Reinforcing academic outcomes and satisfaction in Higher Education through the incorporation of Positive Leadership

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Abstract

The engagement of students and faculty in the teaching and learning process of Higher Education is key to ensure the career readiness of graduates, and their future ability to make a positive impact in their communities and the world. It is in this context that Positive Leadership has been piloted in a young, comprehensive Indian university, where the two professors that led this innovative approach were trained so that the delivery of their subjects enhanced the principles of positive meaning, positive climate, positive communication and positive relationships. The research carried out during this pilot study incorporated a mixed-methods approach, which allowed to scientifically assess the very positive impact of the initiative. Both students and faculty appreciated a more human methodology and reported highly satisfactory results, including boosted engagement and improved grades.

Keywords: Positive Leadership, Higher Education, academic outcomes, learning effectiveness, educational improvements.

1. The opportunities of Positive Leadership

Leadership has emerged as a very significant concept researched over the years. The impact of a leader on organizational wellbeing, bottom line, and employee performance have been investigated and recognized by many researchers (Kahai et al., 2000; Balthazard et al., 2002; Peterson et al., 2003; Arslan & Staub, 2013). Thousands of books, articles and multiple other resources address the topic and provide analyses, theories and valuable recommendations, some of them general, some them only addressing some particular aspects of leadership or concrete classifications. This is the case of positive leadership, which is related to the concept of positive psychology, and where a recent article by Lino (2017) defends that the essence of being a positive leader implies focusing on the best of the others around you, and simultaneously making every effort to become the best of oneself.

Among the numerous theories and conceptualizations of leadership, there is one particular approach that excels because of the outstanding results it is able to generate, that is Positive Leadership, a concept created and communicated by Dr. Kim Cameron, from the University of Michigan, US. Positive Leadership is developed along the lines of four strategies: generating a positive climate, that enables positive relationships, where positive communication is fostered, and where the positive meaning of what we do is always present (Cameron, 2012).

Two of the key concepts beyond the principles of Positive Leadership are gratitude and recognition. Numerous studies like the one carried out by Roberts (2005) prove that showing gratitude and recognition improves the working climate and increases productivity. When employees observe appreciation of their work, their satisfaction increases and they are moved to keep up with much better levels of work performance. Even health is positively affected by feeling valued, as reported in the online survey that the American Psychological Association conducted (APA, 2012). And it is also true that in a university environment, these findings would apply too. According to Benito and Scott-Milligan (2018), faculty recognition should be a key component of the institutional strategy, the authors believe it needs to be multidimensional and transparent, that it should be provided formal and informally, and originate from the institutions themselves, academic leaders, peers and students.

The principles of Positive Leadership make a lot of sense, but one of the most valuable aspects of this approach is the simplicity of its application. Cameron (2013) provides clear recommendations and an interesting set of tools and techniques that organizations can apply in order to generate extraordinary results. And this seems to have been the case of multiple   companies belonging to a great variety of sectors, that range from nuclear energy management, to health services or financial services, where a climate of positivity brought along incredibly virtuous outcomes at all levels. Cameron (2012) provides empirical evidence to demonstrate that positive leadership strategies produce extraordinarily positive results in all these types of organizations.

2. Piloting Positive Leadership in Higher Education

The success of Positive Leadership in many different contexts makes it an interesting approach that could perhaps be expanded to other fields like Education. The members of the present research initiative agreed that it might be a good idea to transfer this very promising research-based approach, which produces extraordinary success, focuses on strengths and enhances virtuous behaviors to some of the courses that are taught in their university. It seems to make sense that the teaching and learning process could benefit from the enhancement of positive communication, positive relationships, positive climate and positive meaning.

Even though no previous initiatives or research have been found regarding the implementation of Positive Leadership in Higher Education, there are some interesting experiences that involve a recent concept, Positive Education, that Professor Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania developed. White (2016) defines Positive Education as "a blend of evidence-based learning from the science of positive psychology and best practices in learning and teaching".

Positive Education is related to the principles of positive psychology, and on numerous occasions it has proved that its key outcomes are not only well-being and happiness but also academic success. There are multiple local initiatives, most of them taking place in the primary and secondary levels of Education, many of which are compiled in the report on the State of Positive Education that resulted from the World Education Summit of 2016, published by Seligman and a team of authors (Bott et al, 2016)

There is not a great number of initiatives where Positive Education is present in Higher Education, but if there is one that can be easily recognized as a best practice, that is the case of Universidad Tecmilenio. who claims to have been recognized as the first positive university in the world, and whose academic model seems to be in good synchrony with Positive Education: "The most disruptive feature of this model is the importance it gives to the students' long-term well-being, which is based on Positive Psychology and supported by the Institute of Happiness Sciences, created by the Universidad Tecmilenio in 2013" (Tecmilenio, 2019)?

The present research project is part of a broader international initiative, inspired by Benito et al (2018), and it constitutes one more example of how positivity, in our case through the incorporation of Positive Leadership, can be introduced in Higher Education. In parallel to our institution, another three from our network of universities have initiated similar pilot studies, with the same approach and similar structure and research methodology. Only very recently, published after the present pilot study started, the projects carried out at Universidad Europea de Madrid, in Spain, and the one carried out at Pearl Academy, in India, constitute successful illustrations of how Positive Leadership can be incorporated into Higher Education (Benito et al, 2019[1] and Benito et al, 2019[2]).

The institution where this study took place is a UGC-recognized and NAAC-accredited Indian university, which offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses and was established in 2003. The research was developed in two different subjects, one of them an online undergraduate general elective titled Leading in a Dynamic Era, the other one a face to face graduate course in International Finance, corresponding to the MBA in Energy Trading program.

The subjects, and their corresponding instructors were selected quasi-randomly, ensuring calendar compatibility, as well as including two different modalities and educational levels.

Once the faculty members were identified, the following steps took place:

- Faculty were informed about the initiative and asked to participate, both of them expressed their interest and willingness to join.
- Faculty were then trained. The professional development program in which they participated consisted of reading about Positive Leadership (Cameron, 2012); doing an online training module that was developed specifically for this purpose; participating in a first workshop regarding the application of the Faculty Guidelines that were created; participating in a second workshop regarding the actual lesson plans in their respective subjects; and participating in several joint sessions and support meetings with the rest of the research team.
- Faculty implemented Positive Leadership in their subjects. They planned every lesson and identified the Positive leadership ingredients they would incorporate every day.
- Faculty delivered their 'enhanced subjects´ and helped to measure the impact on students.

It was the assumption of the research team that the expectations identified by Benito et al (2018) would be our work hypothesis. Therefore, this study tries to prove that by introducing Positive Leadership in the teaching and learning process, we will contribute to: Humanize the teaching and learning process, increase

faculty and student engagement, increase student satisfaction and improve learning effectiveness and academic outcomes

3. Research methodology

The research study presented in this paper followed a mixed-methods approach, where quantitative and qualitative information was sequentially collected. Then the data analysis and the integration of information processes were carried out, followed by the determination of conclusions.

The quantitative information came from surveys and from the extraction of objective academic information available in the university LMS and SMS. Data were processed and the corresponding descriptive statistics were determined, mainly means and percentages that were then compared with the results of previous years. A survey was utilized to collect some key quantitative information regarding the impressions of the students that participated in the pilot. Only two demographic questions, regarding age and gender, were included. The survey contained some Likert questions (1-5 scale) regarding student satisfaction, engagement, learning and the contribution of the instructor to the students´ development. Students were also asked if, in comparison with an average subject, the experience was better or not and if they would recommend the subject. And finally, students were asked to express what they had enjoyed the most and were given the opportunity to add any comments they had.

Additionally, the study incorporated some more quantitative information, specifically attendance and grade distribution, which were available in the university information systems.

The qualitative information was obtained from two focus groups with students, as well as an interview with the two faculty members. The focus groups were conducted, recorded and analyzed to be able to extract the main ideas, which are shown in the corresponding part of this paper.   They were organized close to the subject end, and were carried out by two of the researchers that had not had direct contact with the students. Both were conducted according to the same guidelines and addressed the following topics: The starting point was the students´ description of their experience and how positive it was. They were then requested to refer to their interaction with the professor and with other students, and describe the learning environment. Students were asked about the connections with their future career, and if thy personally valued the human component in their learning experience. Finally, students were asked if they would recommend this pedagogical approach.

In order to ensure higher accuracy, the case of the interviews with faculty, the two instructors were asked to summarize their appreciations in writing, which are presented as direct quotes in the corresponding section of the present article.

4. Quantitative results: students´ survey and academic outcomes

As it was mentioned before, the participating students were asked to complete a survey about their experience, whose results are summarized in the table below. As it can be appreciated, the results are quite

positive, particularly when evaluating their learning (the majority of the students affirms to have learnt much of very much in the two subjects), when recognizing the contribution of faculty to the students´ development (100% and 95% respectively) and when recommending the subjects (100% and 80% respectively).

  It is interesting to appreciate that the results of the online subject were not as good as those of the face to face subject, which is a generalized finding in the university where this pilot took place, where for the moment the online offerings are still very limited.

Table 1: Results of the student survey

	Face to Face module	Online module
What is your age range?	100% 20-30	80% below 20; 10% 20-30
What is your gender?	56% female	30% female
How satisfied are you with your experience in this subject?	4.1 (btw very and highly satisfied)	3.6 (btw quiet and very satisfied)
How engaging did you find the classes?	78% very/highly engaging	45% very/highly engaging
How much did you learn in this subject?	89% much/very much	85% much/very much
Did the instructor contribute positively to your development?	100% yes	95% yes
Was the experience better than an average subject?	89% better	63% better
Would you recommend this subject to other students?	100% Yes	80% Yes

Beyond the students´ appreciation of their experience, some more quantitative information was gathered. The two graphs below show the grade distribution and attendance rates of the face to face subject. The Positive Leadership approach presents a much greater number of A+ and A grades (30% and 35% respectively) than those of the same subject when it was taught during the previous semester (2% and 30% respectively). Additionally, attendance rates are much higher when the Positive Leadership approach is incorporated. As it can be appreciated, most of the students attended between 90% and 100% of the sessions, which is a much better result than that of the previous semester, when the maximum attendance rate was 80%.
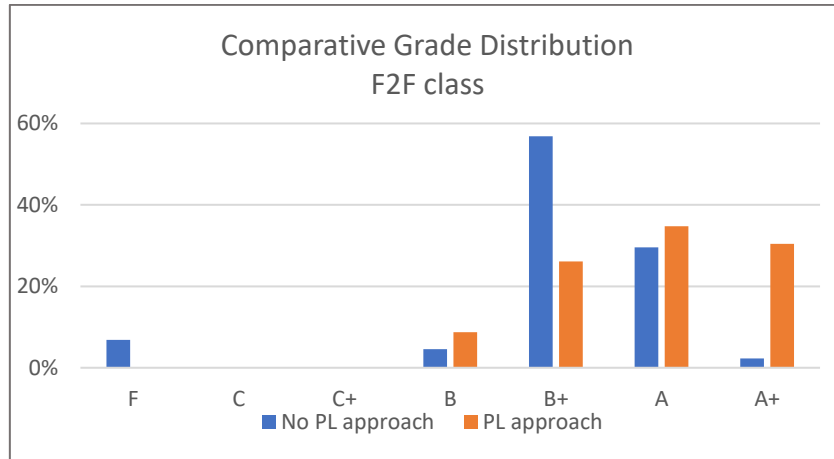
Figure 1

Grade distribution of the face to face subject with and without

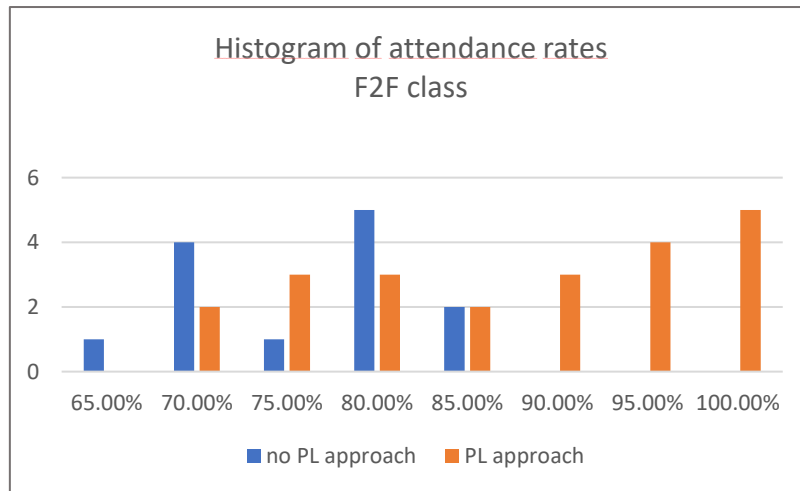the incorporation of Positive Leadership

Figure 2

Attendance rates of the face to face subject with and without

the incorporation of Positive Leadership

With regards to the online module, the grades of the students were also better than those of the semester before, when positive leadership had not been incorporated. The figure below shows the results.
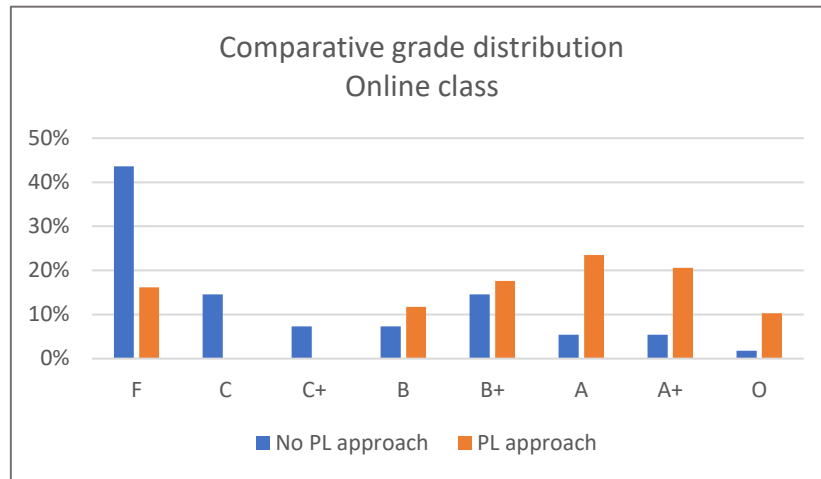
Figure 3

Grade distribution of the online subject with and without

the incorporation of Positive Leadership

In the case of the online subject, the analysis of attendance rates was replaced by the analysis of connection time. Results show that average connection time during the total duration of the subject doubled, and the student that connected the most, did it approximately six times as much as in the student that engaged the most in the previous semester.   The table below presents these results.

Table 2

Student connection time in the online subject with (2018) and without (2017)

the incorporation of Positive Leadership

	2017	2018
Average connection time	1,091 min	2,078 min
Maximum connection time	5,654 min	35,279 min
Number of students connecting > 1,000 min	46%	35%

5. Students´ qualitative impressions

A key component of this study is constituted by the qualitative information that was extracted from the two focus groups with students, which were organized immediately after the finalization of their subjects in December 2018.

Focus group 1: Face to face subject

The outcome of the first focus group was very positive. Some direct quotes from the participants include the following statements: "The environment of the class was comfortable", "We could ask any questions

easily", "The faculty welcomed questions asked in class and the interaction was two ways", "We received personalized attention".

The students unanimously agreed that the International Finance lectures were positive. In describing the interaction with the professor, the students stated that faculty was calm, interested in solving the problems, welcoming in solving their doubts, and always ready to provide real, practical examples that would clarify doubts.

The students described the class environment as positive and enthusiastic. Faculty would call everyone by name and that improved the interaction. There were group assignments and discussions in the class. Students emphasized that they were allowed to interact among themselves, contributing to the understanding of any student in the class. They also stated that the interaction was better than in other classes.

The students also said that they were able to identify each other's strengths and it created a strong bond between each other. Participants agreed that the faculty used simple language and engaged all students, so they wanted to attend the lectures. The students also reported that the students received personal time from faculty, and that the faculty was happy to give individualized attention to the students in case some topic needed more time by the student.

The students stated that faculty maintained a good class environment with strict discipline around the use of mobile phones in class. Once the ground rules were set, there was no distraction. One of the participants said that "for an hour and a half, not a single minute was wasted. We were never bored in the class – the time flew in the class".   Even more, another participant mentioned that "all of us who had no interest in the finance started having interest in class"

About the question asked regarding the applicability of the lectures to the students´ future, the students stated that the course was of great value and would help them become better professionals.

The student highlighted how the personal touch, like calling them by names, the individual attention and personalized problem solving, helped them to understand the subject better. They stated that "the faculty was high energy and passionate" and that "we remember all the concepts so much better because of the examples in a very engaging class". All students unanimously agreed that they will strongly recommend the pedagogy.

Focus group 2: Online subject

The students complimented the online course and mentioned that the course helped them realize their creative potential. The modules were interesting and they learned a lot about leadership. The students mentioned that the professor was interactive and called the student by first names. The faculty would encourage student participation in every topic, and sent timely messages and feedbacks to the students. The feedback was given in a positive way and students cherished that even the negative feedback was also given in a constructive manner.

The students appreciated the human touch by the faculty – like personalized e-mails to students complimenting their work, and particularly enjoyed the videos that the faculty herself recorded and shared during the module, which brought them much closer to their instructor than in other online courses.

Given the limitations of the course contents and learning activities, students got no opportunity to work in groups. However, there was much more interaction in the online discussions, where students were encouraged to share comments with the rest of the students. Engagement was higher, however, one student mentioned that he was not interested in the group interaction, and therefore was not connected to many students, because some colleagues would take tangent discussions of not much value to the rest.

In general, students agreed that the class environment was very competitive and enthusiastic. They think the course will help them in future, and unanimously recommend this positive, personalized intervention their professor introduced.

The discourse analysis of the students done on the recorded sessions provides some clear emerging concepts that the figure below summarizes:

Figure 4

Key concepts emerging from the discourse analysis of the focus groups

6. Impact on faculty

The direct voices of the faculty that participated in this pilot initiative are presented below. The text contains their personal impressions, reflections and learnings:

Professor 1, face to face course:

"It was a wonderful experience. The positive leadership book first talks about the philosophy of positive leadership as a concept and then a proper mechanism is given to practice it. Even after reading the book, I was slightly susceptible and doubtful about the practicality of this whole concept. However, I found that use of positive leadership strategies leads to positive deviance in the performance of students. Special attributes of positive leadership strategies are that these are outcome based.

This time I incorporated the strategies of positive leadership in my teaching pedagogy and the results were different in a measurable way. The strategies of positive leadership give the perspective of how to attain abundance in every aspect of life by focusing on one's strengths and capabilities. Many positive outcomes stimulated by positive communication and positive relationship, for example, discernible enhanced enthusiasm and desire to learn the concepts of the subject among students"

Professor 2, online course:

"The entire exercise of implementing positive leadership in class did take time and effort but the result made whole exercise worth it. The students who logged in regularly to the course remained quite engaged. They were very happy to get the feedbacks and prompt resolution of their concerns. Social presence of the instructor which was created through regular announcements and emails and discussions did create a human connection with the otherwise distant students. As compared to the other online courses, students enjoyed this one more because of the human connection created by implementing the positive leadership principles in the course.

Implementing positive leadership strategies in my online class was an enlightening experience. Through it, I consciously maintained a positive climate in the virtual class by appreciating the efforts of the students and providing feedbacks on a continuous basis. I also tried developing positive relationship with the students by positive communication. All these efforts resulted in higher levels of engagement of the students in the class. The student reviews reflected that they highly appreciated this positive connect with their instructor.

In this exercise, I realized that creating a human touch in our academic delivery definitely motivates the students. It particularly becomes crucial in an online environment, where the interactions between the student and the instructor are mediated by technology and most of the interactions may be asynchronous. Earlier I would knowingly maintain certain 'distance' with the students in the class because I believed that the students would value the academic delivery more than establishing 'positive climate' or 'positive communication' or 'positive relationship'. However, I realized that in addition to a good academic delivery in the class, students do value the 'positive leadership'. In fact, it is the positive leadership in class which catalyzes the absorption of academic content by the students.

The experiment has changed my fundamental belief about teacher-student relationship. I will definitely use positive leadership strategies in all my classes from now onwards and I am sure if other instructors do the same, they will get a positive result in terms of increased student engagement in the class".

6. Conclusions and recommendations

After the realization and analysis of the pilot study presented in this paper, the overall conclusion is that the introduction of the principles of Positive Leadership has created a favorable learning context and high satisfaction levels of students and faculty. Despite the limited scope of our study, it can be affirmed that Positive Leadership has also proven itself as a valuable tool in Higher Education.

By clearly defining the positive meaning of their subjects, creating a positive learning climate, boosting positive communication among students and faculty and generating positive relationships between them,

faculty have been able to improve learning and motivation of their students. The various components of the original hypothesis have all been validated in the research study, and therefore, in our context, it has been proved that Positive Leadership can humanize the teaching and learning process, increase faculty and student engagement, increase student satisfaction and improve learning effectiveness and academic outcomes.

There might be many other components that are crucial elements in the learning process and students´ readiness for a successful career, but the learning environment and the pedagogical approach of faculty are critical elements that have a lot to offer to the Higher Education arena, and it is the belief of the authors of this paper that Positive Leadership can constitute a very valuable approach that is worth exploring.

In the case of the university where the initiative took place, a phased rollout plan will be implemented, where an increasing number of volunteer faculty will be trained and supported to effectively incorporate Positive Leadership in their courses. Further research will determine if the positive effects can be confirmed at a greater scale.

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