

What Behavioral Changes Can I Make to Inspire Enthusiasm in My Classroom?

Presented by:

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Flower Darby is passionate about student success through engaging, innovative teaching approaches, and effective instructional design. She has taught at NAU for over 20 years in areas ranging from English literature to educational technology to dance to Pilates. She loves to apply teaching and learning principles across the disciplines, both in her classes and in those of the faculty she supports. Darby is a Quality Matters master reviewer and presents internationally on online and blended course design.



Editor's Note:

This is a written transcript of an audio recording. Our policy is to edit only the occasional unintelligible phrase. Everything else appears as it was spoken.

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Hi, I'm Flower Darby. And today we're going to talk about how we can inspire and motivate our students through emotions.

You know, sometimes we think that we should leave emotions out of our teaching and learning processes, that academics should be a cold and rational pursuit of knowledge. But I'm going to argue today that emotions can really impact our students and deepen learning. And so we'll look at some ways of deliberately introducing the emotional process and capturing the emotional attention of our students in order to inspire them, to share our enthusiasm, to motivate them to learn our content.

If you think about it, we are highly emotional beings. It's who we are as humans. Emotions are strong and moving, and it doesn't make sense to leave these out of the learning process.

In fact, recent neuroscience has shown that emotion and cognition are closely related. You can't separate them. Emotions impact our cognitive abilities. So why not harness that power? Why not bring it into our classes and take advantage of the impact that emotions can have on student learning and success?

Think for just a minute with me. Think back to a motivating, inspiring teacher in your past. What defined that individual? Well, I bet it was the passion that he or she brought into the classroom. And we all have that. We wouldn't be teaching if we didn't care about our content, about our students' success. And we have the potential to powerfully impact our students' lives, for better or for worse. So let's be intentional about bringing our passion, our enthusiasm, our love for what we do, and embrace that opportunity in our in-person and our online classes.

If you think about it, emotions are really powerful. They get our attention and they hold our attention. Fear, for example-- if you were to come across a poisonous spider and your immediate knee-jerk reaction is that fight-or-flight, that adrenaline, it gets your attention and it can be a safety measure, right? Gets you out of there. In fact, research has shown that we react before we've even actually processed what the danger is.

So emotions are hardwired into us to grab our attention. We know that we're competing for our students' attention, right? They have a lot going on in their lives, on their devices. And if we want to retain that attention, let's bring emotions into it.

Emotions also foster empathy. We can relate to one another at a deeper level. We can understand the human experience. We can see the other person's point of view when emotions are brought into it.

Emotions sustain our interest. They capture our heartstrings. Any advertising executive knows this. You introduce the little puppy into the ad, and all of a sudden, you've got your customers' attention and willingness to engage.

So what can we do? I don't mean to be trite. But how can we deliberately invoke emotional appeals to make our content more meaningful?

And again, emotions can be very powerful motivators, and they can also demotivate our students as well. When students are enjoying the process, they want to be there. They want to learn. They want to dig in.

But if they are hating the process, guess what? The opposite is true. They struggle to engage in class activities if it's boring, if it's irrelevant, if it's-- sometimes there's feelings of anxiety and frustration that come into our classes on the part of our students. And when those emotions are present, it significantly negatively impacts motivation. So let's look at ways that we can be intentional to foster a positive experience, cultivate the students' emotional engagement, in order to promote the best learning that we can.

Today we're talking primarily about what we do as instructors that impacts the emotional climate of our classroom. If you think about it, we all bring our emotions into class. And again, this can be in the physical classroom or in the online environment.

We are people. Don't let our students know that, OK? That's just between you and me. But we are people, and we have emotions, and they impact our day. And they impact our teaching. So acknowledge that, and then let's be deliberate about whether and how to bring that particular emotion into class.

Let's think about ways of harnessing the passion that we have. And when we come to class, let's cultivate our enthusiasm. Let's project optimism. Let's deliberately promote the positive attitude that we have to our content.

Now, I know. Sometimes we get into a bit of a rut. We may have been teaching the class for several semesters or years. Sometimes we're assigned to teach content that isn't the most interesting to us personally. But there's something that we can bring into every class, into every class meeting, into every online discussion, to promote that enthusiasm and that optimism for our content and for our students.

I'm going to encourage you to share your passion. So teach what you love. If you are assigned to teach a class that's less than engaging for you personally, there are still ways to bring your passion, your enthusiasm into it. Can you come up with some stories that really got your attention? Personal experience, anecdotes, examples?

Can you relate your class content to real world case studies that are emotionally charged and moving? Current events? Can you bring those into the classroom to show students how the content impacts them personally, how it's relevant, how it's important? Look for ways to bring your own passion into every class meeting?

And here's another thing. Try to be likeable. I know that might sound a little odd. It's not a popularity contest. But when students like us, they are more motivated. It's a fact. If they like us and respect us and enjoy speaking with us and interacting with us, they're more likely to come to

our classes in the first place. Attendance can be a challenge, as we all know. They're more likely to engage willingly and more deeply in class activities.

So again, it's not a popularity contest, but there are things that we can all do to promote a certain level of likeability. When we're more likeable, you know, again, students are more motivated, engaged. They're more inspired.

So smile at your students. Ask them how their day is going. Demonstrate that you care about them as people. Again, a well-kept secret-- our students are people, too. And they have lives and they have emotions and they have concerns, and when you demonstrate that you care about those things, then we're promoting our likeability, so to speak.

And there are specific behaviors that we can do to foster this, as well. Practice immediacy. Immediacy is a set of behaviors that demonstrates to our students that we are present with them, we are engaged with them, we are there and interested and caring.

Now, if you think about it, standing behind a lectern and reading your lecture notes in a monotone and engaging in very little eye contact, it's almost like putting up a wall between you and your students. There's no connection. So immediacy refers to a set of practices where we deliberately try to move around the room, where we deliberately make eye contact, where we smile, where we engage with our students and demonstrate through nonverbal behaviors that we're there for them. And we're there with them, learning right alongside and sharing that passion that got us into teaching in the first place.

Now, another strategy that we can embrace is to develop our public speaking skills. So I know there are some skeptics out there who are saying, I'm not here to entertain my students and I'm not a naturally dynamic presenter, or I'm not a very charismatic teacher, and I don't have to be. I bring the content. I bring the knowledge.

Well, again, I'm going to ask us to reconsider that. Our students especially-- I'm referring to our in-person classes-- they're a captive audience. And put yourself in their shoes. If the content itself doesn't naturally engage you-- maybe it's a requirement that they're meeting. Maybe they're a non-major. If they're in a room with somebody who just hasn't made any effort to presenting effectively, then that's really going to limit their motivation, their attention, their ability to engage.

So in order to inspire and motivate our students, there are strategies that we can employ. Even if you're not the most naturally bubbly person, or even if you're not a stand-up comic in front of your students, there are things that we can do. For example, vary your vocal tone and your delivery style. So use emphasis in your voice. Change the range and even the timing. You might choose to pause for dramatic effect or to give students time to think. You might repeat a really important point. But change up the way that you're talking and make the effort to do that.

Also, think about your nonverbal behaviors and what those are communicating to students. So think about your body language. It can be the case that when we're not mindful of it, maybe we have a thoughtful face, but it ends up looking like a frown or a negative emotion is being

expressed through our facial features. Instead, deliberately make the effort to smile, to make that eye contact. These are things that all of us can do, regardless of our personality, to bring the inspiration into the classroom, to engage our students' emotions.

Another thing that we want to think about in the class-- again, whether this is in-person or online-- is something called emotional contagion. This is a phenomenon in which the emotions that we bring can impact the people around us. And this is a well-known fact that the crowd of people can all be moved by the emotions that some people are feeling. So for example, cheerleaders take advantage of this when they try to rouse up the crowd to a frenzy to cheer on the team.

But we need to be aware of emotional contagion, as well. We can impact the emotional climate of the room when we bring a positive attitude, when we deliberately decide to leave any negative emotions outside the door. Sure, we all have bad days. We're impacted by sad or upsetting events in our day. But we can choose to try to leave that out, and therefore we don't poison the atmosphere in the room. When we bring our own positive, optimistic enthusiasm, that affects our students. And so let's do that.

We can bring in enjoyable learning activities to foster a positive sense among the students, to engage their attention. We don't want to have fun just for fun's sake. But when we align activities to our course and session objectives, if there is a way to do that in a fun or interesting or engaging way, why not? Can you design a game-like element to engage your students with your content, give them opportunities to practice, and have a little bit of fun, as well?

Another way that we can bring a positive emotion in order to engage our students is to design for control and value. And what I mean here is that giving students some control over the activities that they're engaging in and showing them the relevance of what they're doing so that they value it. These are ways that you can help students to enjoy what they're doing, to feel optimistic and confident and have a positive sense of their ability to succeed in your class, which is motivating. If we think we can't succeed, we won't try. But if we're optimistic and confident, then we engage more willingly and more readily.

Now, one thing that we can do in our classes is to target what's called knowledge emotions. So here, there are three primary emotions that are more closely connected to cognitive processes. One of them is curiosity. And for this, we can ask really great engaging questions of our students.

We can ask them to make predictions. We can say, what do you think is going to be the outcome of this scenario? What do you think might happen in this case? And that, it naturally engages our curiosity and our students' curiosity.

There is a great exercise simply called "I wonder." Project an image related to your content on the screen and ask your students to speculate, just to answer, to fill in that sentence stem. "I wonder." What might that engage? What might that inspire?

Another knowledge emotion is interest. And this makes sense. If we're interested in something, aren't we more likely to engage with it in a deeper and more meaningful way? If we couldn't care less about something, isn't it the case that we're not going to do that? So look for ways to intentionally foster your students' interest.

Again, we want to offer activities to the students that are relevant to their pursuits, that they can see a personal connection to and the value of how that's going to impact them. Offer them choices so that they can choose something-- a project, a task, a topic that is naturally more interesting to them, maybe for their personal pursuits, hobbies, what have you. If you give them choice, they'll be more interested.

And the third knowledge emotion that we can target is flow. Now, I don't have time to go into it at length here, but this is an interesting phenomenon in which we are so engaged in our pursuit that we lose our sense of self. We become immersed in the experience, and it can be highly motivating. It can be very challenging, but the reward and that sense of positive achievement can be impactful once we have completed that activity.

So you can foster flow in your class by really thinking carefully about the level of challenge that you're asking your students to do. To engage or to promote that sense of flow, activities need to be kind of right at the top end of the challenging spectrum. Not too hard to defeat them, but not boring and not challenging, either. So we want to really challenge our students to step up and work hard, and then enjoy the sense of accomplishment when we've succeeded in that task.

Now, keep in mind that any time we're dealing with emotions, there's risk, OK? Emotions are a powerful tool. But that also makes them dangerous. They can be a double-edged sword.

So just remember that negative emotions can be even more powerful than positive emotions. And you can use this intentionally, cautiously, or you can also anticipate that there might come up some things that students are going to react badly to. And you want to plan for those.

So think about their past experiences. Where might there be some trauma in a student's life? You can't anticipate everything. But when we design for emotion, it's important to anticipate a negative response, as well.

And speaking of a negative response, let's think just for a moment about what our students are bringing into our classes. Now, students are at a very highly emotionally charged point in their lives. Our traditional students are young. They're uncertain about their career paths. They're engaged in social acceptance in a way that some of us older folks don't worry so much about anymore. There's emotional situations with roommates and with romantic interests, and there's just a lot going on for our students.

So that all impacts their daily experience. And let's face it. They can have a lot of anxiety about our classes, in-person or online. They're bringing stress, uncertainty. They don't know if they'll succeed. They don't know if they're going to do what you want them to do. What can we do to consciously and deliberately minimize the anxiety that our students are bringing?

Well, lots of things. Show your empathy for your students. Let them know that you understand and you care and you support them. You can make sure that your students know that the activities that you have designed are purposeful, that there is a reason that you're asking them to do what they're doing. They should be legitimate. Students can detect when we're asking them to do busy work or meaningless tasks, and that increases anxiety and frustration. You can be very transparent with your students about why you're asking them to do it, how it benefits course goals or personal career and academic goals, as well.

In order to further minimize anxiety and reduce that negativity, we can clarify our expectations, so that students know exactly how to be successful. We can establish rapport, again, so that students know that we are people and we care about them. We can build those relationships. And we can also be very careful about how we design group work.

This is a major source of anxiety for our students, if we're honest. I think we all know how students can struggle with group projects and the social dynamics and the slacker student. And there's a lot of stress that group projects can put on students. So being intentional about how we design that group work can minimize the anxiety from the outset-- things like establishing a team contract, where all the people on the project are agreeing to the norms and the consequences. Things like being really intentional with your grading of the group project-- is it the case that all the members get the exact same grade, even if there was one student who didn't participate? Encouraging your students or with your students to decide what happens if somebody falls down on the job-- can that student be fired from the group? Is instructor intervention appropriate?

What are the steps that we're going to take? And when we prepare the group projects very carefully, that minimizes the anxiety. And let's be frank-- when we minimize those negative emotions, we have the opportunity to maximize the positive emotions.

So think with me now. What can you try in class next week? Are you going to work on making more eye contact? Smiling more? Asking your students how their day is going? How can you communicate empathy tomorrow?

And then longer term, thinking about your next semester, how can you design that emotion in? What can you personally bring to your class to ignite your students' interest, to share your passion, in order to engage and capture their emotional interest and attention?

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