Optimism for Teachers
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Introduction
Teachers have a lot to be optimistic about. As the academic year rushes to its conclusion and lesson plans wait to be revisited in the next school year, teachers are given the opportunity to review the year and think optimistically about the changes that can be made. New students and new classes enhance the opportunity to start anew. Teachers can use two methods of self-analysis to consider their feelings of optimism about the next school year: the "What Work’s Well" strategy (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2001) from the business world and the "Learned Optimism" model (Seligman, 1991) from positive psychology. These two models can be perfectly adapted for the teaching environment, and what better time to consider them than when the academic year is wrapping up and a new year is on the horizon.

WWW - What Works Well
This is a model that came from the world of business but can be useful for the classroom setting. Before thinking of things to change about the way classes, teaching teams, or research groups run, the idea is to consider the things that already go well. This can be done as an individual teacher, after a presentation or appraisal, or when working with teaching materials. Examples at the end of a teaching block or semester could be "students report that I am enthusiastic," "students seem happy to thank me at the end of class," or "I think that students enjoy the speaking in our classroom activities." It is easy-to-use and effective when given to students as a task for themselves too. They love to have the chance to think positively, are genuinely surprised by the range of ideas that come from their classmates, and appreciate the different approach away from critique. In a recent round of “student-centred” homework activities where groups of students were responsible for leading their classmates in teaching activities and organising conversation topics and games for one week, Freshman students used What Worked Well to appraise themselves and laugh about the challenges of the task. What they found was that once they talked about the good things that happened, it didn’t matter so much about things that were difficult and they could talk about those too with more confidence and acceptance.

When things go right in class, teachers and students should have the chance to let each other know that they enjoyed the lesson and the learning. All teachers have lessons they want to recreate because the lessons were successful and, therefore, What Works Well is a good place to start.

How Optimistic Are You?
Martin Seligman’s “Learned
Optimism” model for assessing personal optimism can be applied to the teaching context. It looks at three features: Personalization, Permanence, and Pervasiveness. The pessimist has to work harder at things that the optimist does naturally. Seligman studied animals, patients, and most recently has worked in schools to explore how this works. See Seligman 2009 for his recent school-based projects in Australia, the US, and the UK.

When something good or bad happens, an optimist is a person who will see things positively, while the pessimist sees the opposite. The incident causing the thoughts will be the same, but an optimist will see things differently to a pessimist (see Figure 1). If a good thing happens an optimist will see themselves as responsible for it (personalization), will think that it may always happen in the same way (permanence), and will think that it may happen in other situations or impact their life in a wider way (pervasiveness). The pessimist considers the opposite and instead sees the same event as an accident that is nothing to do with them (lack of personalization), will think that they simply got lucky (lack of permanence), and will think that the luck will only happen in that one situation, affecting nothing else in their lives (lack of pervasiveness).

Figure 1. Optimistic and pessimistic views of the same events.
Academic Optimism and Personal Optimism
What is the link between the two? Is the person who is personally optimistic likely to be optimistic in the academic setting? Recent studies of teachers in the US have shown there to be a strong correlation between the two (Beard et al., 2009). Professional optimism and personal optimism are linked. It would seem that the teacher who is personally optimistic is also academically optimistic about teaching and student achievement.

Try the following steps with a recent teaching situation. Think of something good that happened in class. Go over the events in your mind and your reactions to them. Why did that good outcome happen? When you describe the event to yourself, how do you see it? Can you find the features of personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness in that inner voice? How do you see your successes?

Considering this model for the teaching professional and the following examples of teacher-talk:

1. “Because we worked hard the class did well in their exams” vs. “I don`t know why, but the class did well after all”
2. “The freshman class I had this year was a challenge” vs. “I always get stuck with the difficult classes”
3. “English is difficult” vs. “Speaking English while teaching is difficult”

The optimistic teacher sees the class’s successes down to his or her own hard work along with giving credit to the students themselves. The old maxim “Good students - good teacher” is what the optimist firmly believes. The pessimist fails to see his/her own input as valuable. When things are difficult, the optimist can see the situation as non-permanent, not that all other classes will be equally difficult to deal with. The pessimist has a fatalistic approach and thinks that getting unlucky with the difficult classes will be a permanent condition to be repeated year after year. How does this work for your own situation?

Of course, most teachers have a balance between optimism and pessimism, depending on the situation. This is good since the extremes of opinion can be troublesome in themselves. Imagine the optimist who cannot see any flaw in his or her teaching. Then no room for improvement can be imagined by this teacher, as he or she is perfect already! Equally, the 100% pessimist will be difficult to coach into making positive changes. Seligman’s approach is to use this model to assess levels of personal optimism and then learn how to be more optimistic if needed. For the pessimist, the next stage is to find out strengths and grow them. As the year wraps up and teachers assess their own enjoyment and engagement in their work, personal and professional optimism are useful elements to consider. Now is
always a good time to be optimistic about teaching!


All of Seligman’s surveys from his website are freely available for the public to use as part of his “positive psychology” drive to promote optimism worldwide.

Fare Thee Well to all our Friends and Colleagues Moving On from KUIS! Stay in Touch!