

ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

*How do I help students
stay positive and focused?*

Joan
YOUNG



ASCD Alexandria, VA USA



ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

*How do I help students
stay positive and focused?*

The Importance of a Positive Classroom	1
Harnessing the Power of Humor	5
Metacognition, Mindset, and Mindfulness	14
Routines, Rituals, and Resilience	24
Novelty, Curiosity, and Wonder	31
Gratitude and Kindness: Giving Back and Paying It Forward	38
A Call to Action	42
Encore	43
References	47
About the Author	49

The Importance of a Positive Classroom

Classroom environment is one of the most important factors affecting student learning. Simply put, students learn better when they view the learning environment as positive and supportive (Dorman, Aldridge, & Fraser, 2006). A positive environment is one in which students feel a sense of belonging, trust others, and feel encouraged to tackle challenges, take risks, and ask questions (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). Such an environment provides relevant content, clear learning goals and feedback, opportunities to build social skills, and strategies to help students succeed (Weimer, 2009).

We all know the factors that can threaten a positive classroom environment: problems that kids bring from home, lack of motivation among students whose love of learning has been drilled right out of them, pressures from testing, and more. We can't control all these factors, but what if we could implement some simple strategies to buffer against their negative effects?

The good news is that we can. We can foster effective learning and transform the experience of our students every day by harnessing the power of emotions. If you're already objecting that you don't have time for that kind of thing, don't worry: I'm not talking about holding a daily class meeting

to talk about feelings. The strategies I offer in this publication can be easily integrated into your instruction. What's more, they are not a luxury or a frill: we ignore the power of emotions at our peril. When we dismiss the effects—both positive and negative—that emotions have on learning, we make our jobs much harder for ourselves.

A bounty of research outlines the impact emotions have on learning. Stress, for example, has a significant negative effect on cognitive functioning (Medina, 2008). Unfortunately, when it comes to learning processes, the power of negative events greatly outweighs the power of positive events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). As a result, we need to prepare ourselves with an arsenal of strategies that inoculate our students against the power of negativity. By providing enough positive experiences to counteract the negative, we can help students avoid getting stuck in a “negative spiral” (Fredrickson, 2001), which can be set off by something as seemingly innocuous as a critical comment from a peer or a stressful test moment. Being caught up in negative emotions in this way impairs learning by narrowing students' focus and inhibiting their ability to see multiple viewpoints and solve problems.

This publication is not a cheat sheet, a “happyology” manual, or a Band-Aid that will fix that distressed kid and send him to a magical haven of learning. Instead, it is a guide to simple routines, strategies, and structures that take little time to implement yet yield immeasurable results. Creating a positive environment produces a powerful ripple effect that continually enhances learning: when students can see

the humor in their mistakes, celebrate their successes, and feel empowered as change agents, they will actively engage in learning and, consequently, learn more effectively. Far from promising easy solutions and instant results, these strategies will increase students' capacity to tolerate the discomfort that comes with working hard and to accept that there *are* no easy answers—that only critical thinking and perseverance lead the way to mastery.

The principles and strategies that follow will help you evaluate the challenges you face in the classroom and address them by infusing your practice with positive elements like humor, novelty, and fascination. The first step is to examine the current state of your learning environment and assess how effective it is.

A Learning Environment Analysis

Take a day or two to be an observer in your own classroom, or invite a colleague to partner with you in reciprocal classroom observation. It is helpful to conduct at least two observations: one on a day when you perceive things to be going smoothly and another during a high-stress period when you feel particularly overwhelmed—for example, around testing or report card time. Obviously, if you're working alone, you can't just stop teaching to observe your class, but take a step back whenever possible and record what you see (for a technology-assisted boost, film the class period). Then answer the following questions:

- **What is the ratio of time students spend off task to time students engage in authentic work?** To make

this data collection manageable, pause every 10 minutes and simply observe how many students are actively engaged and how many are off task. Alternatively, you could closely observe just a small sample of students throughout the entire period.

- **How many times each hour do you encounter a student behavior issue?** If it is too challenging to chart the behavior of each student, you can choose a sample of the class to observe.
- **What are some of the precursors to these behavior issues—that is, events that occur just before the problems arise?** Remember to keep a full observation stance, and try not to leap to judgment. Keep in mind various “factors of mass distraction” that may contribute to problems, such as people entering or leaving the room, noise level, students’ seating locations, and time of day. You might also want to note the affect or mood of students as they come into class that day.

This stage is about asking questions and uncovering the root causes of the problems that impede learning and engagement in your classroom. Engaging in this process with a partner after the class has gone for the day should prove helpful. The Encore section of this publication provides further questions to explore.

In conducting this classroom “autopsy,” you should be able to pinpoint the moments when teaching and learning are most effective, analyze what leads to these moments, and