

# Connection Catalyst: Sparking Learner Engagement Through Intentional Design

Rombaoa Tanaka, N.

*Abstract: The Hawai'i Positive Engagement Project (H-PEP) addresses critical social and emotional needs of educators and parents of young students. Grounded in research on well-being, Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIS), and Adaptive Leadership, this program aims to empower Native Hawaiian adults to increase their well-being and flourishing, thus enhancing their effectiveness in supporting youth. Through synchronous online retreats and asynchronous weekly well-being Calls to Action, H-PEP has served 225 participants throughout the state of Hawai'i via six 10-week cohorts. H-PEP works to spark learner engagement through intentional program design. This paper will further discuss our key lessons learned: 1) integration of adaptive work is a must in order to foster sustainable participant growth and shifts, 2) designing engaging retreats is possible even if they are online synchronous meetings, and 3) using a creative blend of strategies for effective learning supplementation is key.*

## Background

The Hawai'i Positive Engagement Project's (H-PEP's) mission is to innovatively address Native Hawaiian needs that were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Native Hawaiian educators and parents are experiencing toxic stress at an all-time high (Kaholokula et al., 2020). Students lost precious instructional time during the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020), with Hawai'i absenteeism at an all-time high—53% chronic absenteeism compared to 15% pre-pandemic (Lee, 2021). Data highlights Native Hawaiian students' need for more support. Pending HDOE budget cuts could cause “extinction-level impact to Hawaiian education” (Kukahiko et al., 2020, p. 4). H-PEP addresses the social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of Native Hawaiian parents and educators to regulate toxic stress so that they are more effective in supporting their children/ students. H-PEP's focus on adult SEL in addition to technical training on Positive Psychology Interventions in an online cohort setting is an innovative, yet essential, approach that yields higher rates of teacher self-efficacy and well-being (Rombaosa Tanaka et al., 2020). Based on the research base on Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) and 13 years of experience, H-PEP believes this is the main reason traditional professional development (PD) fails to spark lasting change— training without recognition of learners' social and emotional state is incomplete, ineffective, and outdated— yet widely used.

## Project details

Since 2021, H-PEP has explored ways that the widely used technologies of Zoom, Slack, and Google Suite can be used to empower oneself and others. The purpose of these cohorts is to mitigate participants' toxic stress so they can be their most effective self when supporting students.

Participants attended an Opening, Middle, and Closing retreat (18 hours total) via Zoom. Previously, these all-day sessions were held in person, but formats have been modified due to the pandemic. The new strategy is to pre-mail materials and to engage participants with adaptive activities. The Opening Retreat is an orientation session where participants meet their coaches and start to build connections. Participants identify their Values in Action Character Strengths and learn more about/be assigned to use their top strengths daily, shown to reduce symptoms of depression and increase self-contentment (Seligman et al., 2005) that have become even more problematic for teachers and families due to the fall-out from the pandemic (Cardoza, 2021). This reduction in symptoms of depression is critical as depressive symptoms in elementary teachers have been associated with reduced quality of the classroom learning environment and student achievement (McLean & Connor, 2015). During the Middle Retreat, participants create vision boards and create books so they can bring the bookmaking process to their classrooms/families to support children. At the Closing Retreat, participants reflect on their journey and celebrate their progress.

Positive Psychology, founded in 1998 by Dr. Seligman, offers a new paradigm of psychology that is strengths-based and promotes flourishing and optimal functioning. Positive Psychology Interventions, or PPIs, are psychological interventions to increase happiness, well-being, and positive cognitions and emotions (Keyes et al., 2012). PPIs are scientifically proven and evidence-based, address at least one construct of Positive Psychology, and have lifetime benefits (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). There are seven categories of PPIs: Savoring, Gratitude, Kindness Boosters, Empathy, Optimistic, Strength-Building Measures, and Meaning Oriented (Schueller & Parks, 2014). Since PPIs are strengths-based, they provide opportunities to help Native Hawaiian participants flourish in culturally aligned ways instead of focusing on deficits and problems, as traditional psychological interventions do (Chowdhury, 2021). Additionally, PPIs are likely to be highly effective against toxic stress, depression, and disconnection that have occurred due to the pandemic. The project delivered curriculum online asynchronously via their private YouTube and private social media community and mailed hard copy instructions. Participants were asked to complete and reflect on these weekly activities in this online community, providing participants the opportunity to connect and support each other.

## Three key lessons learned

Building personal well-being is a wicked problem that requires adaptive work, such as identifying values and character strengths, fostering relationships, and engaging in personal reflection. Without this adaptive work, PD is likely to result in only

temporary changes that fade once technical support is removed. Conducting PD without adaptive work ultimately sets participants up for long-term failure.

With the completion of five online well-being cohorts, H-PEP has learned many valuable lessons. Here are the top three best practices that the project recommends:

## **Adaptive work is a must**

Building personal well-being is a wicked problem that requires adaptive work, such as identifying values and character strengths, fostering relationships, and engaging in personal reflection. Without this adaptive work, PD is likely to result in only temporary changes that fade once technical support is removed. Conducting PD without adaptive work ultimately sets participants up for long-term failure.

Technical work, where an “expert” teaches strategies to a passive audience (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997), is what traditional PD models are based on. This one-way approach devalues the lived experiences and collective wisdom of learners. Adaptive work serves as a culturally grounded antidote, creating a reciprocal learning experience rooted in mutual respect. Shifting PD away from a purely technical model requires humility, awareness, and the intentional integration of adaptive work—ensuring that learning leads to meaningful, lasting transformation.

## **Online retreats can be designed for high engagement**

Meaningful, fun, and interactive online retreats can be successfully designed. H-PEP facilitated 8-hour Zoom retreats for over 60 participants by incorporating engaging elements such as mailed surprise boxes with a live unboxing, collaborative problem-solving through BreakoutEDU puzzles, and structured team discussions highlighting strengths and leadership styles. An effective icebreaker, “Speedy Talk Story,” paired participants for rotating six-minute conversations, fostering connection and engagement. Creativity in professional development design, rather than technology itself, determines the level of interaction.

## **Utilize a mix of strategies to supplement online learning**

Third, when possible, PD should creatively recognize progress and “what’s going right” with participants. For example, H-PEP created short weekly YouTube videos that provided technical training on Positive Psychology Interventions and Calls to Actions, which asked participants to implement the weekly activities in their daily lives. These YouTube videos were posted in our private cohort Slack community, and links were texted to participants on their mobile phones. After the week was complete, participants were asked to fill out an online feedback form on Google Forms. Project staff would then mail participants “Happy Mail,” which included a letter highlighting the main ideas for the week and an embroidered badge of an image tied to Hawaiian culture and the weekly content. This combination of digital and tangible elements significantly increased engagement and data collection rates.

## **Conclusion**

The Hawai’i Positive Engagement Project’s key takeaways suggest several key implications for the future of professional development (PD) for educators and parents, particularly in the context of post-pandemic-induced stress. First, it is evident that integrating adaptive work—such as values identification, relationship building, and personal reflection—is critical for sustainable growth and lasting change. Without this focus, PD initiatives are likely to produce short-term results rather than

lasting behavioral shifts. This emphasizes the importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of participants before engaging in technical training, which can foster resilience and long-term well-being.

Second, the success of online synchronous retreats demonstrates that high engagement and interactive experiences can be achieved in virtual settings. Well-designed virtual retreats, with features like mailed materials and collaborative activities, can build community and ensure that participants are actively involved, even in an online environment. This takeaway offers a model for designing future PD experiences that maximize engagement, regardless of the medium.

Lastly, the combination of online learning, real-world strategies, and positive reinforcement sparked participant engagement and reflection. The use of supplemental materials, such as online videos and hard copy mailings, not only enhanced learning but also reinforced the cultural alignment of the curriculum. This suggests that blending digital and tangible approaches in PD can improve outcomes and engagement, particularly for diverse populations like Native Hawaiians, whose cultural context is crucial for effective learning. Future PD models should continue to incorporate these blended strategies to meet the evolving needs of educators and parents in a post-pandemic world.

In conclusion, H-PEP's innovative approach to adult social and emotional learning, alongside its use of technology and community-building strategies, has been instrumental in helping educators and parents navigate the challenges posed by increased stress. The project emphasizes the need for holistic, adaptive, and strengths-based interventions to foster well-being in Native Hawaiian communities, enhancing their ability to support their students effectively.

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## Acknowledgments

The Hawai'i Positive Engagement Project: SPARK Aloha was made possible by the United States Department of Education's Native Hawaiian Education Program, Award #S362A210078. H-PEP is housed in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education's Center on Disability Studies. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Government or the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

