

THE 7 Habits OF *Highly Affective* Teachers



Want to make your school a better place for everyone? Make emotional health a habit.

Rick Wormeli



Anxious, overconfident, curious, indifferent, angry, amused, lonely, hopeful, embarrassed, empowered, afraid, excited, diminished—teachers have seen all these emotions emerge from students as they engage with classroom content. Emotional responses to lessons often go through students' minds before they even begin to think about the material: *This stuff is stupid/awesome/beyond me. I'm not comfortable with this. Finally, something I'm good at. Maybe somebody will notice I can't read. Let's see her find a mistake in that one—it's perfect. Does the teacher know I didn't study this last night?*

Some of us deny this reality and claim we aren't trained to guide children's emotional health. We think our purpose is to teach content and skills only, not to deal with the touchy-feely stuff. This attitude turns a blind eye to the developmental nature of the students we serve, and it runs afoul of how minds learn. Unless we're the most severe of sociopaths, we all have emotional responses that affect what we do.

Adding to the messiness, our individual perspectives and experiences may put us out of sync with others' emotional states, even as the institutional nature of schools demands emotional synchronicity. The resulting miscommunication, blame, anxiety, and frustration are not the best ingredients for a good day at school.





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Teachers who deny the emotional elements of teaching and learning can become exhausted from ceaseless confrontations with students' emotional states, often blaming their personal stress and students' failure to learn on students' lack of motivation or maturity. They grow disconnected from students, creating an almost adversarial relationship with them: *I need to get them to shape up. It's them or me. These students are hopeless; why should I bother? It's the parents who created this situation.* This attitude can bleed into daily interactions with students and colleagues.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can develop constructive responses to our own affective needs as teachers and equip our students to do the same. These responses take mindfulness and practice to become daily habits. Borrowing and modifying the premise from Stephen Covey (1989), let's explore the seven habits of highly affective teachers.

1 Find joy in others' success.

Climbing the mountain ourselves and resting at the top while others struggle below isn't the goal; getting everyone to the top is. Our choice to become teachers is reaffirmed with every student's success. Do we experience genuine joy in our students' intellectual milestones? Do we let students see our encouraging smile and rising respect for their work? Or do we interrupt a student's clumsy attempt at a classroom demonstration and just do the task ourselves because it's easier?

We don't just present curriculum and document whether students sink or swim with it; we put skin in the game. We take a personal stake in Gabriella's use of proper dance technique and don't see it as a sacrifice to work with her a couple of times a week before or after school. It isn't an imposition to recommend an online tutorial to Cristian when he requests our input as he studies for an advanced

test. We whisper a triumphant, "Yes!" when Carl finally contributes substantively to a class discussion. We get a little misty-eyed when Larrinda's team places first in the robotics competition, knowing how hard they worked, how much they learned, and how happy their families will be.

2 Cultivate perspective and reframe.

Perspective is often the difference between empowering optimism and defeatist isolation. When a student is disrespectful to us, instead of taking it personally, we realize that he's 14 and has only an occasional filter on impulse control. We focus on the positive young adult he's becoming and help him see how his words and actions have consequences, guiding him in making amends and restoring trust, with tomorrow as a fresh start.

A change in perspective can also help us deal with daily challenges. When parents complain about our assignments, we can reframe the problem this way: *How can I communicate more clearly and in a timely manner so parents aren't frustrated, and how can I get an honest sense of how assignments are impacting students' home life?* Instead of whining about students' distractibility in class, we can seek ways to make our lessons developmentally responsive and meaningful so students are engaged. Hall duty between classes isn't such a hardship when we realize it's an opportunity to connect with students outside class.

Think about whether it's better to be right or to be kind in our interactions with students and colleagues. Sometimes our students need a win more than they need a correction, so we might be kind today and right tomorrow. Perspective provides hope where there is little, and it helps us commit to the long haul. Teachers who have seen formerly frustrating

students come back to visit as successful adults trust in the whole enterprise of schooling and growing up. Setbacks are momentary flashes of concern, not dictates of a locked-in future.

3 Ditch the easy caricature.

Ever since the days of hunters and gatherers, humans have been known for categorizing, much of it for survival. This is still true today: *Will this person hurt me or defend me? Is this person going to require a lot or a little of my energy and time? Do I belong in this group or in that other one?* We pigeonhole others: Eudora is the contrarian, Dave wears rose-colored glasses, Hassan is deep and philosophical, Steve is a sycophant, and Liz always has to see the numbers. We make these categorizations daily, and they affect our interactions with others.

When we see people as fully developed thinkers, they become more to us than our quick categorization reveals. They have value. As a result, we are less likely to dismiss their ideas as not worth considering or to assume nefarious intent on their part. When we visit students' homes and make other efforts to really understand who they are beyond the classroom, they become someone's son, daughter, brother, sister, mentor, surrogate parent, or inspiration. When we see them play in a soccer game, swim competitively, program computers, paint with finesse, perform in a concert, celebrate a religious milestone, or get a new scout badge, we see their extended effort and intellectual fortitude.

When a student becomes more to us than the class clown, mean girl, drama queen, geek, or jock, it is easier to remember that each student matters and is worth our time. They are not just one more paper to grade. We

think of them specifically as we plan our lessons, and we look forward to watching them progress. Time in their company is time well spent.

4 Explore the ethics of teaching.

We know that massive packets of worksheets don't teach, that oral dictation spelling tests are not tests of spelling, and that lectures with no opportunities to process content are ineffective—yet we rarely confront these practices in ourselves or others. Are we open to critique, or do colleagues see us as set in our ways? And what goes unlearned among our students when we play it politically safe?

Candor is hard, but when offered constructively and in a culture where it is safe to hold different opinions from those of our colleagues, it's invigorating. When we open up our practices to the scrutiny of respected colleagues and analyze the merits of our decisions, we may find our strategies lacking, but wrestling with practice like this breathes new life into our work. And we may find our practices validated by others, which creates camaraderie. An unexamined pedagogy can hinder learning, but an examined pedagogy empowers learning and gives our students the classrooms they need.

To what degree do we allow people untrained in teaching to tell us what to do? For example, educators often agree that percentage grades distort the accuracy of grade reports and should be abandoned (Guskey, 2013), but many districts keep them because parents want them. Some teachers count homework as 50 percent of the report card grade, even though we know how much this skews our reports of student performance against standards. Do we say something and change the practice? If we do nothing, we are effectively

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agreeing to distort the grade report.

Discover the energy that comes with candid exploration of ethical issues. Consider how your handling of issues like these may affect your students' well-being:

- An English language learner knows the content but cannot express his expertise because he has language limitations. Should he be allowed to take the test in his native language?

- A student is late with a project. Should her grade on the project be lowered? Or do we give her one grade on timely attention to deadlines and a different grade on how well her project meets academic standards?

- You want to honor diverse opinion and community values, but you teach life science and evolution in a community where a significant number of families are creationists or believe in intelligent design. How do you proceed?

5 Embrace humility.

To accept a new idea, we have to first admit that what we're doing is less effective than we thought. This can be tough because, for many of us, the way we teach defines much of who we are as individuals. If someone critiques our teaching, it feels like they're critiquing us. In humility, however, we grow comfortable with the idea that we may be wrong. One of the signs of an intellectual is the willingness to revise one's thinking. As modern educators, we are intellectuals, and hence open to revision.

Doubt can be our greatest compass rose, providing direction when needed: *My colleague posed a provocative question about that strategy I use, but I dismissed it as having no merit—Have I grown complacent? Could there be another interpretation of that classic text that's just as correct as mine? If I ask for assistance with this student, will the administration think less of me?*



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Let's invite administrators, parents, and students to evaluate us at any time. Let's let students and parents complete report cards on us, ones that they design but that we augment to include elements about which we'd like feedback. We might even want to share, discuss, and respond to this feedback publicly to show our willingness to learn.

6 Value intellect.

Teaching the same age group the same topics five periods a day year after year without intellectual stimulation breeds complacency. It's easier to pull out last year's lesson sequence and go through the motions than it is to breathe new life into the unit and respond to the unique nature of the individuals before us. This problem has existed for ages, as an 1895 report attests:

The deadening influence of routine in teaching is well known; . . . Said a college professor, "What can be more deadening to all intellectual interest than to read year after year the same classic author with the successive classes of students? I plead for a frequent change of authors." . . . No

teacher can afford to dispense with good scholarship; for without it he fails in his chief desire, which is to be of the highest service to his pupils. . . . A good test of the intellectual condition of the schools is to take an account of the studies the teachers are carrying on for themselves. (Seaver, 1895, pp. 21–22)

Teacher Diana Senechal writes on her blog (2013),

Teachers need room for their own lives and interests, even if they devote most of their time to school. Schools and policymakers should recognize that those outside pursuits enrich lives and translate into better teaching. . . . Teachers and students thrive in relation to substantial, beautiful, meaningful subject matter.

A well-nurtured intellect ignites us, deepening our passion for the field. Let's build that intellect. Here are just a few ideas to get you started (for more, see Wormeli, 2013, 2014):

- Start or participate in an Edcamp. To find an Edcamp near you, visit <http://edcamp.wikispaces.com>.

- Write for education publications. Analyzing and explaining what you do can clarify and transform your thinking.

■ Reconsider unit sequences. Should a later unit be taught earlier, or can you move through all the topics historically, rather than treating them as disconnected units?

■ Reflect on how you're different than you were 10 years ago and where you'll be 10 years from now. Identify decisions you've made to get to where you are today and what you still need to do to achieve your current goals.

■ Write a personal grading philosophy statement listing all your grading policies and a rationale for each one.

As you grow through these experiences, think about how you can use your learning to encourage and spark greater learning in your students.

7 Maintain passion and playfulness.

Having fun with your subject and your students will give students permission to engage, even invest, in their learning, and it will elevate your spirits. There's so much stress involved in teaching today's students; moments of true passion and playfulness bring back much-needed humanity.

Save your sanity, then, by incorporating students' names into your test questions and their community culture into their projects. Use props in lessons, take on the manner of a different character from time to time as you teach, and add something startling to two of your lessons this week.

Invite a colleague to burst into your class at a specific time and blurt something related to the lesson then leave quickly as you respond to the commotion with, "That was bizarre, but by good fortune, we can use the information!" Put a mysterious box in the middle of the room with yellow police tape around it and a sign that says, "Warning: Open one week from today, only in the presence of an adult." Activities like these build a sense of

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wonder and curiosity in students.

Show students you don't take yourself too seriously by daring them to find a mistake in your lessons. Insert random humorous slides into your media and lesson presentations, and embrace non sequiturs from students and yourself. Let students step into your shoes by teaching a portion of a lesson (perhaps using a family-friendly puppet you have on hand). Or have a student emcee a unit review game while you take a seat as a contestant.

Speak with just as much enthusiasm about your topic during 7th period as you did in 1st period—after all, it's your students' first time hearing this lesson. Find ways to turn seemingly boring material into a great romance or heroic drama. Get manipulatives into students' hands, and ask them to build physical models of abstract and intangible things (justice, algebra, metaphor, or genetics).

Ask students to think creatively by ranking a cantaloupe, a beach ball, a suitcase, and a copy of the Magna Carta in order of importance to one of the characters in a book. Or have them compose a dialog between two punctuation marks about who's more important. Make learning fun for yourself and your students whenever you can.

And One Bonus Habit

All these habits together create a feeling of emotional wellness, but they

are habits, not incidents. Like muscles that atrophy in disuse, these habits have to be used frequently to achieve emotional health benefits.

Fortunately, as we practice these seven habits, we discover an eighth habit, perhaps the most important: *Self-renew*. We need to consider which elements are ineffective and need to be dropped from our practice, what we need to change, and how to generate hope for today's students and our profession. Taking this time to renew whenever we can will enable us to move forward in positive ways.

Stephen Covey declared that our character is the composite of our habits. Let us then compose virtuous affective habits that will ensure the success of the next generation. ■

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Rick Wormeli (rwormeli@cox.net) is a longtime classroom teacher turned writer and education consultant and trainer. He is the author of several books, including *Summarization in Any Subject* (ASCD, 2004) and *The Collected Writings (So Far) of Rick Wormeli* (AMLE, 2014). Follow him on Twitter @rickwormeli2.