Applying Positive Psychology to Foster Student Engagement and Classroom Community Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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Abstract:

Positive psychology is the study of well-being, which includes 5 essential elements— positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). Applying positive psychology teaching strategies can therefore foster student engagement and classroom community, especially in an online modality and during the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in which social connections are more important and yet harder to establish than ever. The aims of this teacher-ready theory review are to (a) briefly review the PERMA model and its research and application in education, (b) describe my implementation of three positive psychology teaching strategies—strengths identification and application, growth mindset, and gratitude exercises—during the pandemic, as well as their effects based on my observation and student feedback, and (c) offer practical considerations, including some caveats, for instructors to attend to when implementing these strategies in any courses at any time albeit particularly helpful in the face of adversity. Finally, I conclude this article with some tips of being a positive teacher and some of my reflections teaching during the pandemic in the hope of "flattening the emotional distress curve."

Keywords: college teaching | gratitude | growth mindset | PERMA | strengths

Article:

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has changed the world—causing lockdowns, anxiety, and deaths. It also has changed, and will continue to change, education in terms of course delivery and learning modality as a result of mask-wearing and physical distancing guidelines. In March 2020, universities in the United States and across the globe announced campus closure within weeks of the COVID-19 outbreaks; faculties had to convert their in-person courses to online modalities, and college students struggled with moving home and learning in an online environment (Crawford et al., 2020; Johnson, Veletsianos, & Seaman, 2020). Human connections had seemingly lost when students switched learning from interacting with instructors and classmates on campus to seeing images and text on a computer screen, let alone stayed at home. "Flattening the COVID-19 curve" to slow down the spread of the virus was certainly important, whereas "flattening the emotional distress curve" that arose during these challenging and uncertain times was arguably as, if not more, important (Kaslow et al., 2020).

As many students were distressed and missed the social aspect of education, we, psychology instructors, could apply positive psychology teaching strategies to flatten our students' emotional distress curve, as well as to facilitate their learning and engagement, amid this global crisis that had long-lasting impacts. This article is organized in three main sections, in which I (a) briefly review the theoretical framework of positive psychology and its research and application in education, (b) describe the teaching strategies (what, why, and how) I implemented during the pandemic and their effects based on my observation and student feedback, and (c) offer practical considerations and some caveats for instructors to attend to when implementing these strategies in any courses at any time albeit particularly helpful in the face of adversity. Finally, I conclude this article with some tips of being a positive teacher and some of my reflections teaching during the pandemic.

The PERMA Model

Among the many theories of well-being (see Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012), Seligman (2011) proposed a well-being theory that consists of five essential, measurable elements—positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment—the PERMA model. The theory posits that all people pursue these five elements for their own sake in various domains (Seligman, 2019). Within education, positive emotions are important for broadening and building student perception of resources to deal with challenging academic tasks and daily life (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; Fredrickson, 2001). Engagement allows for implementation of strengths and skills to meet any tasks and challenges, such as learning difficult academic contents (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Relationships in a classroom with adequate quantity and quality of positive interactions, from instructor-to-student to student-to-student, can facilitate positive learning outcomes (Gable, Impett, Reis, & Asher, 2004). Meaning includes serving and doing something larger than oneself; for instance, students can learn the value of perseverance and resilience during adversity and apply their strengths to live a purposeful life (Brunzell et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2009). Accomplishments perceived by students can remind them about their potential to grow and succeed even when they have struggles in school and in life (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Research has shown that school and classroom interventions can target each PERMA element to effectively increase K–12 and college students' psychological resources, which are particularly important for those experiencing mental health challenges such as depression and trauma (Brunzell et al., 2016; Seligman, 2019). Applying positive psychology teaching strategies was therefore particularly important when stress and anxiety were on the rise during the pandemic—a mass trauma we experienced collectively (Horesh & Brown, 2020; Kaslow et al., 2020). Beyond family, higher education might be the only social context within which college students had human interaction amid the pandemic and thus served as a unique intervention point. As instructors, we should provide structured opportunities for students, rather than assume that they have the ability on their own, to experience positive emotions, engagement, and classroom community during these challenge times (Brunzell et al., 2016; Kaslow et al., 2020).

Although there is an exhaustive list of positive psychology strategies, some of the most common and effective ones instructors can implement are as follows (see Bolier et al., 2013; Brunzell et al., 2016; Lambert, Passmore, & Joshanloo, 2019 for detailed descriptions): (a) Positive emotions—implementing gratitude and "what went well" activities to capitalize on positive experiences; (b) Engagement—engaging and empowering students to identify, practice, and apply

their strengths and values in learning; (c) Relationships—applying active-constructive responding for positive interactions through capitalizing good news and supporting efforts; (d) Meaning—teaching and emphasizing the value of resilience during adversity and traumatic experiences through storytelling and connecting students to causes beyond the self; and (e) Accomplishment—embedding goal setting and growth mindset messages that encourage students to frame their beliefs about success as dynamic and to grow over time. Thus, in the following section, I illustrate how to implement teaching activities for individual and group strengths identification, growth mindset, and gratitude alongside positive instructions for enhancing PERMA while focusing on engagement and relationships.

Implementation of Positive Psychology Teaching Strategies

Teaching Context

In Spring 2020, I taught three undergraduate-level courses—in-person research methods in psychology (n = 22), in-person physiological psychology (n = 43), and online physiological psychology (n = 42)—in a Midwestern regional university. My students were primarily White (about 90%) and female (about 80%); most were traditional college-aged students, whereas my online course consisted of about half traditional and half nontraditional (i.e., older, having a full-time job) students.

To foster student engagement, classroom community, and psychological well-being in turn during the pandemic and stay-at-home order, I implemented three structured positive psychology strategies in the two in-person courses that were moved online. I explain each strategy below in the format of what it was, why I chose it, how I implemented it, and how it worked based on my observation and student feedback. The student feedback was mostly qualitative, obtained through course evaluation toward the end of the semester, while additional quantitative data related to the gratitude exercise were also collected.

Strengths Identification and Application

In positive psychology, strengths are character traits that are authentic, energizing, and fulfilling to people (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Every semester, I asked my students in my research methods course to identify and apply their individual as well as team strengths in a group research project—the main assignment throughout the course. Identifying character strengths and applying them to overcome challenges and optimize performance is the most common exercise in positive psychology classroom interventions that can increase student engagement, social skills, and enjoyment in school (Seligman, 2019; Seligman et al., 2009).

One of the biggest student concerns toward group projects is unequal individual contributions to groupwork (LaBeouf, Griffith, & Roberts, 2016), which may be attributed to differences in academic backgrounds, communication styles, and personal assets and interests, and more importantly, misunderstanding of and bias toward those differences (Pfeifer & Stoddard, 2019). For instance, it is not uncommon for me to hear Student A (a "Type A," extroverted student) complaining that Student B (a "Type B," introverted student) does not contribute actively in group conversations or take initiative to do tasks; and hear Student B defending that Student A dominates group conversations or always decides and assigns tasks for each group member to do. These differences seemed to have heightened when the course delivery changed from in person to online

(LaBeouf et al., 2016; Young & Bruce, 2011), because some students were not responsive to group communications (Horesh & Brown, 2020). Engaging students to practice and apply their assets and strengths, individually and with their groups, can empower students to clarify their values and learning goals, align their actions to those, and work collaboratively to stay on track during these challenging times (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2011)

The activity I implemented immediately after groups were formed, and before the pandemic, was creation of asset maps that highlight individual and group strengths (Pfeifer & Stoddard, 2019). During class, students first reflected on their own identities and strengths by drawing an asset map that represented them (see the online supplemental materials and https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/gps-research/14/). Then, they discussed these identities and strengths with their group members to know each other better, followed by completing a group asset and task assignment chart. The chart displayed how the group divided up the tasks among members to best utilize their strengths throughout the group research project (see the online supplemental materials). For example, students decided which member(s) would be mostly responsible for organizing and compiling information, communicating with the instructor, analyzing data, and so forth. Because of time constraints in the intensive research methods course, I gave students the autonomy to identify their own strengths; instructors, however, could ask students to complete formal assessment of their strengths such as the VIA Character Strengths Survey that is free (https://www.viacharacter.org/) and the CliftonStrengths Assessment that has a cost (https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en) to potentially reduce bias and stereotypes regarding perception of strengths (Pfeifer & Stoddard, 2019). After transitioning to online course delivery, I asked students to reflect on how they could keep on using their strengths to handle the pandemic situation, work with their groups in a different way, and succeed together.

Focusing on strengths helped my students set proper individual and group goals and determine how each group member wanted to engage with the course material and group assignments, thus fostering autonomy, engagement, and position interactions (Brunzell et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2009). Vulnerable students, in particular, could build confidence when labeling and working with their strengths (Brunzell et al., 2016). In addition, my students stated that they were able to assign group tasks based on strengths and learn each other's identities and stories throughout the course. When I was aware of students' individual and group strengths, I also could better support students through a more individualized approach such as aligning personalized feedback with their strengths (e.g., creativity, judgment). Furthermore, reminding students about practicing and applying their strengths during the pandemic enhanced their perceived ability to continue schoolwork and deal with life stressors (Waters, 2011). The asset mapping activity before the pandemic planted the seed for promoting positive emotions, engagement, classroom community, and resilience during the pandemic.

Growth Mindset

Mindset is the belief, which everyone holds, regarding the nature of intelligence and abilities (Dweck, 2006). In my research methods course, I introduced the concept of mindset by indicating the research behind it, coupled with my personal experiences, assignments, and feedback that instilled a growth mindset both in learning and in life. A growth mindset that frames abilities as malleable and changeable with hard work and practice, instead of a fixed mindset that frames abilities as inborn and not changeable, allows students to see challenges and mistakes as opportunities to grow to become more intelligent and resilient (Brunzell et al., 2016; Dweck,

2006). Mindset also influences stress appraisal (Jamieson, Crum, Goyer, Marotta, & Akinola, 2018). “COVID-19 feels like an ongoing ‘cardiac stress test’ on the world’s infrastructures and systems, magnifying our every functional and structural vulnerability, including that of the field of traumatic stress” (Horesh & Brown, 2020, p. 332). Yet, students kept on attending classes virtually with the intentions and hopes to succeed, but might find themselves frustrated and demanding when achieving below their normal academic standards. A growth mindset could lead students to believe that they could persist amid uncertain circumstances, embrace challenges and learn from them, and trust that effort and instructor feedback contribute to growth and success, all of which promote student engagement (Dweck, 2006). Whereas early mindset research found positive effects of growth mindset mainly on children and adolescents (Dweck, 2006), recent studies have shown that one-session brief interventions, as short as 30 min to an hour, have the potential to enhance the use of effective learning strategies and academic performance in college students (Broda et al., 2018; Lewis, Williams, & Dawson, 2020).

During the early stage of transitioning to online teaching and learning, many of my students reported feeling stressed and some told me that they felt like a failure after completing an SPSS assignment that was difficult partially due to the online learning modality. Therefore, I introduced the concept of mindset the next class based on research from Dweck (2006) and neuroplasticity (Broda et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2020), provided open-access activities (e.g., “Mistakes are Opportunities”, “Supercharge Your Goals”; https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/learnstorm-growth-mindset-activities-us/high-school-activities) for the students to complete if they wish, and created an extra credit assignment for students to reflect on when and how they used a growth versus fixed mindset in the research methods course (see the online supplemental materials). In addition to dealing with challenges and failures, the extra credit assignment included a goal-setting element for the students to adopt a growth mindset more intentionally, which enhanced student engagement and a sense of accomplishment by focusing on effort and the process of learning and growth (Brunzell et al., 2016). For example, one student wrote, “I would like to start consuming research more frequently. I want to challenge myself to interact with research and scientific articles outside of what I am required to do within my classes. I feel that this would make me a better informed and well-rounded individual.”

Moreover, when providing comments on students’ introduction drafts for the research paper, I included growth-oriented feedback—“I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them”—which has been shown to promote student engagement, instructor–student relationship, and academic performance (Yeager et al., 2014). Yeager et al. (2014) revealed that this feedback increased middle school students’ ability to receive criticism and the chance that they revised their paper, the Whites by 40% and the Blacks by 320%, compared with those who received neutral feedback. My class had the same phenomenon that all of my students revised their drafts (compared with some who did not before I implemented this strategy) when submitting their final paper; several students even reported in the course evaluation that the growth-oriented feedback was the most motivating feedback they had received.

During the last week of the semester, I employed storytelling with my personal experience to further strengthen the concept of growth mindset to enhance students’ resilience and instructor–student connections (Brunzell et al., 2016; Landrum, Brakke, & McCarthy, 2019). Specifically, to foster common humanity and compassion (Neff, 2003), I shared my own life challenges and academic failures during my undergraduate studies to connect to some students’ current situations, and then discussed how I used the word “yet” in my growth-oriented self-talk to overcome these academic and personal struggles (Dweck, 2006). Sample statements included “I don’t do well in

college . . . yet," "I'm not good at research . . . yet," and "I can't feel well emotionally . . . yet," which served as a tool for students to remind themselves to stay positive and engaged (Lewis et al., 2020). In response to the course evaluation question "what positive strategies or approaches did you use to support yourself and your learning in this course, during the remote instruction phase of the Spring 2020 semester," about 30% of my students in the research methods course answered a growth mindset, which would likely carry over into their future classes and challenges.

Gratitude

Gratitude can be defined as a positive emotion that people experience when an undeserved situation or act of kindness occurs (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). During the pandemic, I added weekly online discussions that included gratitude exercises in my physiological psychology course. The past two decades of research has shown that gratitude interventions increase feelings of gratitude that lead to greater optimism, resilience, connectedness to others, and general well-being (Brunzell et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2016). Among these interventions, creating gratitude lists or counting blessings, as well as writing gratitude letters or verbally expressing gratitude to others, are the most common and effective gratitude exercises (Davis et al., 2016). For instance, Rash, Matsuba, and Prkachin (2011) asked young adults in the gratitude intervention group to reflect on and write down one thing about people, items, or events that they were grateful for twice a week for four weeks. Compared with the control group who wrote down memorable events, the gratitude group had greater increases in physiological coherence (i.e., less stress responses), self-esteem, and life satisfaction. In higher education, weekly gratitude journaling in a management education class improved student engagement and meaning in learning (Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, & May, 2012).

As students' stress and depressive symptoms heightened during the pandemic, I incorporated gratitude lists into the weekly discussion posts that were simple to implement. During the first week of the online discussions after the course moved online, I explained to my students the benefits of gratitude and showed them videos on the underlying physiological mechanisms with concepts relevant to the course content. Then, the students completed weekly discussions with members in their group, which was established before the pandemic, on each new chapter and included three things they were grateful for over the past week (see the online supplemental materials). The gratitude items ranged from academic performance to physical health to various hobbies (e.g., watching Netflix, baking) that the students developed during the stay-at-home period. These gratitude exercises engaged the students to interact with their group members with empathy that built collective positive emotions and classroom community throughout the semester. For instance, one student mentioned being grateful that "my sister recently had a baby, and the baby is perfectly healthy," and all group members responded with positivity and congratulations messages.

To evaluate student perceptions of the gratitude exercises, I administered two short surveys, one at the start of the transition to online course delivery and one toward the end of the semester, in both of my "in-person" (with gratitude exercises) and online (without gratitude exercises) physiological psychology courses. Within this 4-week period, students completing gratitude exercises, on average, reduced stress (Mchange = −0.42 vs. −0.33 of 5) and increased gratitude (Mchange = 0.36 vs. 0.11 of 15; Emmons & McCullough, 2003), to larger extents than those who did not. When asked to "describe your thoughts and emotions on completing gratitude exercises," an overwhelming number of students reported that they had felt more positive and connected to

both me (i.e., the instructor) and their group members because of the weekly gratitude exercises. Some students even took this exercise to the next level by practicing gratitude every day, "I have made gratitude journaling a part of my nightly routine . . . I spend about 10 minutes drinking a cup of tea, meditating, and writing down at least three things I am grateful for each night"; "For the month of April, I had a gratitude calendar which gave me a different prompt every day to think about. It helped me be thankful for things I wouldn't typically think about." To further strengthen students' positive emotions and connections with me during the last week of the semester, I expressed my own gratitude to students for their hard work and support for group members throughout the semester.

Practical Considerations in Positive Psychology Applications

Although positive psychology teaching strategies may be particularly helpful for fostering positive emotions, student engagement, and classroom community during difficulty times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these strategies are conductive to building students' coping skills in a "normal" world in preparation for any difficult circumstances (Vela, Smith, Whittenberg, Guardiola, & Savage, 2018; Waters, 2011). Given that the rates of depression (10.1% in 2009 and 18.1% in 2018) and anxiety (10.5% in 2009 and 22.1% in 2018) had doubled over the last decade (Hoban, 2019) and that the rates and conditions would likely worsen as a result of the pandemic and social isolation, positive psychology teaching strategies became even more relevant in college coursework. Gaining positive psychology tools helps college students, especially those who have been marginalized or traumatized, navigate not only academic challenges but also nonacademic ones in their personal life (Brunzell et al., 2016; Vela et al., 2018). For instance, application of both character strengths and a growth mindset is important for students to thrive through challenges such as economic downturns and events involving social injustice and inequity; practicing gratitude, regardless of life circumstances, allows for generation, intensification, and continuation of positive experiences that promote overall well-being and academic engagement (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012). There are many possibilities beyond the pandemic for instructors to apply positive psychology teaching strategies to promote students' PERMA, although to do so effectively, it does take intentionality in finding a good fit among the course content, student characteristics, and current events.

Instructors can implement the previously discussed positive psychology teaching strategies in various ways—synchronously or asynchronously, on an individual or group level, and as an assignment or class activity—each comes with its own advantages and challenges. Instructors are encouraged to think critically about their pedagogy behind the chosen strategies in consideration of the personal (e.g., teaching philosophy, training background, communication style) and environmental (e.g., students' technology access, class size, time constraints, group composition and trust) factors. Depending upon the student demographics and whether courses are conducted synchronously or asynchronously, instructors should apply strategies in ways that are equitable to all students; synchronous messaging and videoconference tools may enhance engagement and camaraderie, whereas asynchronous communication could allow for deeper discussions and instructor feedback in more personalized ways (Young & Bruce, 2011). Another key consideration is to align teaching strategies with the instructor's and students' strengths, as well as the course objectives and contents. It should not be difficult for psychology instructors to find a natural intersection between positive psychology and course contents based on research and real-world examples (Lambert et al., 2019; Seligman et al., 2009). For instance, I discuss the research findings

and physiological aspects of mindset and gratitude when introducing those in my research methods and physiological psychology courses.

Several caveats are warranted when implementing activities specifically related to strengths, mindset, and gratitude. If instructors ask students to self-identify strengths in the aforementioned strengths identification and asset mapping activities, they should be cautious of any student bias or stereotypes that may either overestimate or underestimate abilities and skills. Specifically, male students are more likely to mention math and technical skills as their assets, whereas female students are more likely to identify with conflict management and organizational skills (Pfeifer & Stoddard, 2019). Instead of assuming that students can see their own bias and stereotypes, instructors can use this opportunity to discuss some typical stereotypes associated with certain identities for students, especially those who consist of more dominant and privileged identities, to recognize potential marginalization issues behind strengths identification and groupwork (Pfeifer & Stoddard, 2019). Before teaching the concept of mindset through the previously mentioned mindset assignment or storytelling, instructors should be aware of students' initial mindsets and abilities through formal or informal assessments, or wait for a "teachable moment" that they recognize students' fixed mindsets. Given that growth mindset interventions may not be as effective for students who are White (vs. Black) or high achieving (Broda et al., 2018; Yeager et al., 2014), and that more and more students learn about mindset in K–12 education (Yeager et al., 2019), instructors who teach primarily White and high-achieving students may consider applying growth mindset indirectly (e.g., through instructions) and invest more time in other positive psychology teaching strategies. With regard to incorporating gratitude lists or counting blessings, instructors need to pay attention to their students' characteristics and receptivity to the exercise. Some recent studies have revealed that expression of gratitude could sometimes cause feelings of indebtedness, guilt, or other adverse reactions, especially for people who are perfectionistic or disagreeable (Davis et al., 2016), or when people express gratitude toward someone important to them (Oishi, Koo, Lim, & Suh, 2019). Therefore, when including gratitude exercises, instructors should consider cultural and personality factors, provide guidance regarding the goal or target of the gratitude, and obtain early feedback from students.

In addition to applying positive teaching strategies, we should remind ourselves that we, the instructors, are a positive tool as well! When students conceptualize classroom community, it includes connections with classmates as well as with the instructor (Young & Bruce, 2011). In fact, the most common factor of all positive education interventions is that positive teachers are the ones who implement them (Seligman, 2019; Waters, 2011). To this end, active–constructive responding is a positive psychology strategy that can contribute to the quantity and quality of positive instructor statements by capitalizing the good things (Gable et al., 2004). For instance, for every mistake that a student makes on an assignment, instructors can find several good things to comment on, or use active–constructive responding to emphasize one good thing for multiple times. When designing assignments and class activities, instructors should make sure to include "what is right" beyond "what is wrong" that is frequently discussed in psychology courses. For example, if abnormal or clinical psychology instructors have students analyze patient cases with clinical symptoms using DSM criteria, they can ask students to include positive coping strategies in the treatment plan and potential positive outcomes after treatment.

Beyond being positive and growth-oriented, feedback and communications should be frequent in order for students to engage in sustained, goal-directed learning (Brunzell et al., 2016). Providing regular feedback and being available, for the whole class and individual students, also adds meaning and connections to online learning, especially during challenging times such as the

pandemic (Kaslow et al., 2020). The student responses, to the question "what positive strategies or approaches did this instructor use during the remote instruction phase of the Spring 2020 semester," I received the most beyond the use of positive psychology strategies were "the professor is always available," "the professor is very quick in responding to e-mails," "the professor is very encouraging," "he would always do check-ins and even included gratitude in our grade," which corroborate with what Sitzman and Leners (2006) found regarding the importance of perceived instructor caring in online education.

Conclusion

Student engagement and classroom community are important for education at any given time, although they may be particularly important for online learning experiences and during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying positive psychology teaching strategies has the potential of enhancing these learning outcomes along with student well-being, particularly among vulnerable students such as those who are minorities or who experience mental health or confidence issues. I introduced in this article the rationales for and the process of implementing some of the most common positive psychology concepts—strengths, mindset, and gratitude—in teaching during the pandemic, whereas other strategies are available for instructors to try depending upon their course contents and structures (Brunzell et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2019; Seligman, 2019). At the time of this writing, we were experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases in the United States; institutions were unsure of how to deliver courses using in-person, hybrid or blended, and online modalities. To practice what I preach, I am going to apply my top five character strengths—love of learning, curiosity, perspective, teamwork, and zest—to stay positive and engaged in my teaching in the hope that we can flatten both the COVID-19 and the emotional distress curves. Finally, I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to teach such a hardworking and resilient generation of students, to learn and apply new teaching strategies, and to grow as a lifelong learner and educator.

Footnotes

1. One of the three strategies, strengths identification and application, was planned before and emphasized during the pandemic.

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