

Does Personality Matter? Positive Psychology and Student Engagement

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Have you ever found yourself passionately delivering a lecture, only to be met with silence across the room? You might glance around and think, “Tough crowd, huh?” Or perhaps you don’t even notice it. Either way, it’s a moment many educators have experienced.

There are several possible reasons for this silence. Maybe the content is complex, and students are quietly trying to process it. Fair enough. Or maybe the topic feels dry to them, and they’re mentally checking out, waiting for the right moment to slip away. So, what do you do in the situation?

According to studies there are two main instructional strategies: the information transmission which is lecture intensive, focused on direct instruction and content coverage; and the student focused approach based on active learning, participation, skills development, collaboration and provoking debate ([Trigwell and Prosser, 2003](#); [Bremner, 2021](#)). Thus, the answer to the question depends on which instructional strategies that we may have opted in our teaching.

Do You Carry On?

Some educators might choose to continue regardless. After all, you’ve prepared thoroughly, and there’s a syllabus to cover. Plus, these are university students, they should take responsibility for their own learning, right?

In this view, engagement is not your problem. You’re here to teach, and they’re here to learn.

Or Do You Pull Some Tricks?

Others might take a different approach, valuing interaction and connection in the classroom. As humans, we naturally crave engagement, and teaching will feel more rewarding when there’s a two-way exchange. In this case you may have adopted the second approach, the student centred approach ([Trigwell and Prosser, 2003](#)). There’s no shortage of pedagogical strategies available today, including the use of Digital technologies ([Rizk and Davies, 2021](#)); Gamification ([Muhridza et al., 2018](#)); Flipped classrooms ([Aycicek and Yelken, 2018](#); [Merlin-Knoblich and Mason, 2019](#); [Li and Wang, 2023](#)); and Active Learning through role play, case studies, and simulations ([Mohi-ud-Din et al., 2019](#)) just to name a few.

These techniques are powerful. But I always believe there’s one crucial element that determines their success and that is the personality of educator that enables them to tap on students’ positive emotions which is perhaps the key to student engagement.

Even if you decide to continue with the lecture regardless, this element is still important in this situation.

Student engagement is influenced by the learner, the educator, the course content, the teaching method and the learning environment ([D'Souza and Maheshwari, 2010](#)).

And to me, the educator's personality is in the centre of this mix and is the main driver to student engagement.

The Big Five Personality Traits

Educators play an important part in fostering positive emotions that help students to flourish and reduce anxiety ([Fredrickson, 2001](#)). Positive psychology which promotes individuals, communities, and societies to flourish has been found to contribute to student engagement ([Kong, 2021](#)). When educators engage with students authentically, they foster an environment where positive emotions can thrive. Positive psychology can broaden people's thought process, undo lingering negative emotions, build psychological resilience and trigger an upward spiral of enhanced emotional wellbeing ([Fredrickson, 2001](#)).

This emotional connection can spark interest, boost confidence, and encourage deeper engagement. Being an educator isn't just about delivering content, it's about being present, responsive, and emotionally invested. When educators show genuine interest, students are more likely to reciprocate with attention and participation ([Wang et al., 2022](#)).

So, what kind of personalities allow us to tap into students' positive emotions? According to studies there are five personality traits of effective educators known as the Big Five personality traits ([John et. al, 1991](#); [John et. al, 2008](#)).

These personality traits are found to be positively correlated with students' success ([Park et al., 2025](#)) and have a significant impact on student engagement and motivations ([Kim et al., 2019](#)). The Big Five personality traits include **openness**: referring to creative, curious and cultured; **conscientiousness**: meaning organised, responsible, reliable; **extraversion**: which is sociable, assertive, energetic; **agreeableness**: referring to kind, cooperative, trustful; and **emotional stability**: which is calm, secure, unemotional ([John et al., 1991](#); [John et al., 2008](#)). For example, an educator with an 'openness' personality influences the choice of student focused approach in classes ([Davidson, 2017](#)). And an educator's emotional stability can be contagious and when displayed in a classroom can be transmitted to either making students anxious and nervous or having positive emotions ([Kim et al., 2019](#)).

Concluding Thoughts

After nearly 30 years in higher education (yes, time flies!), I've seen the effect of educators' personalities on student engagement firsthand. I've coached others and reflected deeply on what makes a classroom come alive. And I keep coming back to one key element: the personality of the educator. The openness and agreeableness are the strongest predictors of rapport that help students to feel the sense of connection with their lecturer which help them to be engaged and successful in a course ([Park et al., 2025](#)).

Not all of us are naturally warm or charismatic, and that's okay. But the truth is, personality traits that foster connection can be developed ([Che et al., 2023](#)). It starts with small steps, like saying hello, asking questions, and showing empathy. In the classroom, this might mean smiling and showing enthusiasm, learning students' names, having reflective conversations, and showing genuine care for their progress. These small gestures can have a big impact. Students often remember how you made them feel more than what you taught. Students appreciate personal touches more than we sometimes realize. A little warmth, humour, and humanity goes a long way. And you might find that it refreshes and energizes you too ([Kim et al., 2019](#)). So, why not give it a try?

I'd love to hear your thoughts. What strategies have worked for you? How do you bring your personality into the classroom? Let's keep the conversation going.

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