



Artisan teacher NOTES

Do you like your Teacher?

It's a first day of school ritual... peppering my daughter, Emily, with questions about her teachers. "Why do you like her?" On a scale of 1-5, how much do you like him?" She ponders..."a 4 I think." I probe. "Why, why a 4?" Emily ponders some more. "I don't know. I just like him. He's cool." That's actually a pretty elaborate response for a 9th grader.

I have a theory. I believe that Emily is not really answering the question: Do you like your teacher? As she ponders, I believe she is really answering this question: Does your teacher like you?

I think this has always been the case. Every year millions of children and teenagers come home after the first day of school with a sense, an intuition really, of whether or not their teacher is happy to have them in class.

How does a student pick up on this so quickly? How do they answer such a complex question based on such a short experience? As it turns out, all human beings have a well-developed ability to quickly distinguish friend from foe. It's part of our innate set of survival skills. Child and adolescent advocates have a name for the concept as it occurs in school. It's called Unconditional Positive Regard. Children and youth can quickly tell which of their new teachers offer UPR to their students and which do not.

As a practical matter, it is important to note that classrooms with UPR produce more successful students, higher achievement, smaller achievement gaps, and lower absenteeism. How then, can a teacher communicate UPR to students beginning on the very first day and reap the benefits of an enriched classroom environment? Here are some tips:

1. Be genuine.

UPR can not be dependably faked. The brain systems that are attuned to assess UPR are faster and more subtle than most humans' acting ability. If you genuinely like teaching and genuinely like students, you are probably producing a good deal of UPR without even trying.

2. Be explicit.

Directly communicate to each student the three attributes of UPR:

A. Unconditional

B. Positive

C. Regard



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A. Unconditional

Say "Emily, I'm so glad I have you this year!" Don't say "Emily, I've heard you're a hard worker. I like having hard workers in my class." Hear the conditionality in the second example? Of course we all want hard workers—nothing wrong with that and it's a good idea to positively reinforce hard work. We don't, however, want to communicate conditions on our basic positive regard for the student.

B. Positive

Intentionally link positive emotions to the student's presence. Say "I'm glad you're here, I'm happy to have you this year, I was hoping you'd be in my class." Smile, make eye contact, place a hand on the student's shoulder... these are all examples of positive emotional expression. Don't say "Emily, I was only supposed to have 27 students this year and you're the 28th. Are you sure your schedule is correct?"

C. Regard

From Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition: vb. to recognize the worth of a person or thing, to pay attention to, to take into consideration, to respect, to hold in high esteem, to look at, to admire. In essence, to regard a student is to recognize her individually. Say "Hi Emily Rutherford. Am I pronouncing your name correctly? I had an Allison Rutherford two years ago. Is she your sister? I hope you'll consider joining Spanish Club this year. I bet you'd be a good officer." Don't say "OK class let's settle down. You're a bit louder than my 2nd period class. I'm glad you're all here. Please sign up for Spanish club, I'm hoping for 50 members this year." Hear the difference? The second example engages the class as an aggregate, not as individuals. This does not score many "regard" points.

In short, if a teacher is happy to be there on the first day and happy that students are there too, a great potential exists for UPR. By understanding how UPR works, a teacher can be intentional creating it and enjoy even more of its benefits.

Author's note: I first wrote a version of this article in 2006. That year my daughter Emily, whom I first asked "do you like your teacher?" was in 9th grade. I'm happy to report that this fall Emily is beginning her 4th year as a fifth-grade teacher and planning how she can sway her students' responses to that same question. The secret, both then and now, is unconditional positive regard (UPR). For more information on how teachers can design positive classroom experiences see *The Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching*, Chapter 16: Enriched Environments, pages 100-111. ©2013 by Rutherford Learning Group, Inc.



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