

# How teaching mood control can improve school performance



By David Hodgson

The most success I've had in schools is by renaming things



I write this article as rain slices through a charcoal Manchester sky and raindrops punch the roof of my car. Sometimes it's better to be inside looking out. The storm deluging the UK is called Dennis. Naming things is important. Since storms have been named the reporters have an extra swagger. They stand atop a precarious bridge clutching a mic tightly as their hair swings across their contorted faces before cutting to an earlier sequence in which we see a bemused granny in a dinghy, being guided by a partially submerged fireman, down a river that was the high street three hours ago. Naming things is important. Though perhaps storms could be given more dramatic names like Thor or Destruction rather than the names of benevolent uncles and aunts like Colin, Dennis or Gladys.

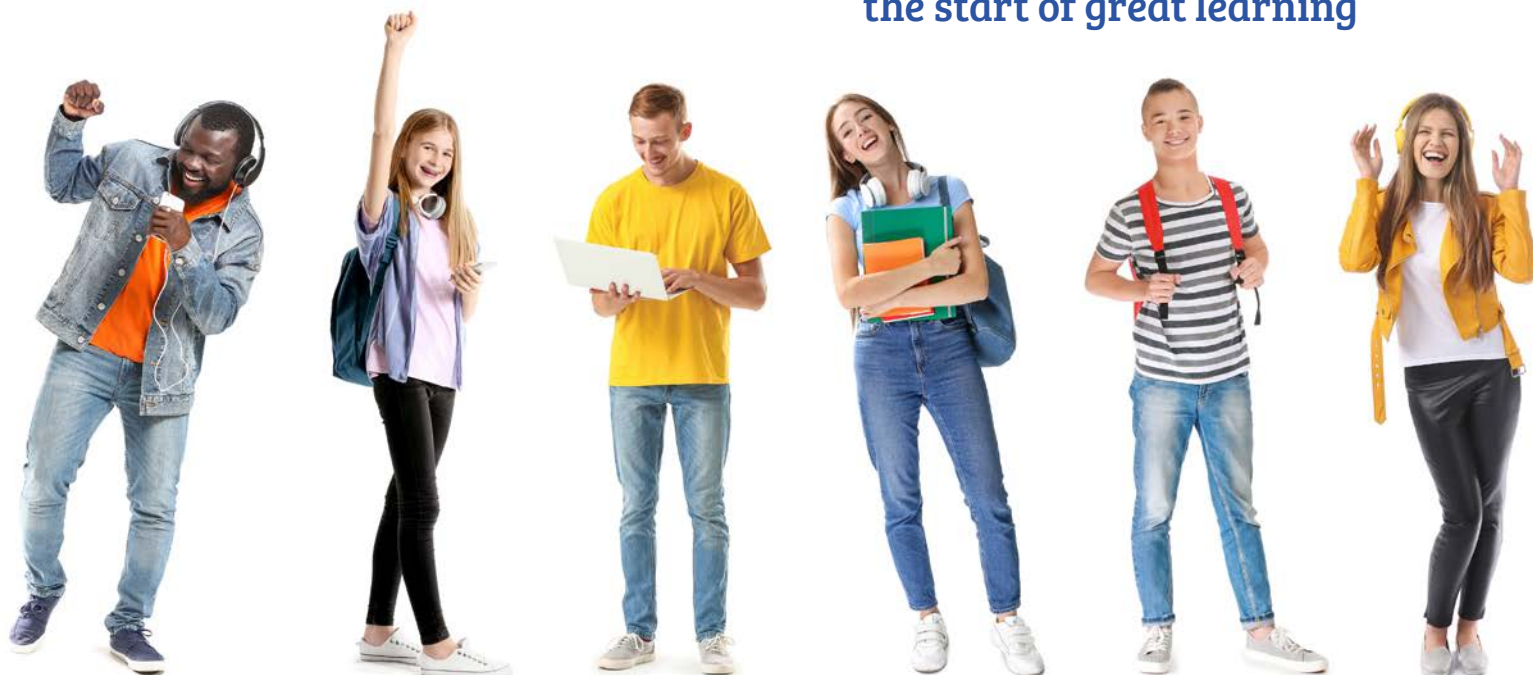
The most success I've had in schools is by renaming things. Asking children to name the state they're in allows them to take control of their learning. Bored, curious, excited, nervous are names given to the moods at the start of a lesson. The mood, invariably persistent, then predicts the direction of the lesson as reliably as the flow of flood waters.

I modelled top-performing students for my book *The Brainbox*, and top-performing teachers for my books *The Little Book of Charisma* and *The Little Book of Inspirational Teaching Activities*:

*Bringing NLP into the Classroom* and find that just naming the ideas something else has allowed me to spread some of the benefits of NLP applications.

Always be in the right mood for whatever it is you're going to do next. This is probably the best life advice I've ever been given. When I modelled students this was my most important observation. The maths class sat leaning forward in rapt attention, waiting for the maths to begin with an almost unbearable thirsty anticipation. 'What are we going to revise, Sir?' The slide revealed the title. 'Oh brilliant, I love surds!' Their palpable heightened state of awareness was replicated by high-performing students in all other subjects too. So being in a state of curiosity like a child being offered a choice from a full tub of Celebrations is the start of great learning. Other moods just don't result in great learning. This is worth knowing. Students only move into the right state for the subjects they like. Fifty per cent of students consciously enter the right state at the beginning of a lesson, only a quarter of students get into the right state for revision and half sabotage exam performance by being nervous during their time in the exam hall. Their state for subjects they dislike is named boredom, irritation or even contempt. I've worked with hundreds of students on state control to start all lessons, exams and revision. This has a huge influence on the performance

## Being in a state of curiosity is the start of great learning



level that follows. At the Olympics, in the final of the 100 metres event, the crouched athletes awaiting the starting gun will have ensured they are in the right state. They won't be thinking of the inadequate hotel toast-making machine at breakfast (always too slow or too fast), they'll be in exactly the right state. I help students choose to avoid boredom during lessons. In exams I help students avoid nerves. The famous Aberdeen puppy experiment revealed the important role of oxytocin on performance. Fifteen minutes before an exam half of the students stroked puppies, the others did not. The results were clear: the puppy-stroking students did far better. The experiment was repeated and the results replicated. The difference was higher levels of oxytocin in the blood. Oxytocin, the cuddle chemical, helps us relax, feel safe and may also boost our creativity. This is enough to positively impact exam grades. Many universities now offer their students oxytocin-boosting animal-petting sessions during the exam season. I've suggested schools introduce their own version of this



and their ideas have included using pictures of puppies or kittens in the exam venue, playing calming music or a quick silly dance routine before they sit down, and providing a pre-exam breakfast to students with reassuring pep talks.

Learning how to anchor states prior to lessons, revision or exams takes only a few seconds. This is an easy win for teachers and students looking for ways to boost SATs and GCSE performance.

When I first qualified I attempted to push NLP into education with the ferocity of a storm. I'm now far more subtle. Some teachers are adamant that NLP is wrong, evil and discredited. Then they often say something like, 'The year 10 group you're going to work with are particularly challenging,' as they contort their face in a sorry-nothing-to-do-with-us expression. When they register my disappointment they quickly follow up with, 'Year 7 are lovely though,' in an attempt to redress the balance, unaware of their flagrant use of NLP. Really? I wonder. All of them some of the time or some of them all of the time? I realised that NLP has always been in schools, especially in those schools that think it isn't. It's also in rude health in hospitals, armies, governments and churches too, but enough of preaching to the converted. After all, we NLP people are supposed to be good communicators. We just need to be aware that some things need to be handled carefully, like changing a colostomy bag or returning the Christmas decorations to the loft (if I hadn't had to Hoover up shattered baubles from the landing floor this article would have been better).

As I finish writing this article the storm has passed. States pass too but being able to choose the right one changes the results we achieve. We can't control the weather but we can control our internal states to influence outcomes. This is one of NLP's best ideas and definitely worth sharing in schools. ■

**David Hodgson** is a training consultant and author who works with teachers and students across the UK and abroad. He has written a number of books to help teachers and students thrive in the classroom and beyond. Please visit [www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk) to see David's published books.