

Building Positive Communication Pedagogy:
Positive Experiential Communication Learning in Human Relating

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Abstract

Following the lead of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and complementing the dark side of interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998, 2004, 2007), this paper seeks to continue to expand the awareness of communication researchers and educators about positive communication—communication that facilitates positive subjective states, enhances development of positive character traits, and creates and sustains empowering relationships, groups, and organizations (e.g., Socha, 2006; 2007; in press). In particular, the paper describes experiential learning assignments—*Positive Communication Experiences*—created for a new communication course—*Positive Communication in Human Relating*. The paper offers suggestions for communication educators about incorporating positive communication experiential lessons into communication courses and communication curricula.

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Following the lead of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and complementing the dark side of interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998, 2004, 2007) this paper seeks to continue to expand the awareness of communication researchers and educators about positive communication—communication that facilitates positive subjective states, enhances development of positive character traits, and creates and sustains empowering relationships, groups, and organizations (Socha, 2006, 2007; in press). First, the paper gives a brief overview of positive psychology and its pedagogy. Second, drawing upon this work, the paper provides an overview of a new communication course—*Positive Communication in Human Relating*. Then, third, the paper describes the details of four experiential learning in positive communication assignments designed for the course—*Positive Communication Experiences* (PCE's). Finally, the paper concludes with suggestions for future development of positive communication experiences in communication courses and curricula.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology widens traditional, business-as-usual psychology's lens beyond mental illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and brings into focus “the scientific study of what goes right in life” (Peterson, 2006, p. 4). “People want more than just to correct their weaknesses. They want lives imbued with meaning The time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called ‘the good life’” (Seligman, 2002, p. ix).

Three “pillars of positive psychology” (Seligman, 2002, p. xi) organize the field's research into studies of: (a) positive emotions and positive subjective states (e.g., contentment,

happiness, joy, pleasure, positive affect, positive moods, etc.) (b) positive traits and virtues (e.g., see Peterson & Seligman's, 2004, positive character strengths such as: creativity, curiosity, authenticity, bravery, kindness, love, social intelligence, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, hope, humor; as well as positive thinking, etc.), and positive institutions (e.g., strong families, good workplaces, good schools, agencies of wellness promotion, etc.).

To date, hundreds of positive psychology articles and numerous books report research covering such topics as: happiness (Seligman, 2002), flow or optimal experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), positive character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), hope (Snyder, 1994, 2000), optimism (Scheier, & Carver, 1985), and more (e.g., see Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, for an overview of empirical research from 2000 - 2005). There are positive psychology such as The European Conference on Positive Psychology (see <http://www.pospsy.ffri.hr/invited.htm>) and National Positive Psychology Summits supported by the Gallop Institute for Global Well Being (Gallop, 2007).

Positive psychology does not seek to replace traditional psychology, but rather to reframe psychological research, pedagogy, and therapy to accept “that goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder, and distress. . . [and to give] as much focus on strengths as on weaknesses, as much interest in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and as much attention to fulfilling the lives of healthy people as to healing the wounds of the distressed (Peterson, 2006, p. 5). This reorientation builds in part on humanistic psychology (e.g., Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1951), but also moves beyond it by relying on rigorous social scientific methodology to test its theories.

At the lead of the positive psychology field stands Dr. Martin Seligman, the founding director of the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center (PPC) (University of

Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center, 2007). Among its many activities, the PPC disseminates information about national and international conferences, offers resources for teachers and researchers (including making available scales and measures of many positive variables); sponsors research projects, and more.

Positive Psychology Pedagogy

The University of Pennsylvania offers the first MA degree in applied positive psychology (University of Pennsylvania College of General Studies, n. d.). And, in the fall of 2007 Claremont Graduate University launched the first PhD program in positive psychology in the U.S. with foci in positive developmental psychology and positive organizational psychology (see Claremont Graduate University, 2008). The curricula of these programs feature courses in empirical research methods and as well about positive emotions, positive development, wellness, and so on. Undergraduate and graduate courses in positive psychology are also offered at many universities throughout the U.S. (e.g., see University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center, 2007b, for syllabi of positive psychology courses offered at: Cornell, Harvard, Hofstra, Stanford, University of Kentucky, University of Michigan, University of Montana, University of Pennsylvania, and others).

The content of undergraduate and graduate courses in positive psychology include books and collections of articles, but many courses use Peterson's (2006) text, *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. This introductory text provides an overview of positive psychology followed by chapters on: pleasure and positive experience; happiness; positive thinking; character strengths; values; interests, abilities and accomplishments; wellness, positive interpersonal relationships, enabling institutions, and future directions of positive psychology (including work in neurobiology, peace, and more).

Peterson's second chapter—*Learning about Positive Psychology: Not a Spectator Sport*—will resonate with communication educators interested in experiential learning as it describes the experiential groundings of pioneering positive psychology instructors and their courses. Among these accounts, Peterson retells the story of how Professor Martin Seligman began the first positive psychology class with a story about how his daughter Nikki confronted him as he was worked in the yard:

“Daddy I want to talk to you.” Yes, Nikki.” Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From when I was three until when I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I was not going to whine any more. That was the hardest thing I have ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch” (Seligman, 2002, p. 28).

As a parent, Seligman realized that he had been teaching his daughter to correct weaknesses, rather than to identify and nurture strengths. But, at the time, Seligman also realized that his field of psychology had little to say about how to do this. Since then, positive psychology courses have adopted this Seligman-inspired, experiential learning ritual of beginning each course by asking students to share events of their lives that show them at their best as they help students to learn to appreciatively listen. According to Peterson (2006, p. 28), “Positive psychology has become for us a course in rhetoric—not just one of reading and writing, but one in speaking and listening.”

At the foundation of positive psychology pedagogy are experiential learning exercises designed to challenge students and faculty to reorient towards positive aspects of life. Peterson (2006) offers examples of these exercises that include: writing gratitude letters, comparing experiences of personal pleasure to experiences of helping others, recording three good things

that happened at the end of each day in a diary and reflecting one them, participating in social and charitable groups and charity work, rehearsing cheerfulness when confronting bureaucracy, giving a friend a good day, and more. At the close of each chapter Peterson's text includes exercises; citations of thematically related books, journal articles, articles in the popular press, websites, and films that illustrate positive chapter themes; and even titles of thematically related songs.

A Turn to Positive Communication

In a chapter in the *Handbook of Applied Communication* (Frey & Cissna, in press), Socha (in press) was tasked with cataloging problems that confront families and ascertaining the effectiveness of applied communication research in addressing these problems. However, as the list of problems grew it became clear that families potentially face an endless number and variety of problems (sometimes many at the same time), and that trying to catalog them all and develop communication interventions for their management was a daunting task.

It was at this point that Socha happened upon Seligman's (2002) book, *Authentic Happiness* and began to recognize some of the problems inherent in orienting applied family communication theory and research primarily towards the study of problems. After further reading (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathmunde, & Whalen, 1997, Peterson & Seligman, 2004, and others), Socha reworked the chapter and suggested that applied family communication scholars should follow the lead of positive psychology and begin to reorient their thinking towards a positive ontology, that is, instead of focusing primarily on family communication problems to focus on family communication strengths.

Since then, examples of work in positive communication include: a chapter that reframes the study of communication in parental discipline episodes to focus on communication that

orchestrates and directs potential (Socha, 2006), a keynote address to communication educators about a turn to positive communication (Socha, 2008), a panel on service learning in communication at regional communication association conference (Socha, 2007), and most recently an undergraduate course that focuses on positive communication in personal and social relationships (COMM 495/595- Positive Communication in Human Relating, Old Dominion University).

Positive Communication Pedagogy

The landscape of contemporary communication education is certainly dotted with many examples of what could be labeled positive communication: comforting (e.g., Burlison & Kunkel, 2002), humor and coping (e.g., Alston, 2007), relational listening (e.g., Halone, 2001), prayer as communication (e.g., Baesler, 1999), forgiveness (e.g., Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008), communication and activism (e.g., Frey & Carragee, 2007), and more. However, this work is scattered so widely throughout communication research literature and communication textbooks that it is relatively unnoticed (it is everywhere, but nowhere). What is needed is the conceptual umbrella of positive communication not only to begin to organize this existing work, but also to provide conceptual coherence to positive communication pedagogy that includes articulating its unique assumptions and tenets.

Positive Communication in Human Relating

In response to this need for a development of a coherent approach to positive communication, in the fall of 2007, an undergraduate special-topics-in-communication course, *Positive Communication in Human Relating*, was developed and taught at a southeastern university in the U.S. (course syllabus available at; <http://www.odu.edu/~tsocha>). A total of 22 students enrolled in the course.

The general aims of the course were to: consider positive psychology theory and research from the point of view of interpersonal communication reorient students' thinking towards viewing positive communication in relationships, and to begin to organize positive communication pedagogy in the context of interpersonal communication. Some of the organizing questions addressed in the course were:

- What is “positive communication” in relationships?
- What might a strengths-based approach to interpersonal communication theorizing look like?
- What role does communication play in human happiness?
- What are positive interpersonal communication functions (e.g., caring, comforting, playing, praying, supporting)?
- What are positive interpersonal communication values (e.g., accuracy, appropriateness, artfulness, clarity, creativity, credibility, listener-centeredness, logical, mutuality, organized, politeness, etc.)?
- What role does creativity play in positive interpersonal communication?
- What is the role of communication in creating positive outcomes for individuals (health, hope, optimism, positive character strengths, wellness, etc.)?
- What is the role of communication in creating conditions that facilitate positive relational outcomes (adjustment, satisfaction, etc.)?

The content of this fifteen week (semester-long) class included Peterson's (2006) text, communication journal articles and books chosen by students and used in their writing assignments, and three films [*Pollyanna* (Swift, 1960/2002), *Rudy* (Anspaugh, 2000), and *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Jackson, 1999)]. Graded assignments included two major papers, two

examinations, and four shorter papers that reported the results of structured positive experiential communication learning experiences.

In brief, major paper #1 asked students to: assess their current happiness using the *Authentic Happiness Inventory* and *Approaches to Happiness Questionnaire* (available free at www.authenichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/), reflect on the kinds of communication processes that they thought facilitated their happiness, locate and review a communication journal article about the process, and begin to develop their own mini-theory of how this communication processes might facilitate their individual happiness. Major paper #2 asked students to assess their signature strengths using the *VIA Signature Strengths Survey* (available free at www.authenichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/) and to reflect on the role of communication in facilitating their top five signature strengths that included reading relevant literature (from communication and allied fields). They were then asked to report their reflections either by means of an essay, a fictional story of their creation, or development of a mini-theory. Traditional criteria were used for the assessment of the papers: good papers are complete, sufficiently detailed, express ideas clearly, properly cited their sources, are formatted according to requested guidelines, show insight into the topic(s), make wise use of resources, and show efforts of creativity. The in-class essay examinations covered readings in Peterson (2006) and lecture slides.

Positive Communication Experiential Assignments

Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), a model of conversation as experiential learning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005), and Peterson's (2006) examples of positive psychology exercises, four experiential learning in communication assignments (labeled *Positive Communication Experiences*) were designed for the course. In particular, Baker, Jensen, and

Kolb's (2005) model of conversation as experiential learning features two dialectics: apprehension (concrete experience) – comprehension (abstract conceptualization) and intension (reflective observation) – extension (active experimentation). According to this model, successful experiential learning comes about by attempting to balance these tensions in the dynamic process of conversation. Thus, the general objectives of *PCE's* were to facilitate concrete and abstract learning of positive communication processes, and provide reflective observation and experimentation with positive communication processes (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005). Assessment of *PCE's* employed traditional criteria (i.e., good papers are complete, sufficiently detailed, express ideas clearly, properly cite their sources, are formatted according to requested guidelines, show insight into the topic(s), make wise use of resources, and show efforts of creativity), but each also employed criteria unique to each assignment.

Communicating at my best. This exercise followed the positive psychology tradition of asking students at the start of a course to write about and relay in class a time when they were at their “communication best,” that is, a communication episode where they believed they were displaying what they regard as competent and effective communication skills leading to what they perceived to be positive outcomes. They were asked to structure their responses to include descriptions of: the context, event, participants (relevant details), content of messages, and the perceived effects of these messages (on your partner and self). Also, they were asked to reflect on what kinds of variables or factors in particular might have made the event “positive”?

For this assignment, most of the students chose to report about communication episodes that pertained to conversations at work, more so than conversations with family and friends. These episodes included, for example: successful job interviews, successfully getting back pay from an employer, successfully confronting a manager whose behavior was viewed as unethical,

handling difficult restaurant customers as they waited on tables, and managing conflicts with employers. Although the reasons for their choices are not known, it is possible that their choices of communication episodes may be attributed in part to choosing communication episodes where they experienced concrete positive outcomes (e.g., getting the job, getting a good tip, etc.), as opposed to outcomes that are more abstract (e.g., imparting warm feelings, etc.).

A good communication day. PCE #2 intended to aid students in sharpening and deepening their awareness of positive elements of everyday communication by experiencing a process called savoring (Bryant, 1989): attempts to become conscious of the experience of pleasures. Similar to savoring foods, chocolates, wines, poetry, and so on, students were instructed that:

Savoring communication means immersing self into the details of communication moments (e.g., subtle pitches and tone qualities of voice, qualities of facial cues, subtle body movements, artifacts, scents, fine details of clothing, lighting, temperature, memorable expressions, etc.) and seeking to appreciate their qualities, as if they were a fine wine.

Further, according to Seligman (2002, p. 108), there are at least “four kinds of savoring: *basking* (receiving praise and congratulations), *thanksgiving* (expressing gratitude for blessings), *marveling* (losing self in the wonder of the moment) and *luxuriating* (indulging the senses).”

Seligman also offers various techniques intended to promote savoring such as: sharing with others (recruiting another to share an experience, telling how much you value the moment); memory-building (taking mental photos, mementos for future reminiscing); self-congratulation (telling yourself about how impressed others are), sharpening perceptions (focusing on details of phenomena, as tasting wine, viewing a painting, listening to music, etc.); absorption (get totally

immersed and try to sense the process—avoid being reminded of other things, planning for a next move, etc.).

The general thrust is that savoring communication episodes slows down experiencing everyday life to allow for its close examination, suspends focusing on the future or dwelling on the past, increases attention to fine details, and increases abilities to be fully present in the moment, all of which helps promote a greater appreciation of communication in everyday life.

Students were asked to savor an episode of live communication with another individual(s) and then to describe the experience (2-3 typed pages). Evaluation criteria beyond tradition criteria included: an effective description of a savored communication episode should help the reader to also savor the experience (something to keep mind while savoring and developing a description of the episode.).

In contrast to PCE #1, most all students chose to savor and report on conversations in personal relationships with romantic others, spouses, a parent, and in the case of two parents in the class, a child. As students read aloud their descriptions I recall very warm and genuine feelings among the students as they listened to students attempt what use often approached poetic language. In written feedback at the course's conclusion, this assignment was among those most often mentioned as being memorable and something that they would attempt to continue to enjoy in their interactions.

Communication and values. Peterson (2006, chap 7) discussed ten values that appear to be shared throughout the world: achievement (e.g., personal success), benevolence, conformity (e.g., politeness), hedonism (e.g., personal pleasure), power (e.g., social status), security, self-direction, stimulation (e.g., excitement, novelty), tradition, and universalism (e.g., appreciating and understanding all people). PCE #3 asked students to reflect on this reading in light of

communication and relationships. In particular, the assignment asked students to choose one value from the list and to think about the kinds of communication practices they would perform that (a) might facilitate and cultivate the value, and (b) those that might inhibit or not support the value. Students were asked to construct a table where they recorded the communication practices that facilitated or inhibited values as well as reasons why they believed their behavior would be facilitative or inhibitive at cultivating the value. For example, communication practices such as giving commands, bragging, and wearing status symbols (e.g., designer clothes) would seem consistent with seeking power, whereas acknowledging the work of others, sharing the limelight, and wearing plain clothing would not. Students were asked to reflect on the positive/negative nature of these values (they are not necessarily positive) as well as communication's role.

Students' choices of values were varied, but they tended towards values such as benevolence (listing behaviors such as saying thank you, giving compliments, and communicating forgiveness) and tradition (listing behaviors such as communicating respect for religious customs, participating in rituals, etc.). As a part of the class discussion of this exercise, the class also generated a list of communication values, that is, items they valued about communication itself. The list included valuing communication that is: accurate, appropriate, artful, clear, creative, engaging, expedient, free, honest, mutual, organized, polite, positive, and so on. The concept of a "communication value" may have yet to be considered by communication scholars and may open a door to a new area of inquiry and raise questions such as: What are communication values? What is communication like when particular values such as expediency are dominant? How do communicators manage clashes of communication values (e.g., expediency versus artfulness)?

Positive communication leisure. The final experiential learning assignment asked students to use what they learned in positive communication class and to focus on the role of positive communication in their free, unoccupied time. Specifically they were asked to write an essay where they planned: “A perfect positive communication leisure day” and supported their choices using course readings. They were given 24 hours and asked to write an essay where they chose activities that optimized their communication leisure. Part of the rationale for this assignment was to see what aspects of the course they included, and to see if they were integrating course readings into their thinking in hopes that this kind of conscious planning might translate into improving the overall quality of their everyday lives (at least as far as messages were concerned).

Student’s verbal feedback about this assignment was incredibly positive, but also they found it incredibly frustrating, as many did not have the luxury of a 24 leisure day, nor did they foresee a day like this on the horizon. Students’ days featured: savored conversations with loved ones, lots of communication play (e.g., humor, laughter), dinner conversations, participating in charity groups, exercising with friends (wellness promotion), and more. Their communication leisure days did include some media (less so than interacting live with people), but students were careful to choose films from Peterson’s lists that sought to promote good feelings, and so on.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Positive communication is a useful way to organize some of the many concepts, ideas, and research already being studied within the communication field, but is also a call to move the field beyond studying what’s what wrong (with media, relationships, as well as poor and ineffective communication in organizations and institutions) to also understand communication strengths, communication values, and communication virtues. As a pedagogical activity,

positive communication experiences can be useful across the field's contexts of communication in relationships, groups, organizations, media, and intercultural/international. For example, in my family communication classes students plan and execute a positive family communication experience intended to prompt family joy. In group communication class, students plan and execute group communication projects such as trying to get faculty and administrators to smile more. And even in communication research methods classes, students are urged to pose questions that not only can increase our understanding of circumstances when communication is problematic, but also to consider concepts like optimal communication and its precursors.

At the level of communication curricula, faculty might begin to examine courses in light of positive communication. Are students who complete degrees in communication over-emphasizing the fixing of communication problems? Given that in PCE #1 students emphasized more organizational relationships when thinking about themselves at their communication best, is there a need to be clearer about positive communication outcomes in relationships? In my department we have embarked on developing an MA in communication program with positive development at its center and asking about the kinds of courses that facilitate positive communication development across the lifespan.

There is much work to be done on the research and pedagogical fronts of positive communication. For example, systematic assessment of the effectiveness of positive communication experiences on outcomes like communication learning is needed. Do positive communication experiences increase students' motivations to learn about communication? Do students who engage in positive communication experiences in class continue to apply what they have learned after the conclusion of the course? These are among myriad questions on this new horizon for which I am grateful to those in positive psychology for prompting.

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