



ASCD Study Guide: Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains

The Power of Practical Optimism

By Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers





Explicitly teaching students that (1) learning changes the brain to support learner motivation and positive teacher expectations, (2) metacognition empowers them to monitor and adjust their learning progress, and (3) cognitive strategies improve their learning across contexts, can lead to a cycle of higher motivation and student learning in ways that help all students reach more of their potential.

This study guide and video featuring teachers implementing our “Drive Your Brain” approach is designed for nations, states, professional learning communities, and teachers who seek to support the learning and achievement of all students.

Introduction

This guide has been created to enrich your application of these research-based, practical, and original ideas for teaching metacognition. The Drive Your Brain® component is just one aspect of our popular BrainSMART® approach to teaching and learning.

This guide is not meant to cover all elements of the video but rather to emphasize key aspects that teachers have found useful: why it is important to teach using these ideas and strategies and how you can teach using our approach. We have found that teachers’ insights about their own learning have been quite powerful. Consider, for example, the following testimonials: “I can still learn important, life-changing things!” “Metacognition is a game changer for me, too.” “I love sharing this positively transformational approach with my students!”

You can use this study guide on your own, or you can pair with a colleague or form a study group. Teachers often enjoy sharing insights and lessons they have learned with colleagues to help students become more independent thinkers and learners.

Educators who want to implement this positive and practical approach to teaching metacognitive strategies might want to also read the book, *Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains: Metacognitive Strategies, Activities, and Lesson Ideas*, found on the ASCD website at www.ascd.org/drivetheirbrains.

The study guide includes a list of supporting resources to supplement, if you wish, your learning, and a series of guiding questions to help you reflect and apply that learning. Because the learning brain and metacognition are separate, but interlocking concepts, this guide addresses them independently, so that we can drill down into their specific details. Participants also will be delighted to learn that most of the supporting resources are available online. While the video was filmed in an elementary school, teachers can use most of the supporting resources across all grade levels and subjects.

Why Is Practical Optimism Important?

Research indicates that people with a positive outlook have less stress and better problem-solving skills than people who are less optimistic. In addition, optimistic learners are more likely to persist in the sometimes difficult work of learning, motivated by the belief that they can accomplish their academic goals. Optimism, which is associated with a brain pathway connecting the left prefrontal region to the amygdala, can be learned and enhanced. We share strategies and stories for increasing students' practical optimism and thus their motivation to learn and achieve.

Tips for Guiding Students to Use Practical Optimism

When teaching students to become motivated learners by increasing their practical optimism, consider using these strategies:

- Explain that how students think about their learning can affect their chances for success and, if appropriate for your students, ask them to give their own examples;
- Emphasize that students can adopt a more positive mindset about their ability to achieve their goals;
- Introduce the term *practical optimism*, define it, and use it often;
- Consider beginning with an explicit lesson that uses practical optimism;
- Notice students using practical optimism and recognize them;
- Emphasize that a can-do attitude and persistence in developing new knowledge and abilities contribute to positive outcomes;
- Inject some fun into your classroom; and
- Lead discussions that encourage students to share examples of the use of practical optimism across academic content areas, social situations, and in contexts outside of school.

In the video, Jill shares "Brightside, the Optimistic Puppy," one of the stories included in the book, *Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains*. Teachers have found the story appropriate for children in preK through primary grades. The story of Brightside illustrates the message that when you are optimistic about your ability to learn and succeed, you are most likely to do so. Feel free to use the original story in your classroom. Before sharing it, introduce the key terms *optimism* and *succeed*.



Brightside, the Optimistic Puppy

Brightside is a happy puppy.

*When it rains, the other puppies are sad. But Brightside says, "I love puddles!"
When it is time to go inside after playtime, the other puppies are sad. But Brightside says,
"I love cuddling up next to the fire!"*

When it is bath time, the other puppies are sad. But Brightside says, "I love bubbles!"

His mama calls him "my little optimist." Brightside doesn't know what that means, but it makes him happy just to hear her say it!

Brightside has many favorite things. His most favorite thing is playing with his boy, Jack. The puppy loves to go for walks with Jack and learn new things. He learns how to shake his paw. He learns how to bark when Jack gives him a signal. He learns how to balance a treat on his nose. Brightside doesn't always learn new things on the first try, but he knows that if he keeps trying, he will succeed.

One day, Jack decides to teach Brightside how to catch a ball. "Oh, boy!" Brightside thinks. "A new favorite thing!"

Jack throws the ball. Brightside runs fast and far. He runs so fast and so far the ball falls behind him. "Great!" Brightside thinks. "Now I know not to run so fast and so far."

Jack throws the ball again. This time Brightside runs slower and not so far. The ball sails over his head. "Great!" Brightside thinks. "Now I know not to run too fast or too slow. If I watch the ball carefully, this time I'll catch it."

Jack throws the ball one more time. Brightside watches the ball fly through the sky, and he runs toward it at just the right speed. Then he jumps up and catches it!

"Yay!" Jack calls. "I knew you could do it."

"Yay!" Brightside barks. "I knew I could do it, too! All I had to do was keep learning and trying! I love catching balls!"

Activity for after the read-aloud: Like Jill in the video, consider inviting children to share something important they have recently learned how to do. Did they make mistakes trying before they learned how to complete the task successfully? Consider modeling by telling students something you have recently learned.

Supporting Resources

If you'd like to delve more deeply into the power of optimism, check out the following materials:



Articles:

"Cultivating Practical Optimism: A Key to Getting the Best from Your Brain" discusses how to increase the likelihood of successful results in your students by cultivating an attitude about life that relies on taking realistic, positive action.

<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2017/09/cultivating-practical-optimism-key-to.html>

"Unleashing the Power of Positivity in Your School" reviews how educators can enhance positive school climate and practical optimism at school through focusing on the upside, gratitude, small acts of kindness, emotional mindfulness, brain and body exercise, and positive surroundings.

<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2017/06/unleashing-power-of-positivity-in-your.html>

"Positive Brains Are Smarter Brains" discusses how optimism and pessimism are somewhat predetermined by genetics, but we can influence positive outcomes by helping students take charge of their thoughts, feelings, and brain chemistry.

<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2015/12/positive-brains-are-smarter-brains.html#more>

"Celebrating BrainSMART's 20-Year Anniversary: Teachers Speak" offers strategies for decreasing stress and worry (which often stand in the way of a positive attitude).

<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2017/12/using-coat-hanger-strategy.html>



ASCD Book:

Chapter 3, Practical Optimism to Improve Motivation and Productivity, in *Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains: Metacognitive Strategies, Activities, and Lesson Ideas* (ASCD, 2016)

Guiding Questions

After watching the video, use the following questions to reflect on what you have learned:

1. In the video, Marcus discusses some benefits of an optimistic outlook. In your opinion, what are some benefits of a practical optimism?
2. How can teachers use the story of "Brightside, the Optimistic Puppy" to help young learners become more optimistic?
3. How does Jill model strategies from the "Tips for Guiding Students to Use Practical Optimism" section of the video? How does she model practical optimism explicitly? How does Jill model practical optimism implicitly?
4. Jill explicitly invites her students to talk about their mistakes when learning after she talks about her own. She asks, "What is something important you recently learned how to do, and if so, did you make mistakes while trying?" Keeping Jill's modeling in mind, what are some ways you encourage your students to learn from their mistakes?



5. After reading the article, “Cultivating Practical Optimism: A Key to Getting the Best from Your Brain,” consider how the story of “Treasure Hunters and Trash Collectors” can be used to create more practically optimistic classrooms. (The story and possible lesson steps to use in the classroom are included in the article.)
<http://donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com/2015/07/cultivating-practical-optimism-key-to.html>
6. What strategies might educators use to help parents better understand the importance of practical optimism at home? Through which events (e.g., parent-teacher conferences) and venues (e.g., parent newsletters) might you and your colleagues share information and strategies to enhance practical optimism with students’ families?
7. As you reflect on the video and any supporting materials you reviewed, what stories, ideas, lessons, and strategies might you use to increase students’ practical optimism? Considering what you have discovered from the video, what might be most helpful as you seek to reach students who suffer sadness, pessimism, and depression?

Reference

Wilson, D. L., & Conyers, M. A. (2016). *Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains: Metacognitive Strategies, Activities, and Lesson Ideas*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

About the Authors

For more than two decades, Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers—cofounders of BrainSMART, Inc. and the Center for Innovative Education and Prevention—have been pioneers in bridging brain science and cognitive psychology to educational practice.

Connect with Donna on social media: www.brainSMART.org

Facebook: Donna Wilson Conyers & BrainSMART

Blog: donnawilsonphd.blogspot.com

LinkedIn: Donna Wilson, PhD

Twitter: [@BrainSMARTU](https://twitter.com/BrainSMARTU)

Pinterest: BrainSMARTu

To inquire about bringing Donna and Marcus to your conference, or to provide professional development for educators in your geographical area, contact donna@brainSMART.org.