

Workshops to Develop Psychological Strengths to Facilitate Autonomous Learning in First Year Students

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Background

Positive Psychology¹ is a relative new development, which aims to foster well-being in individuals, organisations and societies. Research has identified a cross-culturally common set of character strengths which can be measured reliably. Everyone possess these strengths but in varying degrees. Individuals are not always aware of possessing these strengths. Many of these strengths can be developed further via psycho-educational interventions.

Autonomous learning

Learner autonomy can be conceptualised as a *capacity* for taking control of learning². It requires the development of a set of personal qualities and skills. A personal sense of autonomy underpins **autonomous learning**³. Confidence is a core requirement of personal autonomy and positive psychology interventions offer a way to increase student confidence in their own abilities. This should also increase their self-esteem and thereby facilitate their development as autonomous learners.

Aims

- To increase student confidence and related self-esteem via psycho-educational interventions delivered to student volunteers through a series of four workshops in semester two.
- To facilitate autonomous learning in participants
- To evaluate the impact of the workshops on students:
 - Self-confidence
 - Self-Esteem
 - Attitude to autonomous learning
 - General levels of autonomy

Procedure

Students were informed about the workshops in semester 1 when their character strengths were assessed. Students will be recruited from first year psychology and joint honours courses. These students have previously had their character strengths assessed and fed back to them.

A baseline assessment of strengths, self-efficacy (confidence measure), self-esteem and well-being will be undertaken.

The workshops will be facilitated by Ann Macaskill & Andrew Denovan who are both health psychologists. David Bowles with the help of 2 third year students on a research experience module will evaluate the interventions.

Post-intervention, the baseline measures will be repeated and qualitative data on the student experience will also be collected.

A series of 4 two hour workshops are planned. Ethical approval for the project will be sought.

Workshop Topics

The results of the previous CETL project on assessing student character strengths are being used to inform the choice of workshop topics. Only character strengths that can be further developed via interventions were measured. The workshops aim to educate students about the relationship between cognitions, emotions and self-perceptions.

Strengths being Targeted: These were all shown to be significant predictors of autonomous learning in the initial study.

Positive thinking: This theme underpins all the workshops. The interventions are based on well developed principles from cognitive behavioural therapy and also utilise thinking exercises from the positive psychology research literature.

Self-efficacy: Cognitive blocks to self-efficacy will be explored, ways of undermining their own confidence will be identified and confidence boosting techniques examined and implementation work undertaken.

Hope agency: This is a major component of future-oriented motivation to achieve goals.

Gratitude: This is a significant predictor of life satisfaction and well-being, hence its inclusion.

References

1. Seligman, M. E. P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-1
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3. Sinclair, B., I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) (2000) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. *Internet TESL Journal*, 6, 1-11.

Research Team

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