spirals of learning and positive emotion in the classroom. Pay attention to the topics or activities that create joy or engagement and use this knowledge to create more of the same. For example, if you know many students in your writing course are interested in zoology, use these types of texts and examples to teach the content. The benefits of experiencing positive emotion in the classroom are numerous, and include increases in studying behavior, classroom attendance, classroom participation, and academic optimism (Williams et al., 2013). Utilizing activities of this type might also increase students' intrinsic motivation, learning for the love of learning, which has beneficial effects for learning, as well as well-being (Cerasoli et al. 2014; Mabbe et al. 2018; Pink, 2011; Ryan and Deci 2000). As a faculty member, focus on what went 'right' instead of what went 'wrong' in class (Kennette & Chapman, 2021). Build on your successes. Solicit feedback from students if you are unsure. Invite them to tell you what 'worked' and what they appreciated about the lesson.

It can also be beneficial to build student mindfulness by encouraging them to focus on the 'present moment' in your classroom. Developing mindfulness in the classroom has been associated with increased student attention and learning (Zenner et al., 2014). To start developing mindfulness in your classroom, play a song related to the day's topic at the start of class and ask students to listen and think about how it connects. Take a few moments before starting class and ask students to write down anything on their mind which might interfere with their attention in class. Then, have the students put the sheet and the thoughts aside until after class. Or ask the class to take a moment and breathe a few deep belly breaths to help calm their minds before beginning the lesson. You can also ask students to focus on their senses to ground them in the moment, such as identifying one thing they smell, one thing they hear, one thing they feel, and 3 things they see.

In your classroom, encourage students to focus on the positive. At the end of class, ask them to write down three things they are grateful to have learned or three things they are thankful to have experienced in class. Ask them to be specific about WHY they are thankful for these things. Doing this on a regular basis will significantly contribute to students' positive emotions and well-being. Continuing this 'Three Good Things' exercise for several weeks has been shown to result in increased happiness and/or lower rates of depression, which might continue to be felt for many months following the intervention (Gander et al., 2013; Mongrain, & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012; Seligman et al., 2005). Research suggests that practicing gratitude in the classroom is associated with increased optimism, enriched life satisfaction, decreased negative affect and enhanced satisfaction with school experience (Froh et al., 2007). This can be further extended beyond the

classroom by asking students to list three things they are thankful for in their lives that day/week. In a grammar/basic writing course, for example, this could be the writing prompt they use.

Focusing on the positive can also involve helping students to reframe things in a more constructive way. Students can share stories or experiences in the classroom that illustrates the process of reframing. One of the authors of this study had a student in her classroom who had once been homeless. The class was having a discussion about an assignment and the challenges that students were having with parts of the assignment. This student who had been homeless raised his hand and shared his thoughts. He indicated that even outside of this classroom, many of his peers and classmates were complaining about their workload. He indicated how grateful he was to have achieved his goal of attending post-secondary and how lucky he felt to be learning new and exciting things. He suggested to the class that rather than say things like, "I have to do an assignment" or "I have to go to class", that they try saying "I GET to do an assignment" or "I GET to go to class". The students appreciated his suggestion, and for the remainder of the semester, one or more students would come back to this point during a classroom discussion, reminding each other to reframe the negative. It was a lesson that really stuck with them and that made an impact.

When giving students feedback (in any form including written, oral, etc.), strive for a 3:1 positive to negative ratio within your classroom, which is the ratio thought to be needed to overcome the negative bias inherent in the human brain (Fredrickson, 2013b). That is, when offering feedback, aim to cultivate three positives for every comment that identifies a weakness or problem. In classroom discussions, ask students for 3 positives before they discuss the negatives or offer criticisms. Even negative feedback can be framed positively: rather than commenting that a student's paper is 'disorganized', the comment could be re-framed as 'your paper could benefit from additional organization' (Kennette & Chapman, 2021). It is also important to note that negative feedback should be avoided whenever possible (i.e., when it is unrelated to our pedagogical goals) as it is likely to decrease intrinsic motivation (Fong et al., 2019).

Also, be sure to build empathy, kindness, and compassion within your classroom. Have students adopt the persona of an individual related to the lesson you are teaching and perform an activity from that individual's perspective. Model empathy and kindness in your relationships and interactions with your students. Students are more engaged and will work harder for a professor that they like (or have high regard for) and who demonstrates empathy, rather than one they simply respect (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017; Mendes, 2003). Set aside a short time at the end of class and have students give a 'shout out' to classmates who were kind in class that day or who did something noteworthy.

Finally, emphasize resilience and 'grit' using examples from within your content area. Developing these skills may be helpful to those college students who struggle, especially when in an online learning environment (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). In general, students tend to see the result and think that the process to success

must have been easy and effortless. Yet, we all know this is not true, and that often the successes we see in the real world are often just the tip of the iceberg. Accomplished athletes make winning games look easy, for example, but we don't see the hours and hours that they put into training, or the many times when they felt like quitting. JK Rowling, who wrote the Harry Potter book series, was a broke single mother who had experienced a failed marriage and struggled with her career prior to her books being successfully published. To teach students about grit and resilience, have discussions about individuals within their academic field who illustrate these qualities, as well as discussions about how students can develop these strengths themselves. Highlight the difference between times for 'grit' and times to 'quit'. Provide students with all of the resources on campus that can support them when things get tough. Reframe problems and failures within your field, or in your own professional journey, as opportunities for growth and meaning. Offer students perspectives on problems that illustrate persistence and optimism. Model resilience and grit in the classroom by explaining your grit-related thought process (e.g., encouraging yourself with your self-talk, asking yourself what this failed classroom activity has taught you). Be prepared to try new things that might not be successful and then to discuss with the class what was learned from the experience (including what you, as the instructor, learned).

### **What More can be Done in the Online Classroom?**

Although many of the suggestions that have just been discussed can be adapted to an online classroom (whether synchronous or asynchronous), the virtual delivery can pose some additional challenges as noted briefly above but can also provide us with unique opportunities. Online, students have more chances to participate, and faculty can respond to students more individually, which might not be possible in a larger in-person classroom discussion.

While faculty may not be able to greet students in the same warm manner online as they would in person (online, many students may enter the virtual classroom all at the same time, for example), this doesn't mean that a positive, welcoming atmosphere cannot be created. Play some joyful or uplifting music at the start of class when students are arriving. Solicit social and emotional feedback from students during class by having students message you privately and directly during live, online classes. Use fun scales of cat memes to see how they're doing emotionally ('How are you feeling on a scale from newborn kitten to black cat?'). Chat individually or with small groups of students using private breakout rooms. Alternatively, you can greet students by name as you see them logging in. Check in with students to see how they are doing, making sure to model the values of empathy, kindness, and compassion.

Students may be more comfortable participating in mindfulness activities at the start of class if they can turn off their cameras, especially if they feel self-conscious. At the end of class, students can share the three things that they found most helpful from class on an anonymous posting board, such as a Padlet board, which again may encourage greater engagement and participation. A similar posting

board could be used for shout-outs to classmates, recognizing their kindness in the classroom that day (or that week, or even make it ongoing all semester).

Given how important feelings of belonging and connectedness are for students, online teaching and learning should make this one of its primary goals. Research indicates that one of the key factors encouraging feelings of connectedness online is teacher presence/teacher interaction (Hehir et al., 2021). A positive student-teacher relationship promotes feelings of involvement and engagement and encourages students to work harder (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017). To foster this type of relationship online, be approachable. Be sure to provide some time when students can meet with you socially (e.g., for a virtual “coffee time”) and/or to discuss any issues or concerns they are experiencing. Offer as much choice as possible in terms of course completion, assignments, and course participation. Keep a list of students handy when you are meeting online, and jot down any key information about their strengths, abilities, and interests. Refer to this list when you can, during class or in your private assignment feedback, so that students know you are listening and that you support and respect them as individuals.

Faculty should also attempt to create a sense of belonging and connectedness between the students in their online classes. Students want to feel like they are part of a community and part of the campus, even though their classes may be online. To help students feel connected to one another, and to help them feel like they have a supportive space for learning, faculty should make use of live classrooms, group work, threaded discussions, co-ops, and project-based learning (Boling, 2012). However, faculty should take care that these elements of the classroom are not solely teacher driven. Students need to take ownership of their learning by being allowed to select some of the discussion topics, form their own groups, and participate in authentic, ungraded connection activities (Boling, 2012). Cohort learning is another strategy that can be used to encourage a sense of belonging when students are taking courses online. When this type of programming is not an option, faculty could host online social events outside of class, or allow time for socializing between students during part of the online class time. This could also be done asynchronously by providing students with a space (e.g., discussion board) where they can engage socially and share things with their peers.

For asynchronous classes, teacher presence will be especially important since there are no live classes where these interactions will occur naturally. Include your face in any instruction videos that you are creating and using in your courses. Record your own videos, when possible, instead of using videos found online. Give students feedback using voice or video notes instead of text-based feedback or choose to create short videos to share announcements rather than creating them by text (but keep in mind accessibility and individual student preference, so for feedback, perhaps give students a choice of the format in which they’d prefer to receive it). Seeing you and hearing your voice in video throughout the course provides students with a sense of connectedness and encourages engagement. If you have asynchronous discussion boards, make sure you jump in and participate in the discussions to let students know that you are present in the course. Connections and real-world experience could also be fostered in asynchronous online courses by

designing assignments that require students to connect with professionals in their field.

Asynchronous courses should also place an emphasis on the use of multimedia and interactive elements (Boling et al., 2012). Within some learning management systems (LMS), faculty now have the option of creating multiple-choice quizzes, drag-and-drop puzzles, and other quick knowledge checks, and then embedding them directly into the course content. Such interactive elements foster greater online engagement, which is one of the five educational foundations of well-being discussed throughout this article. The use of multimedia will also foster greater student engagement, and could include the use of videos, infographics, audio clips, images, and links to podcasts. Faculty could also integrate forms of social media into their courses, such as the currently popular Tik Tok videos. Perhaps students could even use these elements to demonstrate their learning, complete their assignments, and/or produce non-disposable coursework. Again, these activities create a sense of engagement and autonomy.

While these suggestions are specific to the online classroom, they could also work for the online portion of a hybrid course where some of the class is taught online and some in person. The prevalence of online education makes it particularly important that instructors are intentional in what they do and in how they promote a positive online learning environment.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite positive psychology and positive education being relatively new fields, there is already a convincing case for their use based on scientific research in various countries and contexts. The results seem to consistently indicate that the principles of positive psychology are significantly related to student well-being and academic performance (Waters, 2011). Students and faculty are more likely to experience a longer, healthier life, increased resilience, less depression, increased life satisfaction, better attention, increased creativity, better problem-solving abilities, stronger social support, better relationships, an increased capacity for growth, and a stronger sense of flourishing (Keyes, 2007). With benefits such as these, isn't it worth a try? Higher education should promote psychological well-being in addition to academic development, and positive psychology is one way to move in that direction, providing important benefits to students and faculty, and having a profound impact on their lives, well beyond the classroom.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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