

Using positive psychology to manage tensions in international classrooms at tertiary education levels

Ioana Kocurova-Giurgiu, Emil Velinov

Abstract: Different models from positive psychology have been successfully employed to boost student engagement and increase learning capacity. With conflict, either at individual level as well as group or national level becoming more a norm than an exception in various contexts, this paper aims to explore and illustrate how positive psychology can be used to keep mixed groups of students – Czechs, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans, Kazaks, Slovaks – interested, engaged, focused and feeling safe in volatile and unpredictable times.

The model discussed is being applied in language classrooms at the Skoda Auto University in the Czech Republic to foster engagement but particularly to keep spirits high in these troubling times. The paper aims to illustrate how Seligman's PERMA model prevailed in maintaining a sense of normality in the classroom.

Focused on enhancing positive emotional responses, PERMA is also an improved predictor of psychological distress. This means that proactively working on the components of PERMA not only increases aspects of wellbeing, but also decreases psychological distress which is crucial not only in fostering learning but mostly in establishing a relationship in the classroom that will allow mixed groups of students to work together toward common projects and share accomplishments, regardless of detrimental factors as stress, fear, disengagement or even prejudice. The study will show that a simple shift from the learner to the educator, creating a sense of safety and acceptance for the student and a personal positive approach are key elements to dissolving conflictual situations and foster engagement, inclusion and a love of learning.

This paper explores how all these aspects translate into the classroom. While the case studies are chosen from language and competencies courses, the lessons learned can be reproduced for other types of courses regardless of the topic.

Key words: positive psychology, education, practice, classroom management

1 Introduction: the PERMA Framework

PERMA stands for Positivity, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment, has been used quite extensively in the last years to promote learning and wellbeing both inside and outside the classroom, particularly with underprivileged groups. Developed by Dr. Martin Seligman (2014), it aims to help people "flourish" while promoting thriving through positive psychology. Unlike traditional psychology which looks at what is wrong with people, positive psychology looks at what is right with them. Regarding the conflict in the classroom and its management, it is rather safe to say that in applying positive psychology, the tutor or students will not look for someone to blame but rather look at how someone's

positive traits can be used and applied to further manage and avoid conflict. In other words, rather than pointing out what started the conflict and punishing the person, we are trying to reengage with them and allow them a safe space to see how they can remedy the situation without causing further damage. Moreover, we are also aiming to create a space for further learning. The theory has many limitations to the point that some researchers in fact argue that PERMA does not meet the criteria for a well-established theory (van Zyl and Ten Klooster 2022). Nonetheless, it is the experience of the authors of this paper that despite its limitations, PERMA is an excellent tool to manage conflict, prevent it and promote a safe space in the classroom. Unlike existing literature that focuses on what the students can do to enhance PERMA, this paper aims to illustrate what teachers can do to promote well-being. Morgan and Simmons (2021) have run a full study as a response to the online education environment during the COVID pandemic. In the study they focused on 8 week – 1 hour sessions of activities aiming at gratitude and “counting blessings”, resilience, stress management and hope. Most exercises and activities required the students to reflect on themselves and their environment, as it usually happens with PERMA activities. A popular task is writing a thank you letter in which the participant focuses on the good aspects in their relationships with others or themselves. In all these situations, lecturers, professors or trainers are perceived as powerful because they are leading and ensuring the students complete the tasks. This may also have negative implications if learners are reluctant to disclose personal feelings or information. (Morgan, Simmons 2021)

In the following lines we will look at what is PERMA and how it can be applied in the classroom both for learning as well as for conflictual situations without putting the student in the limelight. We will also illustrate a few key moments in our teaching and how applying PERMA helped us and our students reset and reengage in the course as well as reconnect with their peers and the course trainer. This paper aims to further illustrate how positive psychology can be a fruitful path in learning, both in foreign language acquisition or CLIL, as well as in maintaining a safe space in the classroom in troubled times. It adds to existing research on how PERMA is applied while taking a different approach. Unlike traditional uses of PERMA in which the focus is on the learner and how they can be prompted through various activities to heighten their character strengths, in this paper we are using critical incidents to illustrate how the teacher can employ PERMA principles to create a safe space for learners to thrive both academically as well as emotionally.

2 Literature review

2.1 What is PERMA?

This theory is based on positive psychology and it relies on five major pillars to help humans, in the words of Dr. Seligman, flourish (2014). The dimensions which are later divided into character strengths are: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments.

Schools and education generally have two purposes: a traditional one which focuses on producing learning and an additional one that aims to improve wellbeing as reflected in PERMA. "Learning is, in some ways, subsumed by the A in PERMA. But very importantly the P, the positive emotion, the engagement, how good your relationships are with the teacher, and the meaning all amplify the A." (Seligman 2014: KIPP)

This difference between the theory of happiness and the theory of wellbeing is really topical. The theory of happiness states that we make decisions is to estimate how much happiness (life satisfaction) will be achieved and then take the path that maximizes future happiness: maximizing happiness is the final common path of individual choice. This is a crucial aspect that is central to PERMA in terms of how teachers will approach classroom management, conflict management and ultimately learning and teaching.

2.2 Character strengths

Unlike traditional psychology which focuses on finding what is wrong and fixing it, in positive psychology we are looking after what is good in the individual and how that can make them stronger. The distinction is that in the former we aim to repair the damage while in the latter the goal is to prevent it. This is an essential important aspect for wellbeing and it can be easily extrapolated to education and classroom management. "People who have the opportunity to focus on their strengths every day are 6 times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and more than 3 times as likely to report having an excellent quality of life in general." (Polly 2016)

According to Linley (2010) a strength is a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance.

Park and Peterson (2006) found moderate convergence between self- and teacher-reported character strengths and claimed that certain strengths may be more readily observable in the classroom than others. This is particular to phase-based strengths that are displayed only when the situation demands it (as bravery, for

instance). Conversely, tonic strengths can be displayed in any situation – as per Peterson and Seligman (2004), kindness would be an example of that.

Although they may vary in how frequently they are displayed, character strengths lay in obvious behavior, and, as a result, they should also contribute to positive behavior in the classroom.

Social intelligence, as another strength proved to help manage conflict and relationships with colleagues relating as such to the social aspects of the positive classroom. Among these aspects we can mention cooperation and being a team player. Interpersonal strengths, as empirically proven by Shoshani and Slone (2013), are related with high social functioning at school, and as rated by teachers, might represent positive classroom behavior.

2.3 PERMA in the classroom

Peterson (2006: 25) suggests that positive psychology is “not a spectator sport”, and that this scientific field has signed up to create interventions to help and develop personal growth. In terms of what is happening in the classroom, emotion-centered activities may empower positive transformation and growth among students through the acquisition of essential life skills, therefore fostering a beneficial impact on the individual and their surroundings through emotion contagion (Hatfield et al. 1994).

As mentioned in most studies on the topic, creating a safe space emotionally and nurturing safety overall in learners should be achieved not just at an individual level but also at an institutional one. Gabryś-Barker (2016) explored the potential of applying positive psychology activities as an institutional component, to enhance the emotional climate in the classroom, particularly in the language classroom. Their conclusion was that teachers who can understand and use positive psychology knowledge and techniques to adjust their teaching are positively influencing their and their students’ well-being. Awareness of the indicators of a positive classroom atmosphere and understanding that both the teacher and students are contributing to it were defining factors in achieving a state of flourishing.

Some tips recommended by the authors highlight a form of mutual responsibility for creating a positive learning environment as well as fruitful relationships between trainers and learners. Another aspect focuses on supporting the emotional needs of the students and engaging them in activities that foster experience sharing, such as collaborative assignments or simple small talk. All these would contribute to consolidating safe spaces where the students feel positively about learning but furthermore, it would allow for a “brave space” (Arao and Clemens 2013) where learning is done despite the potential conflict that might arise as a result of student interaction and expression of opinions or values.

Holly and Steiner (2005) have concluded that “the vast majority of students consider the creation of a safe space to be a very or extremely important and that the majority of students perceive that they learn in such a classroom.” (p. 64)

Fostering a sense of belonging that is strong is crucial because it is associated in a positive manner with drive and academic success (Freeman et al. 2017) To do so, it is vital that the trainer or teacher is able to navigate conflict in the classroom as smoothly as possible and turn such moments into teachable ones as they are paramount in dealing with challenging behaviors in the classroom. According to research, students will pick on clues from teachers on how to react in tense moments. As such, ignoring challenging behaviors can further marginalize students, and destroy chances to promote mutual understanding, and disperse stereotypes (Sue et al. 2009; Bergom et al. 2011). It is also recommended to “funnel (...) emotions into useful dialogue” (Ambrose et al. 2010: 184), especially if conflict is escalating. One way to approach this is by encouraging students to take a different perspective or giving them a window to acknowledge and take ownership of their reactions, thoughts or feelings. Another beneficial tool is the use of micro-affirmations and turning them into actions. According to Powel l et al. (2013) these may include: active listening, affirming students’ emotions, and recognizing and validating their experiences.

As shown later in the critical incidents we have chosen, some of these aspects have been successfully employed by the teachers in the classroom to both manage conflict, create a safe space as well as an opportunity for learning.

3 Methodology

The methodology used to illustrate our hypothesis regarding a need for creating a safe space using positive psychology to help students thrive in the classroom relies on the use of critical incidents. For the purposes of efficiency and relevance, only two relevant examples are illustrated here. The technique used is the critical incident technique (CIT) which focuses mainly on the consequences of an incident, may they be either positive or negative (Stauss 1995).

Critical events in a classroom situation provide opportunities for rich analysis of classroom practices (Woods, 2012). In education, Woods (1993) writes that critical incidents (CIs) accelerate learning and understanding, that they are crucial to life-change, as well as defining the reality and identity for the experienter. Documenting and analyzing such events has also become a set component part of reflexive practice. Because CIs are a commonly used tool in research on teaching as well as social sciences, to describe and make sense of significant moments in professional practice, for the purposes of both research and professional development (Woods, 1993), this paper uses the same technique. Nonetheless, in this way,

CIs are generally approached retrospectively. When they recall these instances, participants, in our case – teachers, identify particular situations deeply impactful on mind as well as their professional actions (Woods, 1993).

Edvardson (1995) claims that data collection can be done in three ways: focus groups (interviews), personal interviews, or via observatory or direct participation. In the case of this paper, the technique used was direct participatory observation described later in narratives done by the party involved in the incident.

4 Study - Illustration of PERMA on the teacher's side in conflictual situations

4.1 Critical incident 1: Case illustration on conflict and inclusion

This critical incident is particularly relevant mainly because it happened within a few weeks from the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, amongst claims that Belarus will support Russia. The central figure of this incident is a Belarussian citizen who studies in Slovakia but participated in one-semester exchange through Erasmus+ at our institution. They took part in a CLIL course on soft skills and communication called Business Communication Competences. Among other topics, the course introduces the idea of communication styles and differences between personalities and genders. This particular aspect was the trigger of the conflictual situation as the student disagreed on the fact that we should cater to each other's communication styles, particularly if there was a male/female conjunction. It is worth mentioning that this incident happened around the first 3 weeks of the semester and the initial encounter with the student was by all accounts a pleasant one on both the sides of the trainer as well as the learner.

While in the classroom, the lessons in this course are interactive. A lot of the students have already had their mandatory internships by this time, so it is a common practice to use their experience and knowledge to illustrate communication situations in business or share ways to overcome challenges as such based on their real practice or exchange of ideas with their peers under the guidance of the teacher. In one such instance in which communication differences were discussed, the issue of style was brought up as an obstacle in communication between genders. One point was that women should communicate more directly with men. This was clearly a triggering point for the student who blatantly disagreed almost to the point of being rude. Furthermore, their attitude sparked a heated conversation about gender issues which was completely off-topic for the course at hand, as well as the lesson itself. Nonetheless, the strong dynamic of the conversation was a good opportunity to observe if there were other underlying issues. Moreover, it allowed for intense language development as many issues needed to be expressed

in English, the instruction language of the course. As such, the course trainer decided to let the conversation take its course.

Two other students, one Slovak, the other Kazak, took over the discussion with the student trying to explain the scientific value of their claims. At the same time, the latter aggressively and dismissively refused to listen or even consider their points of view. The fact that examples of “male toxicity” as portrayed by Russian and Belarusian leaders were used to highlight communication differences was not particularly helpful. At this point, the student is clearly overwhelmed by the adverse reaction they got to their ideas but instinctively remains steady in their conviction. Effective communication in a foreign language as well as emotion management had become increasingly difficult for the person.

The teacher tried to bring the discussion back to the topic and calm the participants. However, under the unfavorable atmosphere, the student questioned the teacher’s qualifications and ability to teach based on where the teacher had studied. It was a blatant display of xenophobia and ethnical disregard on their side, even more so as it was done in front of the entire class. Needless to say, the conflict was nowhere near being under control and at this point it included a figure of authority in terms of classroom management.

This was a moment of choice. The teacher could dismiss the student for being rude, unprofessional, racist or xenophobic and leave the whole situation as a bitter experience at the risk of creating further frustration. In reality, many of the students who were in class and discussed the incident later, mentioned that the teacher’s perceived lack of authority might have allowed the student to express such strong opinions in the first place. The lecturer allowed this aspect because the student exercised one of the twenty-four character strengths – bravery despite the rather inappropriate delivery.

As the conflictual situation escalated the course teacher approached the situation from a positive perspective, focusing on the freedom of speech and healthy exchange of opinions in academia. As a result, they acknowledged the student’s frustration vis-à-vis what they perceived to be a put down for women in a patriarchal society, as well as validated the points the student made regarding mutual respect and equality regardless of gender, and that we should treat one another as equal human beings. Through this, the aim was to call in the student’s strength of character focused on kindness. Throughout the conversation, the student was helped to find the words to more specifically express their thoughts.

The teacher also chose to respectfully explain that some of the student’s comments might reveal the fact that she might be dwelling in bigotry. This was a light-bulb moment for the student who instantly started to calm down. It was also a key point in the conflict for the teacher, as it allowed for a learning moment.

Encouraging the class, the teacher asked students to contribute with scientific articles to prove or disprove theories on gender differences in communication to allow for a more balanced overview of the issue. Through this aspect, the focus shifted to fostering curiosity and developing a love of learning. Furthermore, it gave the students more opportunities to enquire information in a foreign language and practice both receptive and productive skills.

Within a week from the incident, the course had a mini database of peer reviewed research which had been read, curated and summarized and shared by and with the students. This was a moment in which other students along with the lecturer, exercised another character strength, wisdom, by accepting that a different idea from their own may weigh more in making the right decisions or getting a critical image of certain contexts.

4.2 Critical incident 2: Case illustration on diversity perceptions

In 2018, the co-author of this paper, was teaching Diversity Management to full-time bachelor students in Latvia when they faced a significant challenge in terms of students' perceptions from former Soviet countries on Diversity Management. The entire course was delivered in the English language but many of the students taking the course were from former Soviet Union countries, where the framework of LGBTIQ+ and same-sex marriages are taboo and not nested at all in the cultures and legislative frameworks within these countries. The students have been taught or informed about these diversity and inclusion issues in the past, but the topic is completely forbidden to be brought to debate in public. Therefore, the professor faced immense challenges in bringing the issues to the students' attention and particularly in increasing their awareness of these aspects. Bringing such controversial topics to live and moreover creating a space for tolerance and inclusion in the minds of youngsters who have been actively sheltered from the issues required more than plane lecturing in the classroom. It primarily required a sense of trust and rapport with the professor. Being on a time crunch, finding a solution to build that safe space as quickly as possible was paramount. Keeping an open attitude and a positive vibe in the classroom was highly important. At this point it became clear to the professor that the fastest way to close the cultural and communicative gap was to switch languages. This is particularly a happy case as the lecturer was able to speak Russian so deciding to change the language of instruction to highlight key information and additional explanation to approach students at a more individual level seemed a no-brainer.

Readjusting terminology and explanations to these bachelor study students in order to be understood correctly and in compliance with their cultural framework turned out to be the way to tap into their willingness to learn and engage. The professor used real examples from personal and professional life, focusing on

positive and personal language support, so they could build rapport and a strong teaching-learning relationship with the students, which would yield efficient and effective results in the classroom. The change in the classroom atmosphere was perceptible as the students gradually started to think differently from the mainstream and they grasped the key critical concepts of diversity and the language that comes with it.

5 Findings

PERMA, applied in the described situations, made students feel heard, enhancing the relationship with their peers, engaging them for the rest of the course as they consistently delivered quality work throughout the semester.

A conflictual situation that might have escalated further and alienated a national from a country that was already in the crosshairs, through a positive approach on the side of the teacher, has de facto turned into a circumstance that yielded curiosity, a desire to learn more and collaborate to find enough information to achieve that goal. Finally, it led to a student's feedback after the course: "A subject that is not difficult, but brought me a lot of knowledge in a normal/business environment; very positive assessment – this subject was very interesting and very rewarding" (savs.cz, 2022)

In terms of how PERMA worked in these cases, the focus was mainly on positive emotion and meaning which drove engagement and relationships. This goes to show that simply by being present and willing to make small adjustments while keeping the main goal in mind – in our case as teachers, coaching and guiding – we can shift the academic paradigm to a more wellbeing focused one that does foster academic skills and interests in the real sense of the word. In this manner, we help our learners build courage, zest, honesty, resilience, and a willingness to learn. Above all, as repeatedly mentioned by the participants in both courses, the sense of a safe space where their voices are acknowledged without discredit, created a will to learn and a drive to foster similar environments in other areas of their personal and professional lives. We achieved this by shifting the focus from having the students reflect on situations that foster PERMA, to quickly adapting to unplanned situations. As educators, we noticed that when approaching problematic events with a positive attitude and an a will to yield character strengths in the students, we invite the learners to join us in finding a solution, and be part of the learning process, as well as cultivate and strengthen wellbeing aspects in themselves.

6 Discussion and limitations

There are studies arguing the validity of PERMA and positive psychology, saying that positive psychological assessment measures produce inconsistent factorial structures, a varying level of intentional consistency, are culturally biased and produce a questionable level of predictive validity (van Zyl and Ten Klooster 2022). While this may be true, the current collection of critical incidents we have selected, tends to show otherwise.

However, the study opened further paths for more concrete research and it is our recommendation to pursue them with a more specific framework that would keep in mind biases, intentional behavior and consistency. It might be beneficial to rerun interviews with the same subjects over a couple of years to compare if the recollection of the facts and their emotional response stayed the same. Another idea might be to run such studies in and outside conflictual situations in the classroom and see how perception might change in terms of how efficient PERMA principles might be.

The authors also suggest that studying the relationship of character strengths in relation to other outcomes in the classroom, such as positive relationships with teachers and with peers, should rely on more empirical data (cf. Quinlan et al. 2015). School positive effect could act as liaison between particular character strengths such as social intelligence or tenacity, positive school functioning, and academic success. (Weber et al. 2014) The most pertinent mechanisms of each of the character strengths associated with education, could be determined if further research would be conducted with the dimensions of positive experiences together with the relationships in the classroom, at the core of the study.

7 Conclusions

The critical incidents presented have clearly shown the importance of creating a safe space emotionally and psychologically, as well as the benefits of this for learning and personal development. Moreover, using PERMA to approach these aspects provides quite a clear framework that allows for on-point interventions and can be easily applied without much training required on the side of the teacher as a lot of the aspects are within one's personality as well as professional skills.

The current paper aimed to illustrate that by teachers using PERMA and positive psychology, conflict in the classroom cannot only be avoided, but moreover, it can be used as a learning opportunity. It can also provide the students with chances to exercise their character strengths and develop new ones. These aspects are the cornerstone of flourishing and well-being. By understanding the PERMA principles and creating a space for conversation and learning, teachers can foster inclusive

and diverse contexts that yield tolerance, acceptance and understanding. In the current educational environment such facets are not just buzzwords, but real interests of the newer generations. They are crucial in how learning, socializing, and integration is done. Miller and Murray (2005) agree that when students are “supported by positive institutional experiences that strengthen their self-esteem and self-efficacy, these students overcome the negative effects attributed to at-risk factors.”

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Authors

Mgr. Ioana Kocurova-Giurgiu, MA, e-mail: ext.ioana.giurgiu@savs.cz, is a visiting lecturer at Skoda Auto University in the Czech Republic teaching skill courses from communication skills to academic focus. One of her main interests is to create a safe environment in her classes that fosters engagement and further learning and promotes free conversations. Using positive psychology, she encourages students to collaborate, to teach and assess each other. Currently, she is interested in motivation and motivating factors in the learning process focusing her attention on student interaction and immersion learning while promoting positive emotion, strengthening relationships in the classroom and focusing on meaningful tasks with clear accomplishments.

Ing. Emil Velinov PhD., e-mail: emil.velinov@savs.cz, currently works at the Department of Marketing and Management, Skoda Auto University. His most recent publication is TMT Digitalization and Firm Internationalization. Emil Velinov was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he graduated from the Faculty of Business Economics, in the field of study Industrial Management (Ing.), followed by the Master degree (MSc.) in Production and Operations Management. He is also a frequent visiting professor at universities across Europe, delivering courses and workshops on diversity and management particularly in the light of digitalization in the 21st century.