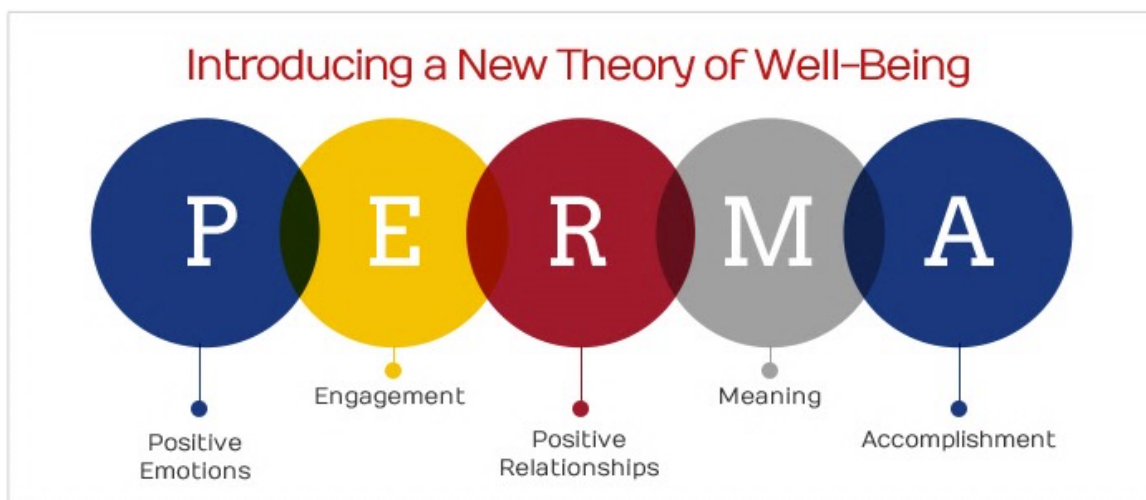


Beyond Writing Anxiety: Supporting Student Well-being in Research Writing Classes

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Kanika Agrawal, Jennifer Campbell, LP Picard, and Zoe Tobier

While there are many ways to think about promoting happiness and well-being in the composition classroom, one helpful heuristic for curriculum development is Martin Seligman's PERMA model, which includes the elements below. I've offered quick-and-dirty definitions and examples for each. How do we already promote these aspects in our classes, and how might we add activities and assignments that help students experience them more?



Positive Emotions – Positive emotions are what most people think of when they hear 'happiness.' Positive feelings result from meeting bodily needs, physical pleasure, or intellectual stimulation. Positive emotions can be momentary, but they contribute considerably to life satisfaction and a general sense that things are going well. A stressed student might hit the trifecta by plopping down on a comfy couch and watching a good documentary while eating ice cream, or better yet by taking a walk with a friend to get some ice cream and having a thought-provoking conversation on the way.

Engagement – Engagement is when we are able to participate in activities that absorb and challenge us. When one is really engaged in their work or a hobby, they enter a state of flow and may even lose their sense of time and self-consciousness. Engagement can involve routine, practice, creativity, and problem solving, but we might not recognize an emotional component until after the fact. A student might get lost in painting, for example, and only 'come to' when they realize that they need to get started on their research, at which time we hope they'll become engaged in that work.

Positive Relationships – This one is fairly obvious. Positive relationships are vital to well-being and loneliness is bad for our health. Other people offer material and emotional support. Students have relationships with family and friends, faculty and classmates. We can try to make the latter two as positive as possible, and just letting students know that we care about them as people can help students, especially when so many relationships are in flux at this time in their lives.

Meaning – Meaning comes from a sense that we matter—that our lives and work have an impact in the world or that we belong to something greater than ourselves. People find meaning in their relationships, work, religious or spiritual practice, etc. Meaning is subjective—what one man finds meaningful, another may see as vapid, and the things that give us purpose change throughout our lives. Students often find their writing more meaningful when they can connect it to another passion and when it's intended for a real audience.

Accomplishment – We feel a sense of accomplishment when we challenge ourselves and meet that challenge. We can feel accomplished when we achieve major milestones, such as a promotion or marriage, but we also get a sense of accomplishment from less consequential pursuits, such as winning in fantasy football or dominating at disc golf. It is key to set realistic goals that move you forward and then to raise the bar, basically in keeping with theories of proximal development. We can help students achieve clear goals in our classes and celebrate their accomplishments.

A Pedagogy of Positive Emotion

Jennifer Campbell

Positive emotion includes both pleasure and enjoyment. Pleasure is physical, from relieving pain, meeting bodily needs, and pleasing the senses, while enjoyment refers to intellectual and emotional stimulation. This aspect of our model also includes optimism and focusing on positive emotions and outcomes more than the negative ones. As writing instructors, we can promote positive emotion in our classrooms from syllabus to assessment. For example, our syllabi should emphasize how students can succeed in class rather than listing potential failures and punishments. We can, as Catherine Savini suggests, abandon intolerant policies that may add stress but don't add to learning. And we can replace them with approaches that harm no one but might help many, and especially students who are struggling.

In our classrooms, we can share our own positive emotions about life and excitement for our subject throughout the term. This includes showing enthusiasm for our students' work and offering feedback that recognizes the positive and encourages improvement rather than just identifying deficits and telling students how to fix them. We can be humane and humorous, include a sense of play in classroom activities, and add cat pictures to our PowerPoint slides. I always hope to encourage a sense of fun in learning along with a more rigorous sense of intellectual engagement, but I begin each class with a "Moment of Zen" or "Happy Practice"—just a few minutes in which we freewrite on a happy topic, meditate, stretch, watch funny videos, and the like. This started as an experiment and quickly turned into one of my students' favorite things because it makes

them feel good for a bit and gives them a minute to settle down and become more present in our space and community. I've been told more than once that an activity totally turned a student's day around, and last quarter, 64% reported that they had used our activities outside of class. These practices might seem frivolous or pandering to some, but they establish a positive mood in the classroom and encourage students to engage more fully in the task at hand, making it easier for them to learn course content and meet educational goals.

Meditative Practices, Engagement, and Choice

Kanika Agrawal

It is not unusual for first-year undergraduates to enter a new classroom hesitantly. But it often seems that a research-writing course is especially likely to provoke and/or exacerbate certain anxieties. Students shuffle in nervous and skeptical. They wonder, will they *really* understand what research is? Will they be able to *do* it? Will what they do *matter*? Seeing our students tentatively circle the outskirts, we may be tempted to immediately guide them toward the center: "To get *there*, let's figure out together *what* to do, and *how-when-why* to do." Unfortunately, in our rush to activate and empower them, we don't always consider *where* and *whether* to do. In academic contexts, we too often situate Western scientific approaches to research at the center and attempt to "progress" in their direction, hoping to grow more confident in our knowledge seeking and production as we get closer. I believe, however, that it is important to think not only in terms of doing but also undoing. We must recognize the anxieties of our students and consider how these anxieties may be undone or transformed.

I am interested in how we might draw on traditions and practices that have sprung up at—or been pushed to—the borders in order to address the anxieties that are often perpetuated by the conventions of the center. Among the most common and well recognized of these are the anxiety of influence and the anxiety of failure. Just as common but often overlooked is the anxiety of choice. Two decades of research on choice has shown that while choice is essential to our sense of autonomy and well-being, too much choice can be demotivating and demoralizing. Students stall at topic choice and focus, which prevents them from becoming truly engaged in their research. In his essay "The Ecstasy of Influence," Jonathan Lethem suggests that where there is anxiety, there is opportunity for ecstasy. Perhaps part of our work, then, is to help our students discover the ecstasies corresponding to or hidden by their anxieties. When it comes to choice, however, we tend to expect the ecstasy and forget about the anxiety. Our students, too, want more choice and yet feel overwhelmed when we ask them to decide what questions to ask, forms to adopt, sources and methods to use, etc. How can we manage choice in our courses to more fully engage students and reduce stress? I propose adapting the practices of object meditation and passage meditation to the classroom environment to help students focus their attention, better understand their own interests, and make meaningful choices.

Using Student Stories to Build Positive Relationships

Zoe Tobier

Within the structure of a required writing course at a four-year college, all students risk feeling isolated—distant from the purpose of the class, and distant from classmates due to divergent academic and social interests. Additionally, transfer students may feel lost in a sea of first-year students. Some report feeling that their identities and experiences are not acknowledged by professors or other campus institutions (Ruggles Gere et al., 2017). We can create positive relationships with our students through conversations in class, in office-hours, and in the margins of their writing. We can offer plenty of opportunities for students to interact with one another and to consider their roles within various communities. We can also facilitate positive relationships at the university by familiarizing students with campus resources and institutional histories and traditions.

Incorporating students' personal stories into the work of the writing classroom can build community by helping students to see across differences without "flattening" those differences (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014). For example, students respond to generative prompts like "Describe what you have in common with your fellow students at DU and how you are different" and "Describe what you have in common with your family and community and how you are different." They share with classmates, who write responses to the author. Through this sharing, students can develop positive relationships that improve learning through better small group discussions and peer workshops and that may extend beyond the classroom. For example, an international student shares that they are shy and how it can be hard for Chinese students to make American friends, but they'd like to; this challenged a peer's perception that Chinese students are aloof and prefer to hang out with others from a similar background. Insights generated by cultivating these connections can also lead to research topics.

Finding Meaning in Research Essays

LP Picard

Students have come to understand a "research essay" to be an academic exercise, a demonstration of conventions mastery and an objective "report" of a pre-determined topic. They aren't used to imagining a space *within* the "research essay" for their own ideas and they haven't been invited to *join* the conversation. My "Interpretive Constellation" research project encourages students to make personal connections to their work, finding meaning for themselves and their readers. This assignment asks students to effectively utilize the research methods we discuss (expert interviews, text-based interpretive research, qualitative methods, and/or content analysis) to navigate an issue of personal significance. While many academic research essays investigate a narrow topic using a specific framework, students explore their broad topic through multiple lenses... stitching together myriad voices and perspectives and drawing connections between ideas to illuminate the constellation of their issue. The goal is not to make a singular argument about this topic, but to provoke critical engagement from readers as they follow the student's process of discovery.

In this way, the Interpretive Constellation project allows students to determine the focus, scope, and purpose of their intellectual inquiry. It also allows them to see how *exigence* emerges from (and is located at the intersection of) both private interest and public concern. Some students have used this project to explore a new interest (e.g., several students researched D&D/RPGs in the wake of the game's renewed popularity). Others have used the project to learn more about themselves (e.g., one student recently learned that she was not Russian but *Belarusian*, and investigated this part of her heritage). And some have even used the project as a coping strategy (e.g., one student wrote about her newly diagnosed Lyme disease & the laborious process of its original misdiagnoses). Ultimate, students see that there are myriad, overlapping *purposes* of research—that it can be used to accomplish different goals.

Fostering and Recognizing Accomplishment **“All Together Now”**

We hope it goes without saying that completing each assignment and the course should give students a sense of accomplishment, but we can increase attention to what students have achieved through positive feedback and opportunities for reflection. Beyond evaluative comments about what students do well in their writing, we can offer encouragement and positive feedback throughout the process. We can scaffold large projects so that students gain a greater sense of accomplishment and confidence as they complete smaller steps and then, ideally, a more ambitious project than they thought they could compose. Students will only feel accomplished when they rise to a challenge, so we need to challenge them consistently without asking for so much that students become stressed or overwhelmed. And it never hurts to bring in a bag of candy to celebrate when students have completed a major project.

Students are more likely to recognize their accomplishments if they are encouraged to reflect on their work regularly and at the end of the term. In WRIT 1133, all students are required to complete a portfolio that reflects on their writing processes and products from the quarter or makes a case for how their work meets course goals. The portfolio process helps students see how much they've written, how their projects improved, and how well they can articulate concepts. Reflections don't have to be formal—even freewrites after certain checkpoints can do the trick. Finally, we want to note that our pedagogies are designed not only to support students' well-being, but to help them accomplish course goals. We see the positive outcomes of our practices in students' formal writing, reflections, final portfolios, and course evaluations, which gives us a nice sense of accomplishment, too.

Some Useful Resources

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