Positive Teaching, Positive Learning

Positive Teaching, Positive Learning is an ideas book for the classroom with practical suggestions for generating and interpreting positive feedback.

Rob Barnes draws on many years of teaching experience and extensive research to propose six core aspects of positive teaching and learning. These include: learning to understand and re-describe difficulties so that they can be minimised; the ways in which high expectations for classroom feedback can be generated; the use of descriptive praise; and the ways in which both pupils and teachers can avoid unnecessary stress through taking a more realistic yet positive view of their lives. Each of these central ideas defining positive teaching and learning is supported by suggestions for practical strategies which have been used successfully in the classroom.

Teachers, lecturers, educational psychologists and anyone concerned with special needs will find this book useful, inspiring and practical.

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Positive Teaching,
Positive Learning

Rob Barnes
After emerging from a cell measuring 7 ft by 7 ft, Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa, described how this had been his home for eighteen years: ‘There were pleasant and unpleasant experiences’, he said, ‘and it depends on how you look at the situation.’
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Sophie was not supposed to improve, and why she did is a question that has resurfaced many times during my teaching career. The mother of this fresh-faced 12-year-old was the librarian at the art school where I was a student. Sophie’s mother was adept at finding anything we wanted to know about and seemed always to have book references at her fingertips. She was helpful, knowledgeable and enthusiastic, someone reliable, who could run a generously stocked library where students’ questions led her to enthuse rather than frown. Sophie frowned a great deal and would sometimes be there in the evenings when her mother was on the later duty.

When, two years later, I found myself taking over a class in my first teaching post, I was surprised to find Sophie sitting there. Information about pupils was thin on the ground and I assumed she was as bright as her mother. Sophie listened carefully, seemed to enjoy what she was asked to do and wrote pages of steadily improving text. She was involved and she was enthusiastic, just like her mother. Sophie even brought in extra work she had done at home. It was only towards the end of the year that I discovered that she had needed special help in her previous years and had been labelled ‘a backward child’ by other teachers. Fortunately, the label on this child had gone missing.

According to her mother, Sophie had improved her schoolwork dramatically that year compared with other years. From my point of view, she had done no more than I expected she would, and I was surprised to find she had been any different. The reasons why Sophie improved are no more than informed guesses. Maybe the extra help over previous years had finally paid off. Maybe she just liked the way I taught or she sat next to another pupil who gave her better explanations of the tasks she was to do. I would like to think that she improved because I expected her to, but that is far too simple a reason.

Were my expectations higher than they might have been? There is no shortage of educational advice, counter-advice, research and articles suggesting that high expectations can lead to high achievement and success. A classic example comes from a famous flurry of research activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, surrounding a controversial experiment by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson. Their work is another example of a story that will not go away,
and sticks in the mind like Sophie’s story of expected improvement. Despite
many reservations their critics have voiced about it, Rosenthal and Jacobson’s
story persists as one of apparent self-fulfilling prophecy. Known as Pygmalion in
the classroom’, their experiment led teachers to think that certain specific pupils
would experience an academic growth spurt during the coming year. In reality
these children were chosen at random. At the end of the year, ‘spurters’
demonstrated greater gains in IQ than other children (Rosenthal and Jacobson
1968). In other studies, teachers were told that particular pupils were gifted.
Later, their teachers could be observed giving them preferential treatment.
Further inquiry looked at naturally occurring teacher expectations and showed
that self-fulfilling prophecies can and do occur in the classroom (Seaver 1973).
Like the Sophie story, there are reasons why positive effects of this kind are
viewed with some suspicion, but they cannot be entirely dismissed.

There are six aspects of positive teaching and learning comprising the main
ideas in this book. The first of these is about learning to understand and
redescribe difficulties so that they can be minimised. Pupils and teachers can
learn practical and optimistic strategies in order to dispute their negative
thinking. The second aspect concerns ways in which high expectations for
classroom feedback can be created. Do pupils expect that whatever the task
there is a strong chance they will need to give feedback? Will feedback be
demanded early in a session or project? High expectations include pupil self-
assessments, which then inform future teaching and learning. Third, there are
ways in which pupils might learn to become responsible, tenacious and self-
rewarded through working in a special group exploring their difficulties.

The fourth aspect of positive teaching and learning concerns the use of
descriptive praise. There is a powerful, detailed and practical means of giving
praise that allows pupils to credit themselves. A fifth aspect is that of developing
pupils’ positive self-awareness as a result of the feedback they encounter. The
sixth aspect deals with ways in which both pupils and teachers can avoid
unnecessary stress through taking a more realistic, yet positive view of their lives.
There are examples of stress-busting strategies that are known to work for
teachers and pupils.

Strategies suggested concern the way we and our pupils can redescribe events
to ourselves in more positive ways. If feedback to children about their progress is
important—and I believe it is fundamental to their success—it is worth looking
at ways to handle negative aspects of this. The strategies are subtle, because there
is a fine line between boosting self-esteem and constantly monitoring children so
they become dependent on us for approval. Relying on the teacher to approve
and say ‘That’s marvellous, brilliant or wonderful’ is not the most positive of
responses for children to experience. We do not want to create a situation where
pupils depend for the most part on a teacher’s approval for their sense of security.
An aim of positive teaching is to help pupils to make the best of learning. The
role of a teacher is to help them in that process. Improved learning cannot be
separated from developing a positive ethos in the classroom. What this means,
and how it relates to classroom language and positive comment, are the subjects of the remaining chapters in the book.

A closer look at the Sophie story shows how difficult it is to find reasons. Teachers not only have expectations, but they also remember their pupils' behaviour and achievements in ways that match established beliefs. Way back in the 1970s, Seaver pointed out that a teacher's bias is one of personal perception as well as expectation. Teachers will assign higher grades to pupils they already believe are brighter, and lower grades to those they believe are less capable. In Rosenthal and Jacobson's experiment it could have been that the teachers wanted to describe pupils as having improved whether they actually did or not. There are other effects. Teachers are known to speak differently to pupils depending on how they already perceive them. Studies by Blakey and his colleagues (1971) showed that teachers used a warmer tone of voice when talking with pupils who they believed were high achievers. There are further studies showing teachers treating younger brothers and sisters similarly to the sibling they previously taught. The younger sibling is frequently labelled as a high or low achiever from the outset. There have been other investigations that show how pupils identified as 'gifted' benefit from the teacher's bias. Teachers can also be biased against children they regard as coming from an inferior social and ethnic background (Rist 1970; Babad 1980).

**Pupils as positive self-improvers**

The idea that high expectations have a positive effect on achievement is ultimately a belief, though one I find attractive. In Sophie's case, my expectations were high and my attitude was positive almost as if by accident. Can positive attitudes be learned? In promoting positive approaches to teaching and learning, I assert six beliefs:

1. Ultimately, negative thinking is wasted energy.
2. Negative thinking feeds on itself.
3. Negative thinking is unnecessarily stressful.
4. Positive optimistic attitudes can be developed.
5. Pupils can take responsibility for becoming positive.
6. Feedback and action are necessary ingredients of improvement.

I also believe that teachers can positively influence pupils' achievement despite the odds. A counter-belief is that pupils' achievement generally matches expectations because teachers are good at forecasting progress. It may not be that they have expectations which influence pupils' achievement, but simply that they forecast their progress so accurately that pupils match that forecast. Nothing unexpected happens. But do children really achieve according to expectations just because the teacher forecasted accurately? Might it be possible for pupils to achieve far more if teachers' expectations were changed for higher
ones? The impressive array of research does not conclusively show that expectations bias pupil learning. Nor, significantly, does it show that high expectations have nothing to do with a pupil’s success.

If we take the idea that positive teaching includes belief in pupils’ almost limitless capacity to improve, there are several consequences. First, the onus is on us to find ways to trigger improvement and to convince pupils they can achieve more than they think. The belief is that if we can only find a way, there will be breakthroughs and rewards for pupils concerning their achievements. This could of course be a recipe for making pupils over-dependent, but it need not be. The onus can be to find strategies that actually include teaching pupils how to learn for themselves. Positive teaching is not just giving pupils a rather generous ‘benefit of the doubt’ about their difficulties, and plenty of praise, but also about trying to set up the circumstances in which they can be self-improvers. Their rate of improvement and development will vary, but the onus is to teach as if achievement is just around the corner.

We will also need to encourage an attitude that is very high on hope. That hope will be something along the lines that whatever difficulty appears, it is not permanent and pervasive, but specific and temporary and there are ways to change it for the better. An example would be the difference between saying that a pupil cannot spell, and saying that a pupil has not so far remembered the spelling of many words. A high hope factor is different from pretending pupils are achieving when they are not. There is little point in being optimistic about achievement if all that happens is that we lose a sense of reality by distorting perceptions of pupils’ results. It would not be very positive to try to hone skills and knowledge beyond children’s ability to cope, or ignore their apparent weaknesses.

Positive teaching assumes we will make the most of pupils’ potential, building on and describing their successes, rather than defining their limitations. This sounds so familiar that we might easily think we already do it. Faced with the familiar, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that no self-respecting teacher would do anything but encourage, persuade and be positive towards pupils. How else would we do the job? It is logical to suppose that as professionals we are there to believe in our pupils, take a positive view of their potential and move them forward. It is likely that we may take numerous teaching qualities for granted, such as trying to interest and motivate pupils in what they do, or praising their efforts and achievement. Lidz (1991) summed up the problem of familiarity when describing formative assessment (assessment intended to feed back into learning in order to improve it). She commented that the ‘very logic of the idea that formative feedback leads to improvement could lead practitioners to think that they already do it’. Teachers may do all of these things to some extent, but not necessarily create a climate for high hopes of successful learning. Positive teaching is a familiar idea, so familiar that, like believing that people have no reason to drop litter, we might logically expect to live in a litter-free positive world.
The word ‘improvement’ is a rather flexible one. Believing in pupils’ capacity to improve could mean a variety of things, not all of them to do with achievement in a particular subject or skill. Rather in the way we might generalise about the importance of raising standards, ‘improvement’ suffers from meaning all manner of things depending on how it is used. Desforges (1993:8) poses two questions about improvement and learners. Can learners do things which they earlier could not do? Can they do things effectively which earlier they did clumsily or slowly? These two criteria are rough and ready reference points, but they at least give a starting point for assessing improvement. It might be that improvement means increased skills or better understanding. Can learners swim faster, for example, or do they understand more clearly why climate changes? It could be that pupils’ improvement means that they are better-adjusted human beings whose behaviour helps rather than hinders the smooth running of the classroom. Whatever we define as improvement is likely to mean that pupils have more than they had before, or that the quality of what they achieve is higher.

We need not be over ‘picky’ about what pupils improve so long as there is a starting point. Improvement can be holistic, so that success in one area of their lives may well spill over into other areas. I confess I have little evidence for this except what I have observed and other teachers have confirmed. I have found that the experience of success can boost self-esteem and give pupils the confidence to learn something new. Starting points for improvement are not quite so hit-and-miss as we might think. Teachers and children choose particular tasks through which to develop learning so these inevitably become the starting points. If children are to improve in their use of computers, for example, they obviously need to be involved in practising tasks using them or nothing much will happen. There is no guarantee that children will improve their skills and understanding, but there is certainly the potential for that. Improvement of the very best kind can be that children believe in themselves where previously they did not.

Feedback, self-esteem and positive comment

There are two main sources of feedback on success and failure when learning anything. First, feedback comes from tasks. Examples are tasks, such as doing a maths problem, writing, sawing wood or painting a surface. We observe our actions with varying degrees of accuracy and make adjustments much as a driver learns to steers a vehicle. Feedback on what is happening enables the driver to make decisions to steer in a particular direction. Sometimes during tasks we may even engage in self-talk (inside our head or verbalised to ourselves) in response to noticing what we are doing. The second source of feedback comes from people either through their expressions, actions or words. Some educational computer programs have encouraging responses built in as speech and text, such as ‘Well done!’ or ‘Good try. Have another go.’ The remaining feedback to children is
likely to be written feedback as in the marking of work, grades and assessment marks. Little of this feedback is neutral in its effect on pupils’ self-esteem, though much of it may not exactly be earth-shattering in its importance.

Tasks we do can invite a wide range of positive and negative feedback, feelings and responses. Depending on how any of us habitually copes with successes and failures, we can experience strong feelings about the task in relation to ourselves. We can feel very strongly positive or negative even before we start. As teachers we are not in control of how pupils themselves will respond, but we know from experience that tolerance of failure in individual pupils varies. More importantly, we have the chance to influence perceptions by the way we teach pupils to handle success and failure for themselves. Pupils’ sense of themselves is at stake. In an ideal world teachers could boost each pupil’s self-esteem on a daily basis, and some teachers believe they can actually do this. In my ideal world, pupils would become far better at recognising success and boosting self-esteem for themselves. They already have strong needs to be approved by their friends and teachers, as most pupils do. The need for well-handled positive feedback from teachers cannot be underestimated, but it need not create dependency or generate an even greater need for praise.

Realistically there is no guarantee that as teachers we can always remember to describe pupil progress positively. We might learn to give positive comments to pupils, but we cannot always guarantee to do this every time. Pupils have some responsibility for praising themselves. I have heard teachers talk about their pupils needing ‘to take responsibility for themselves’ and ‘take responsibility for their learning’. Too often, this can be misunderstood as a need to blame ourselves when things go wrong. Seligman (1990) is quick to point out that self-blame leads directly to low self-esteem, and can become an established reaction to failure. Self-esteem depends largely on the perceptions and feelings we have about events and ourselves in relation to others. It does not depend on the events that happen, so much as the way in which we view them. Pupils, for example, may have irrational perceptions of failing to achieve a high enough standard, or not getting close enough to a view of success they imagined. A gap between how anyone sees themselves achieving and an ideal is in some ways healthy for human development. Without aspirations towards ideals we could become passive and no longer strive for anything.

Pupils who continually blame themselves can see themselves as being worthless, unlovable and stupid. Pupils who find reasons to blame external factors are, according to Seligman, simply protecting their self-esteem. He admits this is healthy enough for them, but not very helpful for us if we are trying to teach pupils whose view of learning is very negative. They may habitually blame themselves for their lack of ability (‘I’m useless at doing science’, ‘I’m not talented’) or blame external factors (‘I couldn’t see the board’, ‘He/she kept interrupting me’, ‘This is boring/a waste of time’). Although we may describe them as having low self-esteem, this is actually an overgeneralisation. A point made by McKay and Fanning (1992) is that low self-esteem, although thought of
as a general state of being, actually relates to more specific situations. At school a child may have low self-esteem regarding academic ability, but at home higher self-esteem resulting from skill at playing computer games. Another pupil might feel they are good at schoolwork, but have low self-esteem about being a member of a group and socialising outside school. Levels of self-esteem also fluctuate according to how we perceive events affecting us for good or ill.

Most of the time individuals quite reasonably assume that the way they view events, relationships and themselves are accurate because there needs to be some basis for making day-to-day decisions. Where perceptions are negative, Martin Seligman (1990) and Harriet Braiker (1989) both offer strategies for changing them. Any accompanying negative devaluing self-talk, inside their heads, can be changed to a more positive dimension. Perceptions and beliefs, they claim, can change as we learn to think and talk about them differently. I will develop the educational context of their ideas and provide practical examples in the chapters which follow.

Remaining positive, and being aware of when we are negative, requires that we practise the classroom language to achieve this. In the heat of the moment things can still be different because feelings of frustration and tiredness take over. Teachers are fallible, not super-human. Like people in other jobs, they need a good old moan with a colleague now and again. Sharing difficult experiences with others is a way of getting a sense of meaning back into our world.

I know all the theory. I know I need to step back from the situation and try to pick out strengths. I know I need to be patient and positive. But I got wound up with this kid Darren didn’t I? He was fiddling with his pen and talking as I looked at his work. He was supposed to understand division in maths and I must have told them a million times to carry the remainder over. This time I’d arrived late at school because the car wouldn’t start and I was already a bit angry and fed up, so I shouted at him, which I knew I shouldn’t have done. ‘What do you think you’re doing? No. Let’s get real! What are you NOT doing that you should know how to by now?’ —all the things I didn’t want to hear coming out of my mouth. ‘How many times have I told you to carry figures over? Eh? How many times? Don’t think of showing me that until you’ve sorted it out properly, you hear me?’ Screaming pitch? Almost. The weird thing is I could hear myself saying all the wrong things but I couldn’t switch to a calmer, more positive exchange. I’d had enough of it and it felt like it was somebody else talking, and could hear myself saying inside my head, ‘Cool it. Don’t say it. Don’t say it.’ But I still said it didn’t I?

(Primary-school teacher)

We might know in our minds that negative critical comment is deadly to self-esteem, but it is another matter framing our words more positively to counteract this. The gap between theory and practice closes slowly. As teachers, we can catch ourselves being negative when we would rather be positive. We are human
and we fail. Beyond the failures, there are changes we can try to make in what we habitually say and do in the classroom. If this seems difficult to achieve, we might remember that a similar process already happens for many teachers at the start of their careers. They change their classroom language and action as they discover what effect their comments seem to have on children. How can this process be extended to develop a positive framework for improvement, without ignoring the reality of pupils’ errors and failures? My experience is that teaching is a profession where the practice of correcting errors and saying ‘what is wrong’ is deeply ingrained. Of necessity, we are adept at noticing what goes wrong and trying to do something about it. Criticism and correction are after all part and parcel of teaching. Fortunately there are ways to redirect negative classroom language to something more constructive and positive than it often is. Seligman (1990), and Rogers (1992) both agree that redirection of this kind is difficult to achieve, but still possible and certainly worth learning.

In any situation, we have underlying automatic responses that quickly surface. The automatic responses tend to be buried within our style of explaining our lives, and they do not easily become dislodged. We have internal self-talk that can tell us something ‘should’ or ‘shouldn’t’ have happened or that ‘we ought to be able to cope by now’ or that something should be better than it is. We compare how things are with how we think they ‘ought to be’ or ‘should be’ and turn the difference into negative criticism. An important ingredient in developing positive teaching is understanding the relationship between automatic self-talk and our perceptions. Any proposed changes to what we say, described in the following chapters, will inevitably include changes to self-talk. Reactions to tasks and events can be driven by highly emotional self-talk as pupils and teachers feel frustrated and disappointed, elated or excited (‘It’s just not fair!’ , ‘I must get it right’, ‘I’m really bad at this’, ‘I liked doing that’, ‘It’s fantastic!’). The extent to which we ourselves can be aware of our negative responses varies as do our emotions. As Rogers says, we cannot choose our emotions, but we can choose our perceptions of classroom events, and the way we attribute success and failure.

If we want to be positive in the classroom, the quality of feedback we give or receive matters. The way it is interpreted through self-talk lies at the heart of positive exchange in the classroom. If a teacher’s good lesson plans and subject knowledge are a prerequisite for effective teaching, then feedback is the fuel. We may talk of giving feedback as ‘constructive criticism’ or feedback intended to boost an individual’s self-esteem. I include the teacher’s self-esteem in this too, because without teaching being rewarding it is difficult to give continually of ourselves. One of the hardest things for a teacher to do is to be positive when giving feedback on failure. It is sometimes much harder for some teachers to cope with than recognising success. Failure can diminish, or alternatively provide a positive springboard for learning. Feedback on failure can be threatening or promising, and it takes a skilful teacher to know the difference.

For the teacher, feedback from pupils can be a facial expression, a child’s negative frown of confusion or a positive moment of understanding conveyed by
wide-eyed delight. There is also the reality of experiencing negative and aggressive feedback from pupils who are ‘acting out’ and intend to be disruptive. Some of the best teachers I know are actually brilliant self-correctors as they respond to children. They do not ignore difficulties. They read the classroom situation accurately and have the ability to change direction according to the feedback they receive and the signals they give. They watch out for misunderstandings, self-correct their explanations, and have some idea of the effect they have on pupils. Their skill is one of trying to minimise possible difficulties and avoid laying psychological landmines for children to step on. The very best teachers can make learning feel achievable and fun without lowering expectations or reducing the value of tasks. If these attributes seem to fit almost every teacher in the world, we are back again with the familiar. Beyond the familiar is the possibility that some teachers are exceptionally good at this and we can learn something from them.

We might think that to teach positively means going overboard with the praise and encouragement that we give to children. Few teachers would disagree with the general view that praise is necessary and powerful in keeping the ethos of a classroom positive. As Dreikurs and Cassel (1972) put it, ‘A child needs encouragement like a plant needs water.’ The difficulties with sustaining praise and encouragement are that not every problem can be solved by being encouraging. Being encouraging in the face of continual negative pupil behaviour, such as a pupil being sullen and muttering snide comments, can be very draining. Praise that encourages has to be believed by pupils or it is worthless. It can otherwise make children doubt the praiser (Faber and Mazlish 1980). Something else is needed, because some feedback about errors is unavoidably going to be negative, so praising effort may be no compensation whatever for failure. Over-praising, as McKay and Fanning (1992) comment, can make children feel uncomfortable because they know that they are not actually ‘brilliant’, ‘the cleverest’, ‘most generous’ pupils in the world.

**Recognising cycles of failure**

There are some children in every class who may have already made up their minds that things are not going to work for them. They have become negative despite their teacher’s attempts at enthusiastic encouragement. Previous experience influences how they feel about learning anything new or difficult. Those pupils who have had success in the past can risk trying something new, because if they fail, they have a bank-balance of previous success on which to draw. They can afford to take the knocks and try again. Other pupils are tenacious by nature and will try again regardless of setbacks. By contrast, the pupil who readily says, ‘This is stupid, I don’t want to do it’ is really saying that they have had enough or that they cannot face failing. It is likely that they are saying to themselves, ‘I’m stupid. I’m afraid that I can’t do it’, responses which can lead to their exhibiting silence at one extreme and acting out mischievously
at the other. As far as the task at hand is concerned, they minimise failure by
minimising their emotional investment in the task (Solomon 1992:58). If there
is a prophecy in the classroom, it is that there will be certain children locked into
patterns of behaviour in which they are not going to experience academic
success. Pupils, for example, who do not really want to be involved at the start of
lessons have no strong reason to listen to any instructions there happen to be. A
common pattern is: not listening, therefore not really understanding, and
consequently experiencing failure with the tasks that are set. Tasks then become
a chore, and the prize for failure may be that the teacher sets a much simpler, but
even less interesting task. The cycle continues as experiences demotivate
children and any previous willingness to be involved dissipates.

This cycle of failure naturally pushes pupils into finding other ways to
survive the school day. Some will become expert at surviving their day by
doing the minimum, manipulating teachers into giving them extra attention
and wasting time. If children have low academic self-esteem, the chances are
that instead of involving themselves in tasks, they already rely on other
strategies to feel important. What teacher has not experienced children
being a disruptive distraction, calling out and wandering across the room?
The pay-off for them is probably to be stopped and for attention and peer
approval to be directed their way. Other familiar patterns persist. Give or
take a few moments of apparent willingness, some pupils always want to do
something else instead of what they or their teacher had agreed to do. They
may even have had a say in how the task would be done, agreed they would
make a start, but soon found a more attractive distraction. This can be
anything from asking irrelevant questions of others to repairing pens, pencil
cases, arranging equipment, or even finishing another task they thought they
needed to. The alternatives to remaining on-task are endlessly subversive.
The possibilities for pupils gaining undeserved attention are what can make
teaching so difficult at times.

Concerning failure, Seligman (1990) has described a state he calls
‘learned helplessness’, where some people become convinced that whatever
they do it will make no difference. Their low tolerance of difficulty and
failure (in their own eyes) ensures that experience after experience reinforces
their belief that they cannot influence or have any control over their lives.
They learn to be helpless. What Seligman claims happens is that whenever
they feel that they have failed, their belief about failure strongly influences
their next try. Further failure pushes them towards anticipating that the next
thing they try will inevitably fail too. After several ‘failures’, they become
convinced that their lack of ability pervades far more areas of their life than
it actually does. Their beliefs about themselves become very negative and are
described by them as being permanent, using such generalised statements as
‘I’m useless’, ‘I’m hopeless at doing this’. Instead of seeing difficulties as
temporary and specific to the situation, they see them as permanent
weaknesses. They then stop trying and see themselves as incapable of success,
which of course becomes self-fulfilling as they close off any possibility of its ever happening. Plan B soon goes into operation. Alternatives to making the effort surface, and almost any distraction or withdrawn behaviour is possible. For success to be experienced a minimum requirement is genuine involvement. Seligman’s interest is in why some people still try in the face of extreme adversity rather than giving up. More promising still are ideas about how optimism can be learned (Chapter 2).

What of the way we explain failure to pupils? The educational consultant Bill Rogers describes a near disaster when he was trying to learn how to sail:

The best teacher I ever had never ever criticised my failures, but he did acknowledge them. I was learning to sail and I capsized early on. He came alongside my boat and said, ‘The boat’s in the drink, Bill. The sail’s in the water now, but when you climbed up onto the hull…’, and he’s saying this from a little dinghy and I’m coughing and spluttering in the water. ‘Bill, you climbed straight back and you remembered your overboard drill.’ He repeated it, ‘You remembered your overboard drill.’ I felt secure with that guy teaching me. First of all I felt better about the capsizing and in feeling better, you do better. Although I felt bad about capsizing, I didn’t feel so bad. Then he said, ‘Do you know what to do next?’ and I said, ‘Gee, I think so’, and he said, ‘When you’re pulling the centreboard down just let it settle a few moments and then climb back into the boat and point the sail into the wind.’ You see, he didn’t concentrate on my failures, yet the failure was very powerful as learning experience. But the failure didn’t diminish me in any way.

(Interview, 1997)

How does negative thinking feed on itself?

I have so far sketched how some pupils can be locked into cycles of negativity, experiencing failure and helplessness. These are extreme examples and most individuals manage to be something other than helpless. Extreme examples are useful for beginning to understand how positive and negative responses can feed the cycle of success or failure. Failure can breed failure unless the cycle is broken. Suzie Orbach (1997) illuminates the extreme attractions of negativity. She talks about a person’s loss of motivation and state of hopelessness as well as their helplessness.

It is much trickier to help when hopelessness has become an individual’s signature. All their experience is filtered through a channel of defeatism or of purposelessness. Nothing works out, and when it does, when opportunities arise and things get better, they can find it very hard to adapt. It’s as though there is something safe in negativity. It’s known. It’s stable. It’s reliable.

(Orbach 1997)
There are similarities to be drawn between her comments and times when teachers try to help pupils who are seriously unmotivated. Whatever the teacher suggests is turned down as being pointless in a ‘can’t do’, ‘waste of time’, ‘won’t work’ style of negative avoidance response, which is the opposite of an involved ‘could try this’. As Orbach describes, the cycle of negative experience feeding negativity can lead to a personal style which is hard for some people to give up. The negativity has become a habit, practised, familiar and a reassuringly self-protective filter.

Safety in negativity can be addictive. The pupil or teacher who says ‘I’m no good at this’ is relatively safe from possible criticism or the effects of failure because they have already declared their incompetence. Nobody can say worse if we have already said the worst about ourselves. In high-achieving individuals, ‘It’s not up to my usual standard’ can be the more subtle form of negativity. Negative comment and negative thinking protect us from what we most fear, whether it is fear of failure, fear of humiliation, fear of criticism or fear of rejection by other people (Humphreys 1996). We protect our self-esteem in whatever we do and say, sometimes intentionally annoying, even wounding other people in the process. As Humphreys explains, by labelling ourselves extremely as ‘hopeless’, or ‘no good’ at something, we reduce our own expectations of ourselves so that possible failure is not such a hammer-blow. Whenever we say to other people, ‘I’m useless a…’, it reduces their expectations of us by leading them to believe that only mistakes and failures can be expected of us.

Negative comments are a fast track to making us feel better about underlying fears of failure. By labelling others or their efforts as ‘no good, abysmal’ or ‘dreadful’ we also protect our self-esteem by affirming our sense of superiority. Negative comments about people and events can sometimes make us feel more effective and competent by virtue of comparison. Knowing this, of course, may make little difference because it seems to be a basic human mechanism for releasing our feelings of frustration. It is often a way of reaffirming belief in ourselves.

The attraction of avoiding failure is not confined to children. It is obvious to most of us, even if we think we learn from our failures, that we would rather avoid them. Similarly attractive to some pupils is avoidance of doing anything, a state which is passive, a focus of no action, and no effort. In the classroom, it may take the form of passive resistance as a pupil privately decides not to be involved. There can be a mental ‘sit this one out’ barrier to taking part in most things. Staffrooms can also be places where tensions, often between two or three individuals, produce such negativity. This can be seen in a teacher’s negative avoidance comments in a staff planning meeting. Familiar defences are remarks like ‘We did that five years ago and it didn’t work then’, ‘That never works’, ‘Why change it now?’, ‘Well, we already do that, don’t we?’ Negative tone of voice also colours comments of a relatively neutrally worded kind so that they then sound defensive or aggressively negative in tone.
Whenever anything goes wrong in the classroom, and of course it frequently does, we have little control over how we react emotionally. Experience of teaching helps us to understand classroom disasters, but the level of emotional frustration, anger or fear is actually unpredictable. Plans that go wrong, conflicts of staff interest, and pupils who underachieve or misbehave can fuel our emotions. Pupils too respond emotionally. Negative emotions can centre on their fear of feeling stupid, being made an example of, or experiencing failure again and again. John-Roger McWilliams and Peter McWilliams (1991) describe negative reactions as our fight-or-flight response to feelings of anger or fear. Our fight (anger, including anger with ourselves) causes us to complain and find fault. Our flight (fear, and underconfidence) causes us to give up and abandon things. The mind when in fight mode becomes strongly addicted to the psychological ‘high’ of being right in finding fault. I have experienced this fight/flight response myself in the context of teaching children as well as from a personal point of view. I can imagine it from the child’s perspective too. They explain:

How does negative thinking work? When the fight or flight response is triggered we look for everything that is wrong. And there’s always something wrong, so our mind filters out the positive and focuses on the negative…the chain reaction is to be enthusiastically negative, which in turn triggers even more hideous evidence, which kicks off an even stronger fight or flight response. Get the idea? Triggering the fight or flight response actually puts enormous stress on the body. The trouble is that the mind tries to find reasons for the fight/flight response…and there will always be something to be found. (McWilliams and McWilliams 1991:31)

Fight/flight responses rapidly accumulate. Frustration can lead to negative thinking, next to complaint and criticism and in turn to the next frustration, until we are almost at screaming pitch. One thing out of place triggers more and yet more. Teachers generally want children to behave in ways they find acceptable and want to establish social routines, politeness and consideration for others. Children—most children—have needs other than being polite and remembering to put things away. They want to do things like go out to play, eat lunch and talk to friends. A common trigger for frustration for anyone, including children, is to know what we already want to do, be ready to do it, then have to do something else. A short-cut to protecting ourselves, and thereby trying to head off yet more fight/flight feelings, is to become negative. In the classroom a teacher can hardly withdraw, be negative and unresponsive. It may not even be very healthy psychologically, but experienced teachers will step back daily from their negative classroom frustrations to maintain an outward semblance of sanity. The inner stress this can create is well known.

For some individuals, negative thoughts and critical comments can feed negativity because they are convincing. Negative comments, especially about ourselves and our apparent mismatch in achievement, are believable. If we can
always find something wrong in the fight/flight response, then we can always find something convincingly critical to say about ourselves. Various reasons are advanced for this, but the most common is that as children we experienced considerable importance and attention attached to behaviour parents did not want. We also experienced significant negative critical comment when we did not come up to expectations. There is a certain familiarity for us in being reminded of the criticisms of childhood. I have frequently asked myself why student teachers find it so hard to believe praise for their teaching. It is as if the inner voice of a parent says, ‘That’s not true. Don’t be so stupid. There are far better teachers than you! You’re only starting teaching so how can you possibly be any good at it?’ The shortcomings (there are always some) are there to prevent us from deserving the praise. Somewhere, the teaching fell short of perfection, short of how it ‘should have been’ and the difference cancelled out what was achieved.

I am not suggesting that negative comments can be eradicated from teaching and learning. Inevitably, pupils who go against agreed classroom rules, for example, and fall far short of reasonable expectations will experience negative comment. They may even experience punishment. In the short term this may solve any immediate problems of disruption, but how effective is it over a period of time? Derek Rollinson (1997) has concluded that within the workplace treating people in a negative way has little improving effect. Summarising his research findings, the Observer newspaper ran a headline in February 1997. This simply said, ‘Treat ’em mean and they’ll just be less keen.’ Evidence showed that most disciplinary hearings for breaking the rules do not alter the behaviour of employees for the better. Where people had infringed company rules about time keeping or fiddled expenses they were disciplined. The effect of this was that they only grudgingly decided to conform. Many of them found the experience provoked resistance to conformity and some 45 per cent thought they would still continue to break the rules. Rollinson theorised that successful use of punishment requires very strict control of the surrounding conditions and this is extremely difficult to achieve.

A conclusion that may tentatively be drawn from this is that in the longer term, criticism and punishment militate against a culture like teaching, which actually depends on co-operation. If the research is anything to go by, all that happens is that trust is destroyed. Mistrust subsequently conditions how the individual views the workplace and the managers in it. An intriguing finding in Rollinson’s research was that co-operation, and ownership of the problem, were involved in what he regarded as successful disciplinary procedures. As he explained, ‘To be successful in improving an individual’s behaviour, the manager has to get the person to admit they should not have broken the rule, and then ask them what they are going to do about it. So the person becomes the author of their own code of conduct.’
Positive thinking, switching focus

I began by describing how Sophie improved and how the story of her success has stayed with me. A question that remains is whether criticism and self-critical comment erode self-esteem or are simply a way of being realistic. When are negative thinking and criticism just the stark reality of the situation? Negative thinking may, as Humphreys reminds, be ‘protective thinking’, a way of defending self-esteem against possible or actual threat (Humphreys 1996). That sounds real enough. John-Roger McWilliams and Peter McWilliams (1991) are against positive thinking if it denies reality. So are Ellis (1994) and Seligman (1990). They are in favour of recognising disasters and difficulties, then switching focus to concentrate on the positive. They are against ‘being positive’ about everything in sight. The difference between positive thinking at all costs and switching focus from negative to positive is truly one of description. The emphasis on reality is exactly what the story of learning to sail exemplifies. The boat had capsized and the sail was in the water, but fortunately we remembered our overboard drill. The sailing teacher made no attempt to label or judge at the point of disaster. He simply described the reality and pulled the positive ‘you remembered your overboard drill’ into the foreground.

Learning to switch focus to concentrate on the positive has two stages, both of which are important for classroom practice. First, we learn that negative actions and reactions are often (though not always) individuals’ ways of protecting themselves. Understanding that, we may grow to feel less personally threatened by their comments because they need not be taken at face value. Second, we can become better at looking for ways to describe success and failure, changing the negative critic for a healthier one. This is particularly important concerning perceptions of failure, since the effect on self-esteem can lead to passivity, anger or hopelessness. Thinking in a positive way can be difficult. Positive thoughts are there, but it is as if sometimes they are waiting for us to stop criticising long enough to hear them.

KEY POINTS

• Whatever difficulty appears, it is not permanent and pervasive, but specific and temporary.
• Positive teaching requires us to develop a ‘high hope’ factor for pupil success.
• Positive teaching is unlikely to be a matter of describing failures as successes, though it is certainly about pulling descriptions of success into the foreground.
• Positive teaching concerns the way we handle feedback, particularly negative feedback intended to draw attention to areas in need of improvement.
• Low self-esteem, although thought of as a general state of being, actually relates to more specific situations.
• Self-blame leads directly to low self-esteem.
• Negative thinking creates resentment if it is in the form of destructive criticism.
• Negative thinking threatens self-esteem, including our own.
• Negative actions and reactions are most probably an individual’s way of protecting him- or herself.
• We can become better at looking for ways to describe success and failure, changing the negative critic for a more healthy one.


McWilliams, John-Roger and McWilliams, Peter (1991) *You Can’t Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought*. London: Thorsons.


