Applying 'hope theory' to first year learning. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This paper proposes a model of student support based on student goals and strengths, rather than addressing their weaknesses. It argues that Hope Theory can be used in education as it has been used in counselling to assist students to develop goal setting and a sense of agency by building on their strengths. It suggests that careful curriculum design and engaged learning are essential to building hope and eventual learning success; and that this can be achieved through ongoing collaboration between professional and academic staff. While acknowledging the limitations of a convenience sample, it presents a case study of a single first year course with an enrolment of 250 students.

Transforming higher education

The Australian Government has announced its ambition for growth in higher education attainment, aiming for 40% of all 25 to 34 year olds to hold a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), and has established as a priority the transformation of access to higher education by students from low socio economic backgrounds (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Criticisms of these changes and predictions of their outcomes have been expressed in both the popular and academic press (Bosanquet, 2009; Hare, & Ross, 2012; Massaro, 2009; Meyers, 2012). The combination of a belief that students are being accepted into university with little chance of success, and a government policy that funded tertiary education providers on the basis of successful student completions, has led to an increasing emphasis on limiting student attrition. Significant attrition of students in their first year at university is an international phenomenon, and it is recognised that the causes of first year attrition are "multi-faceted, complex and context-specific" (Whitehead, 2012, p. 384).

The responses to attrition have been fairly uniform, with retention programs worldwide focusing primarily on what new students lack, and concentrating on remedying this lack in an attempt to give students every chance of success. Retention programs seem to follow a consistent pattern of identifying student "needs" through assessment and monitoring, and addressing those needs through a range of support and training methods. (Bowles, & Jones, 2003; Habley, & McClanahan, 2004). Clifton and Anderson (2002), who devised the *StrengthsQuest* program, criticise retention programs that focus on students' academic deficits and attempt only to identify and remedy these. They argue that more effective approaches to student retention and success should be based on working with students' strengths.

Nurturing hope for student success

As Sally Kift points out, "starting first year at university can be a daunting experience and a big adjustment for new students. Some adjust easily and thrive. As many as one third do not and think about leaving" (Kift, 2014, p. 1). Students arriving at the University of Newcastle (UoN), Australia, seem increasingly to be overwhelmed by what faces them, rather than excited by new opportunities and interesting challenges. For several years in their pre-tertiary studies, they have been working towards the goal of a particular ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank), a goal which my students have often reported as being set by parents or social expectations rather than personal motivations. To achieve this goal, they have been trained to excel at specific academic tests and tasks, and are often over-supported by "helicopter" parents. When they start their first week of the semester, many have no new goals to work towards, and in many cases little experience in developing pathways to achieve goals they have set themselves. Many even leave university after four years believing things will work out, though with no plans for how that will happen (Arum & Roksa, 2014).

The combination of the absence of clear goals and the capacity to work towards goals by overcoming obstacles means that students may not reach optimal functioning in their first year at university,

and in my experience are likely to see this as a reflection on their abilities. This self-assessment has led to students dropping out of courses and programs. In 2012, UoN interviewed approximately six hundred students who had withdrawn prior to census date, and the responses aligned with other studies in identifying a feeling of not belonging as a reason for student attrition (Scott, Shah, Grebenikov, & Singh, 2008). Support programs that identify their "weaknesses" and attempt to remedy those weaknesses may simply increase the student's perception that they do not belong at university. Snyder (2002) argues that the pathway to helping people attain optimal functioning would be one that engages people in activities "that match their strengths rather than trying to fix their weaknesses" (p. 253)—a process through which people develop hope based on "self-referential thoughts about their capacity to produce routes to goals" (p. 250).

Many students enter their first year filled with hope, but this hope is based on a perception that anyone can reach any desired goal, without any focussed ideas on how this is achieved (Snyder, 2002). This kind of hope may be better described as optimism. It is based on emotion and, as such, is susceptible to fading or disappearing entirely when students face challenges (Williams & Butler, 2010).

Some students will possess, or can develop, a different kind of hope—one based on thinking about one's goals and the motivations to pursue them, and the possible pathways to those goals. Snyder (1995) defined hope as "individuals' perceptions regarding their capacities to (1) clearly conceptualise goals, (2) develop the specific strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking), and (3) initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking)" (p. 355). Hope is having clear goals along with the perceived capability to discover pathways to those goals and a belief that one can initiate action to follow those pathways, a combination of "pathways thinking" and "agency thinking" (Snyder, 2000).

Hope theory (Smith, 2006) is a strengths-based concept within the positive psychology field, where the concept of "learned optimism" has shifted the focus to helping clients construct positive perceptions about the future through goal setting, optimism, and hope (Seligman, 1991; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). School psychologists in particular have recognised the benefits of practices that are based on strength building, rather than deficiency focused (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg, & Furlong, 2004). Hope theory has been seen to have promise in the prediction of persistence in higher education, and it makes sense that students entering university with the confidence to set goals and a commitment to pursue different avenues to achieve them would have a significant potential to persist in their studies. *Adult Hope Scale* scores have provided reliable predictors of student success over their undergraduate careers, with students who have high scores more consistently achieving higher grades and graduating from college than students with low scores (Holder, 2007; Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman , 2003; Williams & Butler, 2010).

Locke and Latham (2002) have described goal setting as helping students direct their attention and effort towards productive activities; energising and stimulating action; encouraging the perseverance that Duckworth and colleagues call "grit" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly,, 2007); and helping develop task-appropriate knowledge and skills.

Skinner (1996) defines agency as the condition of "the self as agent, the self's actions or behaviours as the means, and an effected change in the social or physical environment as the outcome" (p. 558), that is, agency is where an individual can bring about change through their own actions. Choice is essential to agency, "because choosing is an action through which agents may simultaneously express unique preferences and alter the world according to those preferences" (Snibbe & Markus, 2005, p. 706).

Pathway thinking describes a person's ability to generate one or more workable routes to their goal. These mental plans or road maps that guide hopeful thought have been described as "waypower" (Snyder, 1995, p. 10). People who have willpower, or the ambition to achieve their goals, may not necessarily have a similarly developed ability to create the paths that lead to goal achievement, that is, they may not have waypower to accompany their willpower.

Supporting hope

In 2005, Tinto commented that while many universities were committed to increasing student retention, they treated student success as one more item added to the issues to be addressed at the institutional level. These issues were usually approached through a "tacked on" strategy, where a specific unit addressing the problem was added rather than redeveloping the educational character of courses or changing the institutional climate (Tinto, 2005). Tinto points out that student success is built on success in individual courses, one course at a time. Institutions of higher education have generally concentrated their efforts in student retention outside the classroom, in centres of student support. Increasingly they are moving towards institution-wide

diagnostic testing, particularly in maths and writing, and a range of types of remedial activities in response to the test scores (Ní fhloinn, Bhaird, & Nolan, 2013). However a significant body of evidence demonstrates that academic support is most effective when it is integrated into the learning environment (Bowles & Jones, 2003).

Faculty have an important role in developing hope, within the classroom. Students quickly develop expectations of their university careers based on their classroom experiences, and if those expectations support a feeling of belonging, they increase student perceptions of their ability to succeed (Tinto, 2005). The ability of faculty to give students a sense of agency, to teach goal-setting, and to develop persistence in following pathways to achievement, will alter both the degree and type of student experience, and increase the opportunities for success.

Case study

The first year course *Film, Media and Cultural Studies* at UoN, was remodelled to incorporate activities designed to build in students the ability to set goals in line with their strengths, to have a sense of agency in regard to their studies, and to be able to identify several pathways to their goals and the confidence to choose between them. In other words, the course was designed to develop hope in the students. The *Adult Hope Scale* was administered pre-semester and post-semester to derive a "hope score" for the cohort. Blackboard's survey tool was used, which allowed the retention of only those surveys where both before and after were completed, without compromising student anonymity. Measured on a seven point scale the "agency thinking" of the cohort increased from 5.8 to 6.4 over the semester, and the

"pathways thinking" increased from 5.9 to 6.8. While simple maturation and acclimatisation might account for some of this increase, the highest increase was against those factors which were specifically addressed in the course.

Developing agency thinking used strategies designed to recognise student experience, value personal opinion, recognise individual expertise, and allow choice.

Individual student experience was recognised by course content linked to student experiences, with activities that encouraged them to reflect on their own media environment; readings based on research into student groups, or activities that students could identify with; and group discussion that required the application of the readings to individual opinions and practice Course content reflected and validated student interests and experiences.

Individual expertise was recognised by providing opportunities for students to be instructors. Blogs entries were made public so students could learn from each other. A buddy system encouraged students to read and comment on the blogs of a group of their peers, giving them all an opportunity to take the role of the expert. In skills development workshops, designed in consultation with the Learning Development Unit, students were able to participate as learners or as information providers. The workshops were tied to the weekly content and the assessment items and available as a face-to-face session, or an online workshop. Students were able to drop in and out of these modes as they saw the need.

Allowing choice in learning goals, content, and assessment and providing the rationale for selecting one option over another and the consequences for making that decision, allowed students to develop a sense of agency. Encouraging choice, and giving students the tools with which they can make informed choices, strengthens their sense of agency, and develops pathway thinking.

Pathways thinking was developed by providing clear learning outcomes which were written in behavioural terms and explained and discussed with students. This modelled goal-setting and gave students a foundation for their own learning goals. Gaol-setting activities were included in course work, and rather than simply setting out-of-class activities students were encouraged to set their own goals and use provided resources to achieve these goals. Students were encouraged to find pathways to goals by breaking difficult tasks into smaller components, by assessing process along with the final product, and by classroom exercises that developed problem solving, creative thinking and persistence. These characteristics were further developed through the assessment process which rewarded these skills. Too often faculty say that they want to see students challenging themselves, being creative, or going out on a limb, but reward the higher grades to the students who played it safe and took the conventional path. To build hope students need to be rewarded for giving due attention to the pathway, not just the final destination.

The course also used classroom activities that draw directly on positive psychology to promote hopeful thinking: brainteasers, fun quizzes, and competitions; "inverted pyramid" discussion groups; narratives or storytelling to convey information; journal writing or blogging that encouraged reflective learning; mental visualisation to remind students of past successes; and on

occasions emotional-regulation procedures such as hand-clapping and vigorous waving, and other gestures that symbolise success.

In hindsight it would have been useful to have given the *Adult Hope Scale* to students in the course in the previous year, to make it easier to determine if the increased scores were the result of the activities or simply an effect of maturation. The attrition rate decreased from 17.5% to 8.3%, and fail rate from 11.3% to 8.7%. Student satisfaction with the course, measured on a five point scale improved from 3.8 to 4.4. Student feedback comments suggest that the activities did play a role in increasing students' ability to set goals, find alternative pathways to their goals, and believe in their ability to bring about change in their academic lives:

> *The module has also helped me greatly in learning to relate my own personal experiences to things I learn and I have been able to apply this skill to other courses in my time here at UoN. I have learned a lot about the media, but also realised how much I know without knowing I know, if that makes sense.*

> *In summarising this course and its content, I have learned as much about myself as I have about the media and society.*

There is to date little research on Hope Theory as a teaching philosophy. However, a large body of work exists on positive psychology, the use of Hope Theory in counselling is well documented, and research on the effect of high Hope Scale scores on student success has been widely published, and it is my observation that the qualities associated with hope theory — the capacity to clearly conceptualise goals, to develop strategies to reach those goals, and to accept personal agency in using those strategies — can be taught. Empirical research across broader populations is required to test this belief. However the results of this small case study were sufficiently positive for the principles to be used to underpin first year curriculum design in the future.

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