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When I began teaching, I found students' attitudes to be the most troublesome issue I encountered. I know, no surprise to veteran teachers, but I was personally concerned about the future of the children. How could a student have such a negative, apathetic view of life? After the novelty of a new school year wears off, students seem to adorn themselves with thankless, "me" attitudes that climax at the end of the year. As a teacher, I wondered how many doors I held open, how many pencils I picked up, and how many favors I did that went unrecognized by students. I also noticed how their self-serving attitudes affected their learning in the classroom.

I believed that if they could think positive thoughts about reading and writing, there would be no more of the automatic moans and groans that seem to accompany any assignment they receive. Realizing that I needed to address these problems and help my students become positive thinkers, I spent many nights contemplating what I could do to focus on positive thinking in my classroom.

As if fate was recognizing my angst about this problem, I caught sight of a *Reader's Digest* article titled, "How the New Science of *Thank You* Can Change Your Life." Intrigued that there was an actual science associated with *thank yous*, I continued to read the article that proved to be an excerpt from *Thank You Power*, a book by Deborah Norville. What I read heightened my passion to make my students grateful and creative, and to generate with them a classroom community that encouraged students to find the beneficial value of the reading and writing they did in my classroom.

The Science

In the 1990s three scientists conducted research for Alzheimer's disease and reviewed biographical essays written in the 1930s by nuns. These essays were originally used to determine career pathways and then were filed away and long forgotten. As part of their research, the scientists scored the essays for positive emotional content, such as happiness, interest, love and hope. When the results were compared with each nun's current lifestyle, they found that the "nuns who expressed the most positive emotions lived up to ten years longer than those who expressed the fewest" (Frederickson 330). This finding amazed the scientific world because the connection between positive thinking and life style was never considered or documented. In fact, the study noted, "this gain in life expectancy is considerably longer than the gain achieved by those who quit smoking" (330). This powerful connection between positive emotion and life expectancy has spurred interest in a new branch of psychological science: positive psychology.

One study that has emerged from positive psychology is Robert E. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough's "Dimensions and Perspectives of Gratitude." They studied three groups of people and randomly assigned them to reflect on different things. One group reflected on negative occurrences, one group on positive occurrences and the third group focused on every day events. Results of this study found that "The people who focused on gratitude were just flat out happier...those who were grateful had a higher quality of life" (Norville 146).

According to Emmons and McCullough's research, those who reflected on their gratitude of positive occurrences exhibited the following effects:

- Felt better about themselves
- Reported fewer physical symptoms
- Made progress toward their personal goals
- Higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, attentiveness and energy
- More likely to have helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support to another
- Better sleep duration and quality
- Higher levels of positive emotions, life

satisfaction, vitality, and lower levels of depression and stress
- Placed less importance on material goods with others.

In addition to the benefits of gratitude, I was drawn to the methods Emmons and McCullough developed to cultivate gratitude in daily life, including gratitude journals and other forms of positive reflection. Many of their simple methods, as described in Norville's book, could be easily modified for any grade level classroom while meeting the learning objectives. In my English 11 and journalism classes, I began to realize that gratitude could benefit my students when applied to both literature and composition.

The Classroom

As I was reading about the Emmons and McCullough study, I realized that I wanted each and every benefit of positive thinking for my students, e.g., a healthier and longer life, positive emotions and less stress—things that are wished for by most adults. What greater gift could I give them? And on an academic level, if they could learn to look past their negative emotions, could they then identify and internalize the benefits and lessons that come from the literature the read and the compositions they write? Now knowing how positive reflection and gratitude can actually change and improve the lives of my students, how could I not take action and formulate lessons to accommodate this? What a simple way to make an impact in their learning styles as well as their future.

Show Them Why

I shared excerpts form Norville's book with my students so they could begin to appreciate how important it is to be grateful and positive. The content led to class discussions about what positive things we should do for others and why we don't do these simple tasks—for example, holding the door open for someone is rarely performed anymore. Why? My students discussed this and concluded that they are all thankful when a door is held and the action is something they can do to help someone out. The students then reflected on their own actions as I challenged them to make "Public Displays of Gratitude" whenever possible. These public displays might include bestowing a thank you for a service rendered, or the completion of a service that is worthy of a thank you.

As a result, my students made an effort to act grateful and positive during their day-to-day lives. After our initial lesson, I began receiving thank yous for everything I handed out—from tests to candy—and if there was a student standing by, I usually enjoyed having the door held open for me and my weighty schoolbag. Additionally, several minutes of the class hour was often engaged by students bragging about all the thank yous they had given and the courteous things they received thanks for. This positive recognition led students to begin identifying similar positive occurrences in the literature they read and they began to ask highly inquisitive questions regarding the literature. Soon, positive thinking was taking over the classroom.

Make the Literature Positive

I had a revelation when a student asked me, "Why don't we read any happy literature?" Fellow classmates supported him with their observations of the negative themes we had encountered that year: the nature of evil in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the death and betrayal in *Hamlet*, and the evil of human nature in *Lord of the Flies*. They had raised a good point. Why had I focused on such negative themes? Couldn't we concentrate on something positive to glean from these readings? (Also, cf. Kristen Randle's article in *English Journal*, "Young Adult Literature: Let it be Hope" and Laura Miller's article in the *New York Times*, "Why Teachers Love Depressing Books.")

Barbara Fredrickson, director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory at the University of Michigan, noted in her research that "when people feel good, their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, flexible, and open to information…positive emotions can lead to the discovery of novel ideas, actions and social bonds (333). Here was an aha! moment for me: if my students could think positively about the content, they could learn more from it. During the next trimester, I was still faced with the dark themes of the British literature, but I made a point to make the students apply everything in a positive manner to their own lives. I found my students recognizing the themes and attempting to remedy the issues facing the characters. For example, some diagnosed Hamlet's suicidal thoughts and found resources to help him, while others became thankful for their own crazy-yet-not-as crazy-as-Hamlet's families.

Focusing on the positive defiantly provided much more laughter—and learning—in my classroom.

As a teacher, it was very fulfilling to see the students demonstrate positive thinking through higher level thinking skills. They became much more cooperative and involved in their learning. Not having to deal with many negative attitudes and preconceived notions, I was able to direct discussion and prepare lesson objectives to help students think critically and not only analyze the literature, but also synthesize meanings of it. Beyond memorizing plot lines and identifying themes, my students focused on applying the lessons they learned to their own lives. They began to take an active interest in learning and how it applied to their future. Literature became something more than memorizing key facts; it became a tool to apply to and evaluate life. Lessons were learned and students were exercising their ability of forward thinking.

Gratitude Journals

Once a week, my students were required to journal about the past week and what occurrences they were grateful for. Completed as a warm up, the students looked forward to this day. A few minutes at the beginning of class for reflection journaling allowed the students to focus on positive thinking. Not willing to let my students alone benefit from positive psychology, I attempted to journal with them each week. I, too, could benefit from less stress in my life.

As guidance for the gratitude journals, I follow Norville's advice: "Take a moment during the day…to jot down three things that happened that day for which you are grateful. Anything that made you feel uplifted, that brought a smile to your face or your heart, or will contributed toward your future happiness, works" (Norville 149). She also encourages writers to record why this was good for them. After the first few journal entries, it became an easy task for my students to recognize these moments in their lives and focus on the benefit of it. Additional assignments asked the students to record similar instances in the literature they were reading. Doing this allowed the students to stretch their thinking while they combined writing and reading into their daily warm ups.

When we would finish journaling, I asked for volunteers to share with the class what they were thankful for. Most students were willing to share at least one thing that happened to them, and as they did this I noticed smiles appear on the faces of the students. They felt good about what they are doing and were taking time to celebrate it. I soon found the students involving their classmates in their journals; they were becoming more understanding and accepting of each other. Furthermore, they were becoming comfortable writing in a new genre that required them to reflect upon their ideas and writing and complete revisions, as they knew their designated audience would be their peers. Not only were the journals and reflections making a positive impact on the students' lives, it was making a positive impact on our classroom learning community.

Thank You Letters

To help improve morale in the school, I required students to write four thank you letters to faculty and staff. The letters had to focus on something the person had done for the student and specifically thank him or her for this deed, and express their gratitude. The first letter was done in class after a mini lesson on friendly letters, which focused on format and content. Then we took the letters through the writing process until their ideas were developed and supported with details, and all conventions were correct. Final copies were handwritten on a legal pad and then distributed to the recipients via office mailboxes. The recipients were elated to receive recognition for their hard work and proud that they were making differences in the lives of their students.

I require letters to be handwritten. According to Jill Bremer of Bremer Communications,

> *When you write a note by hand, it shows the other person that you cared enough to pull out the stationery box and choose your words without the conveniences of the grammar tool and spellchecker. Written notes are also permanent, which means they can be saved by the recipient and passed around to share with others.*

Giving the students an authentic audience to their voice helped made the thank you letters highly effective learning tools. Students made sure their work was perfectly polished before it was sent out; they didn't want anyone

thinking they were "stupid." Every comma and indentation was checked several times before a final was written. I was constantly asked, "Is he or she really going to read this?" When they were assured that the intended audience would indeed be receiving the letter, much heartfelt work was put into it. They became proud of their work and wanted it read, and they became more conscientious in revising and editing their work. They also eagerly awaited response. One week I was a bit late distributing the letters and students were bugging me to get it done. "I kept asking Ms. Potter if she had read her letter yet, and she said she didn't. Where is it, Mrs. Buckhold?" Never before had an assignment made my students so interested in their audience.

I also used the thank you letter assignment in my journalism class. Close to graduation and with finalized publications, seniors had to write three letters to people who had impacted their life journey to that point. One person had to be a family member (or one considered as family). The day after the final letters were delivered, a student told the class that her mother started crying, and then she did until they ran out of Kleenex. Other students reported similar results of their letters and expressed their appreciation for the assignment. As a class, they agreed that being grateful is a great way to impact not only their life, but also the lives of others.

Conclusion

As an educator, I am concerned with the future of my students and take this on as an immense responsibility. If I have the power to impact their lives in a positive way, I will do all I can to accomplish this. This is why I spent a year of working to incorporate and teach the science of thank you into my classroom and linking it to their work as readers and writers. If my students can recognize the importance of positive thinking and maintain a grateful attitude in the future, I hope to have helped them make their quality of life better. Isn't this the goal of all English teachers? Do we not all strive to help our students achieve good lives as adults through our teaching of reading and writing?

Always thinking of the benchmarks and objectives I must meet, I found it relatively simple to incorporate my focus on gratitude and positive thinking. The lessons were simple and easy to involve various expectations. The thank you letter assignment, for example, could easily be tailored to any grade level or any content area. Many teachers could create a related approach and have similar positive results in their classrooms. Students at any age benefit from positive thinking; in fact, the younger they learn, the longer gratitude has to affect their approach to learning.

I may not know the results of these lessons on my students. I do not know if they will live five or ten years longer because I had them maintain gratitude journals. I do not know if they will live stress free, healthy lives because I made them write thank you notes. Like any teacher, I do my best and hope for it, too. I did, however, receive several thank you notes this summer from the graduating seniors, which made every lesson worth it.

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