Character Strengths, Health, Well-being & Autonomous Learning In New Students

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Research Team
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Background

Autonomous Learning and Positive Psychology

There is a large literature examining the effects of various pedagogies on the development of autonomous learning [1,2]. However, there is a dearth of research, focusing on the personal qualities of students, which facilitate or impede their development as autonomous learners. A personal sense of autonomy underpins autonomous learning as outlined in self-determination theory [3]. This project adopts the perspective of the new school of Positive Psychology [4]. This approach identifies and measures human strengths and has developed psycho-educational interventions to enable individuals to maximise the use of their personal strengths to increase their confidence and self-esteem. One of the core requirements of autonomous learning is confidence and this project aims to use measures and techniques from positive psychology to develop student confidence to facilitate their development as autonomous learners [3].

Mental Health, Well-being and Life Satisfaction

One aim of education must be to foster well-being and life satisfaction and the ability to cope with adversities in life. There is evidence that significant levels of psychological distress are experienced by some students. Measures of mental health, well-being and life satisfaction were included to allow us to explore this issue.

Procedure

Measures
A questionnaire was designed to measure character strengths. Only character strengths that can be developed via interventions were assessed, and which were theoretically linked to learning abilities. In response to concerns about levels of psychological distress in students, measures of mental health, well-being and life satisfaction were incorporated.
Ethical approval was obtained from the D&S Research ethics Committee.

Initial Assessment
214 first year students were given a questionnaire assessing their character strengths on their first day at university in their seminar groups preceding team building exercises.

Analysis
An SPSS data set was created and student scores on individual scales were converted into standardized z-scores to allow comparison of scores between different scales. The top three character strengths were identified for each individual and a personal report describing their three top strengths was prepared for each student.

Feedback and Follow-Up
Two weeks after the data had been collected, reports were delivered to students in seminars on a personal and academic skills development module. Students were again briefed on what character strengths were and each given the report on their three top strengths. After time to read the report, students completed a brief questionnaire to assess their reactions to the report. Seminar tutors then encouraged students to include reference to their top strengths in their early work on their personal Development Portfolios.

Extended Follow-up
At the start of semester 2, students will be followed up and assessments made of attitudes to learning, self-efficacy, self-esteem, mental health, well-being and life satisfaction to allow an assessment amongst other things of the impact that the university experience is having on these students.

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Some Preliminary Results

Strengths & Autonomous Learning
- Exploratory curiosity, positive thinking and course self-efficacy were statistically significant predictors of autonomous learning.

- Positive thinking, course self-efficacy and hope agency (measures motivation to pursue goals) were statistically significant predictors of attitude to learning.

Strengths & Well-being
- Hope agency, hope pathways and course-self-efficacy were statistically significant predictors of mental health.

- Self-esteem, gratitude, social self-efficacy were statistically significant predictors of life satisfaction.

Impact of Assessment
- Over 50% of students would not have described themselves as having these character strengths.
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- 64% were aware of using the strengths described.

- Just under 50% immediately wondered about how they had scored on the other strengths

Outputs
- Paper on study reported here.
- Paper on relationship of measures to self-determination theory (Still to analyse).
- Paper on new measure of autonomous learning developed for the study & being validated.

Future
An online package to assess student psychological strengths can be developed for dissemination across the university and exercises to develop strengths.

References
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