

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

A *Strengths Approach to Online Teaching*

Too often we approach new tasks, especially in the area of technology, by focusing on what we cannot do. Sally Kuhlenschmidt envisions how teaching an online class would proceed if we started from our particular strengths.

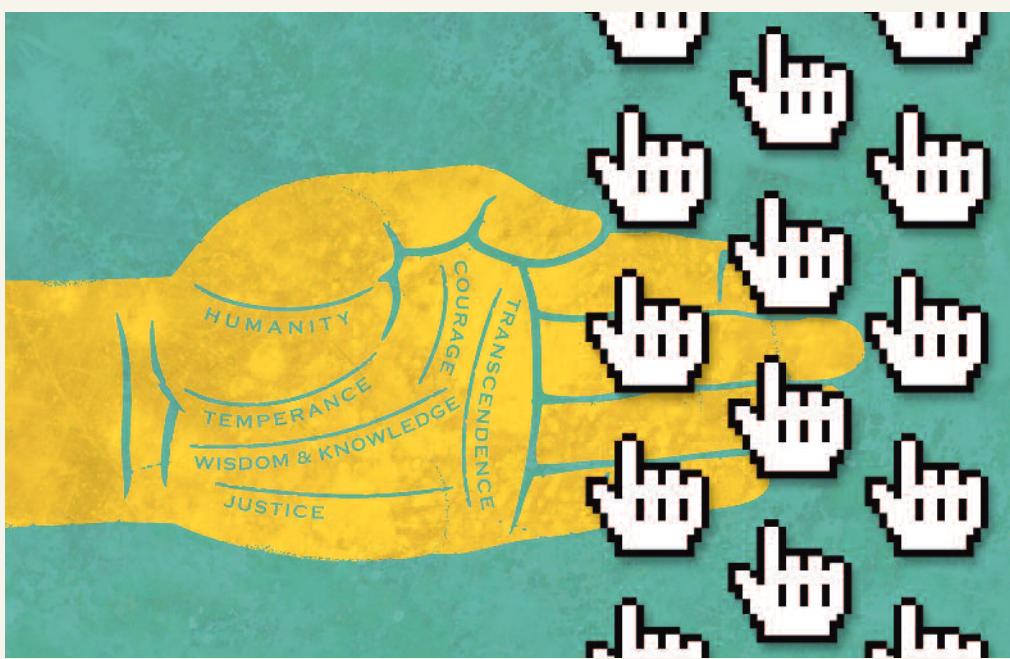
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How can you use your strengths to improve the quality of teaching online?

“Education should instill in us an informed comprehension of our past, an engaged connection to our present, and a joyous sense of confidence in our future.” — Susan Saltrick (1997)

Not all recent revolutions have been technological. Since 2000, a subfield of psychology called “positive psychology” has categorized universal human strengths and identified ways of using this knowledge to enhance our lives, our performance, and our enjoyment of our work (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These universal human qualities, called character strengths, are the building blocks of an effective, happy life—and can also influence your approach to online teaching.

The task of learning to teach online has typically been approached as one of learning specific technology, or of how to apply instructional design or pedagogical principles. These approaches can miss the individual qualities of relationship that keep students in the learning situation and build a community. Join an exploration of positive psychology and learn how shifting to thinking about strengths, instead of weaknesses, can help you succeed in this journey.



What is a character strength?

A character strength is a capacity to engage in behaviors, thoughts, or feelings that are constructive or health enhancing for oneself and others. Your particular strengths are likely to be reflected in your first response to any situation.

The research generated 24 strengths clustered into six categories. This is referred to the VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification is as follows:

WITHOUT THE **HUMAN CONNECTION** THERE IS NO PURPOSE TO ANY TEACHING AS THE GOAL OF THE TASK IS TO GROW OTHER PERSONS.

1. WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE—intellectual capacities, such as perspective, curiosity, love of learning, judgment and creativity, which help in acquiring and using knowledge.

2. COURAGE—emotional strengths, such as honesty, perseverance, zest, and bravery, which call upon capacities leading to goal accomplishment despite obstacles.

3. HUMANITY—strengths of relationship, such as social intelligence, kindness, and giving and receiving love.

4. JUSTICE—capacities, such as fairness, leadership and teamwork, which lead to a healthy life in community.

Meet Sally Kuhlenschmidt



Sally Kuhlenschmidt is a professor of psychology at Western Kentucky University. She served as director of the WKU faculty development center

for 20 years. Kuhlenschmidt started teaching online in 1998, including courses such as "Issues in Teaching an Online Course," "Psychological Tests," and "Abnormal Psychology." She has trained over 200 faculty in an intensive weeklong program on how to teach online, and served on the Board of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education. Most of her professional career has been focused on identifying how faculty can use technology in their instruction in ways that respect their workload and goals.

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > USING WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT STRENGTHS

She plagiarized her discussion board post again, taking sentences directly from the book without citation. Previously, I would have docked her for plagiarism and felt satisfied I had done my job. Now,

however, I reflected on what I knew of her identified strengths, including her stated desire to learn, to lead her in the best direction. Instead of expressing righteous indignation, I invited her to a one-on-one lesson about how to

paraphrase more efficiently and effectively. She arrived mildly resentful about being called in and somewhat frustrated as she could not imagine another way to do the assignment. I knew I had to target her strong desire to

learn and remained focused on the learning that would improve if she "owned" the content and put it in her words. After demonstrating paraphrasing and having her practice on some sections, she brightened and said, "I

would rather understand the material and I see how this method will make me do so." She had found a reason to not plagiarize that spoke to her strength of *Love of Learning*. The next day she wrote to thank me for my time.

5. TEMPERANCE—strengths, such as self-regulation, prudence, humility, and forgiveness, which help to maintain balance.

6. TRANSCENDENCE—capacities, such as humor, gratitude, hope, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and spirituality, that lead to meaning and connection with the larger world.

The VIA Institute on Character (<http://www.viacharacter.org/>) provides a free online survey you can use to determine your strengths profile.

How might character strengths support you in the process of teaching online? As you read the suggested applications, seek your strengths and avoid thinking about qualities you are lacking. It's the difference between moving toward a destination versus moving away from something unpleasant. The former journey is more likely to bring you to a worthwhile outcome.

Wisdom and Knowledge

In the context of online teaching, this cluster of strengths such as perspective and judgment provides tools for evaluating what is worthwhile. These skills let you take advantage of the best technology without wasting time on fads. Curiosity and love of learning permit you to enjoy the process of learning the new tools. And creativity lets you produce innovations in instruction online, tempered by judgment. Regardless

of the technology, your wisdom is invaluable to students and can help you recognize the wisdom that students bring to any course. How can you encourage their strengths?

WHEN WE CONNECT ALL THAT WE DO TO
A LARGER PURPOSE
THEN WE CAN WORK WITH FOCUS AND ENERGY.

Courage

For the person who is anxious about technology or for those facing opposition to their technological innovations, the application of courage may seem obvious. These strengths let us be honest about the challenges we are facing so we can better marshal our capacities to work through them. There are specific behavioral skills, such as pausing and breaking the problem down into parts, which keep us going (perseverance) when we encounter problems. Zest for life can support our teaching online if we view the task as an adventure. We don't always give ourselves credit for the bravery it takes to face the needs of students, to acknowledge the edges of our own knowledge, and to recognize the bravery of our students.

Humanity

Without the human connection there is no purpose to any teaching, as the goal of the task is to grow other persons. In the focus on technologies, we may risk losing our humanity and allow the technological environment to lead us. Social intelligence can enable the connection between instructor and students online. If we approach our syllabi, course documents, and emailed messages with an attitude of kindness, then the course can be transformative for students seeking growth. Practicing kindness does not rule out judgment and wisdom in establishing consequences for inappropriate behavior; however. If all of our actions are done with love—love of the discipline, of the growth potential in students, of those who help us in our teaching—then we have succeeded before we take any actions, before any technology is chosen or instruction designed.

Justice

Teaching is about building a community of learners, and strengths that encourage community building are fairness, leadership and teamwork. Teachers may have a different sense of what is fair than do students. Get feedback on your policies and procedures to see how they are being interpreted. Showing that you are concerned about developing and supporting course integrity by

■ BEST PRACTICES > FIVE STEPS TO UNDERTAKE NOW

TAKE THE VIA SURVEY and consider how each of your strengths informs your teaching. How can you pull your strengths into your online course? How can you use them to tackle an instructional problem you are facing?

REVIEW YOUR SYLLABUS, course documents and emails from the perspective

of your character strengths. Modify the documents to reflect that quality.

REVIEW YOUR ASSIGNMENTS and rubrics to determine if they build strengths in students. If not, how can they be modified to focus on enhancing what individual students bring to the discipline? Do the assignments focus on what stu-

dents should do (or on what they shouldn't do)?

HAVE YOUR STUDENTS take the VIA Survey so they can focus on their own strengths, not only areas for improvement.

REFLECT ON THE COLLABORATIONS necessary for online courses. You will often work with support personnel,



such as information technology and student support, to develop an online course. How can you use your strengths to build optimal relationships? What strengths do you see in them that you can encourage?

monitoring exams and helping them learn about plagiarism (rather than just catch them at it) are some ways to develop a community of fairness. In this way you evince leadership. Managing the course activities and clearly organizing the online activities is also part of effective leadership. Leaders seek to be the best for their community by continuous improvement of skills. As appropriate, you can also develop teamwork online, helping students learn to work together on projects using a variety of technology tools.

Temperance

For creative persons and those just learning to use technologies, it is easy to get seduced by all the options and spend too much time on a minor tool than is justified. The strength of self-regulation can help you monitor your time allocation and prudence can guide you to grow your online course over time, rather than attempting too much at first. Humility keeps you open to learning and to recognize when an activity isn't working. Forgiveness is needed for yourself, to forgive yourself the trips down blind alleys that are an inevitable part of learning technology, to forgive those who may seem impatient with your learning and to forgive students who, in their anxiety, seem abrupt in emails.

Transcendence

What is transcendent about teaching online? A sense of humor is not possible without some degree of perspective on the situation. It demands you step back and recognize truth and thereby see new possibilities. Gratitude for the opportunity to use these tools, learn a new skill, and work with the students can help you cope with the frustrations that arise in any complex endeavor. Pausing to "smell the roses" and appreciate how amazing it is to connect with the world through your computer is a powerful moment of appreciation. And, while we know technology and students can be frustrating, we can hope for improvements as well as insights in our students. Our beliefs about our purpose in teaching motivate us and calls upon the strength of spirituality. When we connect all that we do to a larger purpose, then we can work with focus and energy.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

WHY AND HOW TO GET STARTED

IS THIS JUST FEEL-GOOD PSYCHOLOGY FLUFF?

There is solid research behind the classification system, and you are welcome to read it and evaluate it for yourself. (See References.) If you accept classifications of problems in living, such as depression or schizophrenia, then this system, while in its infancy, represents a parallel conceptual model for issues of health.

SOMEONE IS ALWAYS TELLING ME I SHOULD ADD ANOTHER TASK TO MY WORKLOAD. WHAT MAKES THIS APPROACH MORE WORTHWHILE THAN THE OTHERS?

You can embed strengths in what you are already doing without making it feel like one more thing to do. Recognizing and enhancing your strengths has the potential of helping you choose among all those demands in a way

that is personally satisfying and sustains you through difficult times. Building on your strengths makes it more likely you will enjoy your teaching and your students.

HOW DO I APPLY ONE OF MY PARTICULAR STRENGTHS TO A PROBLEM IN ONLINE TEACHING?

While the survey is valid on average, there is error in every measurement if enough people take it. Your first step upon receiving results should be to reflect on whether you agree. Do those top strengths reflect what others tell you about yourself and how you assess yourself? With some thought you may find that most do match your knowledge of yourself. Then consider how to apply your top strengths to the situation. For example, if one of your strengths is social intelligence, you may find talking to others a useful strategy in overcoming

the problem. If it is love of learning, you may research applications online.

I START LOOKING AT MY STRENGTHS BUT I GET SIDE-TRACKED BY MY WEAKNESSES. HELP!

How can you use your strength to overcome those habits of thought? Return to your strengths as solutions. For example, if your strength is Sense of Humor and you are frustrated in the area of Self-Regulation, use humor to reframe and renew your self-regulation. Or if a top strength is a Sense of Fairness, you can fairly evaluate yourself, looking for areas where you are successful in self-regulation. Use your strengths to find your way.



Conclusion

This is but a quick survey of ways to see our strengths in our online teaching. Given that our work can lead us to focus on weaknesses, the intellectual and emotional courage it takes to shift thinking to strengths should not be underestimated. Practice is required as with learning anything new. But the journey is toward a healthful, constructive, life-affirming, balanced and comfortable outcome. Use your particular strengths to succeed in that journey.

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