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## The positive impact of negative role models

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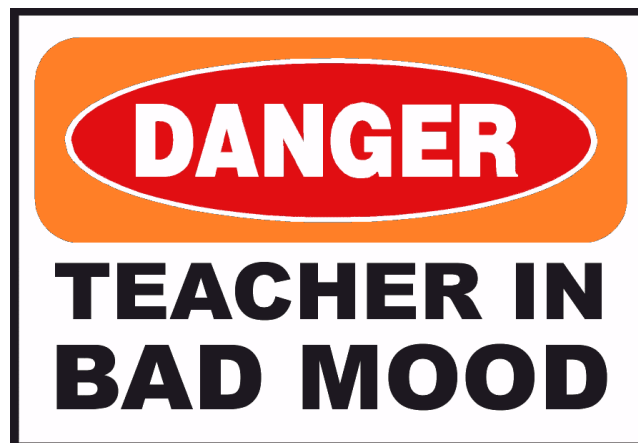
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# THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE ROLE-MODELS ON TEACHING

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**Abstract:** The attitude of teachers towards students can vary substantially in relation to different factors, such as educational background, pedagogical training, teaching methods, etc. In this paper, we explore the impact of negative role-models on future teaching. In particular, past experiences of teachers as students as well as the contextual influence of other teachers on their future teaching has been explored. The scope of this paper is to assess the possible impact that negative role-models may have on teaching performance, methods and quality. While the positive impact of positive role-models have been deeply investigated in the literature, the study of the impact of negative role-models is somewhat controversial. To investigate the positive impact of negative role-models, the key factors involved in the influence of role-models are presented and discussed through a set of case studies. Recommendations to address problematic cases are also presented.

**Keywords:** Role model. Teaching attitude. Teacher role. Superstar teacher. Lecturing. Negative teacher.

## 1. Introduction

*“Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach who we are”.*  
(Hamachek, 1999)

The term “role-model” has been introduced by the sociologist Robert Merton who emphasized that a person has a status set in the social setting in which he/she is “rather than assuming one status and one role” (Calhoun, 2010; Merton, 1968). In the context of higher education, a role-model is often associated with the influence of a teaching context, pedagogical education and past experiences as a student on teaching behaviour and attitudes (Lunenberg, Korthagen, & Swennen, 2007).

The importance of role-models in education has been discussed in several environments such as medicine (Copley, Osen, Rinkoff, & Huang, 2014), economics (Bosma, Hessels, Schutjens, Praag, & Verheul, 2012), sport science (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014), gender studies (Paredes, 2014), teacher education (Lunenberg et al., 2007), etc. In addition, the influence of academic discipline and teaching context on approaches to teaching have been investigated by researchers (Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, 2006).

A general classification of the characteristics of a role model involves three main components, namely 1) Competence, intended as the technical knowledge and skills of the teacher, 2) Teaching skills, intended as teacher’s capabilities to communicate knowledge, and 3) Personal qualities, i.e., attributes promoting ethical honesty, integrity, enthusiasm, etc. (Cruess, Cruess, & Steinert, 2008).

Two overall qualitative outcomes can be considered when analyzing the correlation between role models and their impact on teaching, i.e., the role models and their impact on teaching can be either positive or negative. This produces a typical 2x2 symmetric matrix, made of four different scenarios, namely 1) positive /positive (P/P), 2) positive/negative (P/N), 3) negative/positive (N/P), 4) negative/negative (N/N), as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Role-models and their impact on teaching.*

	<b>Impact</b>	
<b>Role model</b>	Positive	Negative
Positive	P/P	P/N
Negative	<b>N/P</b>	N/N

Cases in which positive role-models have a direct positive impact on future teachers have been investigated in the literature, such as the case of the so-called “superstar teachers” provoking self-enhancement and inspiration (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). However, positive role models have also been shown to cause demoralization (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In contrast, the interpretation of the impact of

negative role models can be somewhat difficult, with studies showing that the context has a key role in a resulting positive (N/P) or negative (N/N) impact (Lockwood et al., 2002).

Lockwood et al. (2002) found that using negative role models with people who prefer a strategy of pursuing desirable outcomes, can actually lower their motivation. This was also found for the reverse situation where people exposed to positive role models were discouraged because they preferred strategies to avoid failures. However, when people were primed for negative role models their motivation was increased when shown a negative role model. Lockwood et al. (2002) recommends that preventative goals should be stressed before using negative role models because people who prefer positive roles may be discouraged. In a separate experiment, people were asked to give an example of a positive or negative role model that motivated them and most respondents (73%) gave an example of a positive role model (Lockwood et al., 2002).

The main questions associated with this paper concerning the positive impact of negative role-models are:

- In which cases can negative role-models have a positive impact on teaching?
- What type of contextual environment can generate a positive impact from negative role models?

The aim of this paper is not to give a definitive answer to these questions, but to investigate the factors and variables that may have a key impact on these issues. To address this scope, the analysis of a set of case studies has been conducted in order to identify some common trends affecting the N/P case. The motivation of the paper comes from some relevant personal experience of the authors as well as the evident lack of literature on the subject.

## **2. Case studies**

These case studies shall demonstrate various situations in which negative role models have affected the approaches to teaching of the interviewees in a positive way. They have been collected by doing interviews with teachers at Lund University as well as collecting personal experiences within the project team. All interviews are anonymized, and the names are fictitious.

### **2.1. Methodology**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on seven higher education teachers. The interviewees varied in age, gender, years of teaching experience, cultural and educational background. Each interview started with the following introduction:

*“Hi! We are investigating the impact of negative role models in the education career of teachers and their impact on teaching attitudes. The interview is made anonymous. Take 5 minutes to reflect on your student and/or teacher life. Can you recall a teacher that appeared very negative in his/her role to you and, therefore, influenced your own approach of teaching? If so, how?”*

The interviewee had a few minutes to recall N/P cases that she/he personally experienced. Thereafter, the subject started with a brief description of the case and the practical consequences on her/his present teaching style.

To collect the background data and the case itself, an interview template (see Table 2) was developed to collect the following information: The interviewees were first asked about personal data for both, themselves and the negative role model at the time of the described case as well as themselves at the present time. This data includes (a) gender, (b) the mutual positions at the time of the described case, (c) professional background, (d) educational and cultural background, (e) the years of teaching experience, (f) the country where the case happened, as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2. Description of the case fields.*

a	Gender	gender of interviewee (Female F/ Male M)
b	Former position	position at the time of the described case
c	Professional Position	professional position at the time of the case
d	Educational Background	educational background at the time of the case
e	Experience	Teaching experience or length of time studying in years (yrs)
f	Country	country where the case occurred
g	SOLO-taxonomy	self-estimation of the learning outcomes gained through that negative role model, 1 = prestructural, 2 = unistructural, 3 = multistructural, 4 = relational, 5 = extended abstract and n.a. = not applicable

As a final assessment, the interviewee was introduced to the concept of SOLO-taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982) and she/he was requested to self-evaluate the observed learning outcome from the negative role model by addressing one of the five possible levels in the SOLO-taxonomy, as shown in the interview template (Annex 1). The SOLO-taxonomy self-estimation was asked at the end of the interview and was meant also to reflect the positive lessons learned from that situation that improved her/his teaching skills.

## 2.2. The cases

### Case 1 – *Sorry, but this is not your matter*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	F	F
Former position	Guest Lecturer	Student
Professional Position	Business expert	Bachelor student
Educational Background	Business	Chemistry
Experience	not applicable	not applicable
Country	Canada	
SOLO-taxonomy	4/5	

*The case:* Kay was attending a guest lecture held by Jamie. Jamie was a skilled and talented business expert and she did not teach very often to chemistry students. During the lecture, Jamie used the same approach that she had with the business students and she continuously referred to examples from the business industry. Kay felt inadequate and lost during the lecture.

*The impact:* Today, Kay is a talented associate professor in her 30s. She teaches in a foreign country to students from different backgrounds. She thinks that lectures should be tailored to the audience to be more inclusive.

### Case 2 – *My life is destroyed*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	F	F
Former position	Teacher	Student
Professional Position	High school teacher	High school student
Educational Background	not applicable	High school
Experience	not applicable	0yrs
Country	Canada	
SOLO-taxonomy	not applicable	

*The case:* Beth was greeted by her teacher Kristen, who was coming back after a long sick leave. Kristen started off with a desperate report of how her personal life was basically destroyed. The students were stunned.

*The impact:* Today, Beth teaches at the university and she often shares personal events to make the lectures more interesting and personal. However, the sharing is done carefully and is used to improve the learning experience. She avoids using the students as relief valve.

Case 3 – *Science is in our daily life*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	M	M
Former position	Teacher	Student
Professional Position	Academic	Master Student
Educational Background	Civil engineering	Environmental engineering
Experience	~30yrs	0yrs
Country	Italy	
SOLO-taxonomy	2	

*The case:* Gilbert taught applied physics in engineering masters' courses for many years. He knew the subject very well and he wrote equations on the whiteboard for hours. He never connected them to practical cases and/or applications. Bryan was forced to memorize many equations to pass the exam. He understood the applied physics concepts only thanks to his own passion.

*The impact:* By definition, applied physics is all about applications. Bryan today is a young PhD student and he gives lectures at the university. He always starts with a concrete example and he refers back to the theoretical background. This is much easier for the students to grasp the concepts and apply them to other cases. The learning outcomes improve dramatically by just explaining how the science comes into our daily lives.

Case 4 – *Ha! Ha! Ha! You, loser!*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	M	M
Former position	Examiner	Student
Professional Position	Associate Professor	Bachelor Student
Educational Background	Structural Engineering	Civil Engineering
Experience	~15yrs	2yrs
Country	Italy	
SOLO-taxonomy	2	

*The case:* Peter was informing the students about their written tests. 18/30 was the minimum requirement for accessing the oral examination and, finally, to get a pass on the course. He gathered all the students in a room and asked them to sit. He started to call them by name and corresponding evaluation. On top of that, he asked the student Jack Smith to stand up. He said "Smith, please stand up... thank you... mmm... you're very close to the boundary... however still below it! 16/30! Hahaha". Jack felt totally humiliated and he hated the course.

*The impact:* Jack is a PhD student today and he takes extra care in assessing students and in communicating the results to them. He knows that students put a lot of effort into their studies and they are very sensitive to evaluations. Through his own experience, he learnt that humiliation is

definitely a bad solution to stimulate a better student performance and extremely unprofessional.

*Case 5 – Hello, I am here!*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	M	M
Former position	Teacher	Student
Professional Position	Univ. Professor	University student
Educational Background	Real estate	-
Experience	20 yrs	2 yrs
Country	Not available	
SOLO-taxonomy	1-2/5	

*The case:* John was an engaged student listening to the lecture of Mr. Richardson, who had to deal with about 300 2<sup>nd</sup> year students in his class. However, Mr. Richardson's approach was to fully ignore the presence of the students by not paying attention to them, staring at the board / power point and bog down the lecture in routine. He was locked up in his own world and had no contact with his surroundings.

*The impact:* John became aware of how important it is to connect with students and ask for their feedback because of this experience. He is always trying to get feedback from students. He considers feedback to be extremely important in developing good teaching skills.

*Case 6 – What's the benefit to be here?*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	M	M
Former position	Teacher	Student
Professional Position	Assoc. Professor	1 <sup>st</sup> year lecturer
Educational Background	Computer Science	Computer Science
Experience	25 yrs	0 yrs
Country	Not available	
SOLO-taxonomy	2-3/5	

*The case:* Richard was used to teaching students by copying respective literature and reading this off in his lectures. He was convinced that this pedagogic approach was sufficient and usually did not comment any additional information to this. So he focused on providing the information without fetching feedback from the students. However, he complained to Paul, a young teacher who just started his university lecturer career, about the ignorance of the students to attend the course and their inability to learn the matter. He noticed that there were too few coming to his course and he was very sure that if they do so, they would not learn anything.

*The impact:* This experience impacted Paul's teaching career deeply. Since that time, Paul set the principle when planning a course that each student is worth an effort to give an added value to existing literature. There must be



an added benefit for a student to come to the course and get new information that is not found in literature.

Case 7 – *You are out...*

	<i>Negative Role Model</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>
Gender	M	F
Former position	Teacher	Student
Professional Position	Univ. Professor	University Student
Educational Background	Architecture	High school
Experience	30 yrs	0 yrs
Country	Not available	
SOLO-taxonomy	1-2	

*The case:* Marion, once an architecture student, was remembering Hans, an experienced teacher at University, who was responsible for one of the main introductory courses to Architecture for the 1<sup>st</sup> year students. It was a mandatory lecture with more than 600 students attending. So Hans decided that it was best to make clear at an early stage what the program was about. He started his lectures with the words "Most of you will not be able to study architecture. It is hard, it is complex and very few of you have the talent. Most of you are too stupid anyway." Marion believed that his intention was to reduce the number of participants to those who were actually really interested. Hans discouraged and shocked many of the new students in regards to the culture of university.

*The impact:* Marion finished the program and became a university teacher herself, but even 20 year later she still remembers this first very bad memory and takes now very much care that she doesn't discourage her students.

### 3. Discussion

*"Our students are our future colleagues. We can already now invite them to a broad community of practice, where students are viewed as colleagues, and thereby we can facilitate the creation of their identity"*  
(Svinicki, 2011)

Students usually are affected by their teachers' views and by their learning styles, that's why a consideration for the teacher's audience (students) is a good approach to the students' diverse knowledge and differences.

In **Case 1**; Kay considered her students background and tailored her lectures to the audience, in the opposite of her negative role model, where she had felt inadequate and lost as a student. One key to good lecturing is an awareness of the audience and adapting to the differences in students' knowledge, motivation, and skills for learning (Svinicki, 2011).

Also, as a role model, sometimes it helps the students to see you as a human being, with warmth, and a little humor. The issue is to have a limited

friendship with students and that one should be personal but not private (Elmgren & Henriksson, 2014). As it is indicated in **Case 2** Beth develops this limited friendship with her students but is careful to limit this friendship because if she is too close to the students it will be difficult to make demands on them as a teacher.

Negative role models can motivate students by inspiring them in their future as teachers to avoid the role models' failures and prevent their own mistakes (Lockwood et al., 2002). This was the impact of the negative role model in **Case 3** on Bryan. He realized that providing real life examples to his students would allow them to better understand the subject. One of the effective teaching styles is to adopt a personal model, where the teacher gives real life examples and encourages his students to observe and imitate how things in real life work (Julie Yazici, 2005). Also, giving an everyday example especially within the applicable discipline and writing a common phrase or sketching a relationship will give the students a chance to relate this to their lives. It will also provide visual cues, that can be used as a point of reference later for them (Svinicki, 2011).

In **Case 4** Jack had a goal to avoid what he encountered in his past negative role model, and he realized that humiliation would be a bad solution to stimulate his students and would be unprofessional as a teacher. Jack's goals could be described as prevention goals since his aim is to avoid the occurrence of negative past situations, which he observed in his negative role model. This allows developing a higher sensitivity to the presence of such types of problems in his future experience (Lockwood et al., 2002). Jack's current positive attitude as a role model today can make a difference on the learning process of his students (Gourneau, 2005).

This was the effect in **Case 7** also, where the role model, Hans, created negative emotions related to unsuccessful outcomes for Marion. Given her negative past experience, Marion has a preventing goal even after 20 years, i.e., not to become a negative role model, and not to discourage her students. A careless attitude from her negative role model and discouragement is today linked with the opposite Marion's sincere interest towards student's capabilities (Gourneau, 2005).

Sometimes, the lecture is an effective way of communicating information for the teacher and the students (Svinicki, 2011). However, in **Case 5**, this was not the case as there was scarce communication between the students and the teacher. This experience had an effect on John and now he always tries not to behave as his negative role model behaved. John believes that there should be feedback from the students and that this is important to develop teaching skills. Becoming conscious of what is going on in the students' minds, and considering feedback from students through interacting with them directly, or even through their facial expressions, non-verbal behavior, and oral comments is very important to help students to learn more effectively (Svinicki, 2011).

In **Case 6**, the negative role model was a one-way communicator with his students. This is another example of a negative role model having a positive impact on the person who experienced the poor teaching. Teaching involves communication between the students and the teachers, where the teachers influence their students, but also the students influence their teachers (Frymier, 2005).

Some of the interviewees had a difficult time at first recalling a negative role model. These people may prefer to use positive role models normally. Nevertheless, they were able to recall a negative role model and how this impacted their teaching methods. People tend to forget negative role models depending on their context/background. This suggests that there may be some occasions where persons prefer negative role models to avoid failures and negativity in their future teaching.

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