

Cultivating a Positive Environment for Students

By Larry Ferlazzo

This article is adapted from Larry Ferlazzo's new book, *Self-Driven Learning: Teaching Strategies For Student Motivation*.

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Just how important are positive emotions in the learning process? **Studies** show that these feelings can enhance students' attention and higher-order thinking skills, as well as encouraging perseverance.

But here's the thing. We all have those days when students (sometimes many students) enter our classrooms without a positive frame of mind. The negativity often has nothing to do with us or with school—troubles with family, friends, romantic connections, or other outside forces can prey on students' minds. And unfortunately, as most teachers know, negativity (just like self-control and discipline) can be contagious.

What does that mean for us as teachers?

The Challenge of 'Bad Emotions'

First, let's stare down the challenge. As Florida State University psychology professor **Roy Baumeister** points out, **extensive research** finds that "bad emotions ... and bad feedback have more impact than good ones." The brain appears to process negative information more thoroughly, and the emotions created tend to last longer. This may have an evolutionary basis—our ancestors were probably more likely to survive by being particularly attuned to bad things and therefore more likely to pass on their genes.

In *The New York Times*, Harvard professor Teresa M. Amabile has **discussed** the influence of negativity on the workplace (and it doesn't seem to be too much of a stretch to expect similar consequences in the classroom). After analyzing some 12,000 diary entries, Amabile said she found that the negative effect of a setback at work was more than twice as strong as the positive effect of an event that signaled progress. And the power of a setback to increase frustration is more than three times as strong as the power of progress to decrease frustration.

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A community-organizing adage says that when organizers are having a bad day, all they can do is focus on doing good organizing and it will eventually get better. The same is true with teaching. But what specific strategies can we leverage?

Starting the Day Off Well

Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman has identified the importance of "**good endings**"—what happens at the end of events tends to be what we remember, and what we use to make decisions in the future.

But beginnings also have an important role.

Remember the old adage about "starting your day off on the right foot"? **Researchers** confirmed it with a study of call center employees (although they just as well might have been examining students). If you started the day in a positive mood, then you were likely to continue that way ... and vice versa.

How we start off the day with our students can have a major effect on how they will feel for the rest of the day. A greeting with a smile, an engaging lesson, a helpful attitude—these are all important all the time, but especially at the beginning of the school day.

Building Relationships

In researcher John Hattie's recent review of factors influencing student achievement, he finds that the quality of student-teacher relationships ranks 12th—out of 138. That's why a teacher's most effective tool may be the ear—as much or more so than the mouth.

Consider this anecdote. In the late 19th century, both William Ewart Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli served multiple terms as Prime Minister of England. According to one source, Queen Victoria described each man: "When I left the dining room after sitting next to Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest man in England," she said. "But after sitting next to Mr. Disraeli, I thought I was the cleverest woman in England".

To help sustain a culture of positivity, we must listen carefully and ask good questions that help students to feel supported. If we learn about our students' hopes and dreams, we can better connect instruction to students' interests and goals.

Balancing Positivity and Criticism

I'm not arguing that the classroom should be a criticism-free zone. Obviously, we all need helpful critique in order to grow. But how can we offer constructive criticism in a way that supports the positive classroom atmosphere we are trying to sustain?

For one thing, we can keep "the Losada line" in mind. Psychologist **Marcial Losada** found that it was necessary to have a ratio of three positive interactions for every critical interaction in order to develop and maintain a healthy team.

We can also be strategic about how to deliver criticism. A popular method is the "criticism sandwich": begin with a compliment, offer a critique, then end with another compliment.

Some doubt this method. They argue that since the brain takes more cognitive power to process negative remarks and remembers them more easily, it may forget the preceding praise. Professor Clifford Nass of Stanford instead **recommends** that teachers lead with criticism, then offer extensive praise. (I personally

have found the criticism sandwich more effective with most students, but you might want to try working both ways to see which strategy resonates with your students.)

Finally, research suggests that because of the processing time criticism requires, it is best to give only one critical comment at a time.

Prompting Recognition of the Positive

Consider adding a new tradition to your classroom routine: writing reflections each Friday. Ask students to write briefly about one or two good things that happened to them during the week. But take it a little further—ask students to explain why the good things occurred. Why? Identifying those reasons can help students see actions they can take more often to increase the quality and quantity of positive events in their lives.

Studies have shown that sharing positive events with others creates a more trusting and supportive environment, especially if people react positively to what is shared. So, after the writing, ask students to share their experiences with a partner who is charged with asking questions to learn more about the event.

One hundred years ago, the word "positive" began to mean much more than mathematical certainty. People began to use it as a term "concentrating on what is constructive and good." Let's put that relatively new meaning to use in our classrooms!

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