A Positive Psychology Workshop for Trainee Assistant Practitioners in Higher Education.

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Abstract
This article discusses how trainee assistant practitioners (TAPs) can firstly, learn transferable Positive Psychological Interventions to enable them to flourish at work and in higher education. Secondly, learn the importance of maintaining their wellbeing when dealing with the demands of providing supportive high quality care in a changeable workforce environment. An overview is provided of a one day pilot workshop delivered as a summer school, to learners beginning their second year of study with an outline the range of interventions used. Results are presented showing that the pilot workshops achieved their goals. Students finished the workshops with a significantly greater appreciation of their own strengths and recognised their need to be more self-compassionate. Finally, the potential of further developing the workshop/toolkit to enhance personal and professional self-efficacy is considered.

Keywords
- Trainee Assistant Practitioners
- Character strengths
- Positive Psychology Interventions
- Well being
- Positive Teaching and learning
Trainee Assistant Practitioners in Higher Education

Working as a lecturer led the first author to an interest in exploring the strengths of Foundation Degree Health and Social Care Trainee Assistant Practitioner (TAP) students in the learning environment. Traditionally assessment, planning and intervention often revolve around individual needs and deficits and often only briefly touch on the gifts, talents and strengths that people have. The use of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) (Seligman, 2012) in education and employment are becoming increasingly popular and are topical features in research. The mission statement of the University of Bolton is that it is Teaching Intensive Research Informed (TIRI). The present project aimed to therefore, to effectively embed the university’s Teaching Intensive Research Informed agenda into practice. It also aimed to improve the focus on positive student self-assessment in a more structured and evidence based manner.

Assistant practitioners deliver responsible, high quality care supporting a wide range of registered health care professionals and this is enhanced through their experience within higher education. It is therefore imperative that they receive the tools to develop and flourish in this arena. It is believed that Positive Psychology offers a range of helpful tools for assistant practitioners.

Gainful Employment

It has been well documented that gainful employment provides income and the benefits of safety, variety, satisfaction, companionship and purpose amongst others. A large part of one’s life is spent at work, so understanding personal confidence in dealing with career development and work related goal activities is key to satisfaction. Matching strengths to employee duties is key to success for the employee. There are three successful stages to this approach (Hodges and Clifton, 2004). First, self-awareness of strengths. Second, integrating them into one’s self-image. Finally, linking rewards to changes in behaviour. It is often those who would benefit most are those who are the hardest to convince due to working excessively, experiencing burnout or restructuring, a common reality in the current economic climate. Improving an
employee’s outlook involves consideration of the positive factors that the role provides in terms of developing one’s interests, belonging to a group, receiving recognition for work well done and a sense of purpose in delivering high standards of care.

It is recognised that health and social care work is challenging and is more than just paid employment. It is central to our lives and often defines us, ensuring development through formal and informal learning, thereby having a major impact on wellbeing. There is often a subculture of demonstrating devotion to work by frequent working outside of paid hours, commenting on levels of busyness and constant altruistic service to human kind (Stebbins, 2009).

In relation to this, two paradigms have emerged where positive organisational behaviour (driven by getting the best out of the employee) and positive organisational scholarship (getting the best out of the organisation for the benefit of the employees) have been identified (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Luthans, 2002). There is overlap and not necessarily conflict with each other but this research centralises on the latter in improving learners’ wellbeing as transferable skills and has the potential to reduce future burnout. A large part of current research is centred on helping individuals develop these skills, and some studies have looked at the trained health care professional but there has been a lack of evidence in application with support workers. This focus resulted in a pilot study completed this summer with two groups of Foundation Degree Trainee Assistant Practitioners.

**Benefits of Recognising Character Strengths**

Many studies have shown that when different strengths have been clearly identified, harnessed and applied regularly in daily life, satisfaction, productivity and creativity are increased and negative symptomatology is reduced (Proyer et al., 2015, Harzer & Ruch, 2015). Learning how to “become” and flourish as a health and social care student in higher education is a huge life transition and students may experience a gamut of emotions, from excitement at starting to feelings of anxiety about the changes ahead. Learning how to utilise strengths in the course will prove beneficial through the
transition and the envisioning of their future selves. Autonomous learning requires students to have confidence in their own abilities and by using applied positive psychology interventions this research hopes to develop these skills further maintaining high retention and improved academic outcomes.

It is well documented that despite positive initiatives, attrition during health and social care courses can be a problem and therefore soliciting quantitative and qualitative feedback throughout is fundamental to understanding some of the reasons why students leave. Values based recruitment in health and social care has been seen as a positive alternative model and is a core objective in a recent government mandate for Health Education England (HEE, 2014). Research shows that ‘traits, behaviours and motivational drivers are equally - and in some cases more – important that recruiting against competencies.... We would support and encourage the wide implementation of it.’ (Health Service Journal, 2015).

The stress of achieving high grades, involvement through workforce change and balancing work-life demands will be constant and it is unrealistic to think otherwise. However, what can be changed is the learner’s approach to engagement on the course by supporting their personal development and enabling involvement in decision making by practicing good habits related to core features of increasing self-esteem, improving resilience, forging positive relationships, experiencing gratitude and developing self-compassion (Lewis, 2013).

**Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs)**

The growing body of evidence ((Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, Gorjian, 2006) is finding that there are timely, practical and user friendly techniques that can improve overall wellbeing each day and be enjoyable to carry out, such as being with valued colleagues and working to individual strengths which can have a significant impact on the ability to feel good, effectively function and increase resilience. This pilot project aimed to enhance the learning experience of Foundation Degree Health and Social Care students within the University, specifically focusing on enhancing natural
resources with centralised positive practice and to reflect on where this form of applied psychology can be practically developed further through the skilful application of ideas and drivers to help change their wellbeing for the better.

The PPI was delivered to two separate groups of students in the format of a one-day workshop. Each group attended on the day that they would normally be in university. 19 participants completed the interventions on day 1 and 13 participants on day 2 giving a total of 32 students. They had an age range from 25 – 60 with the gender ratio of females to males being 3:1 which is reflective of these groups. The workshop was set mainly in an informal classroom setting and included discussions following an introduction of the main concepts with guided activities accompanied by a self-completing workbook containing space for reflection and extra sources of information. Permission and consent was sought from the group following university ethical guidelines and an outline of the day given.

**Positive Psychology Techniques Employed**

The positive psychology techniques employed in the workshop consisted of the learners completing:

- An initial self-assessed *Happiness Scale* was initially completed so that the cohorts results could be compared to larger populations and this feedback would be delivered at the end of the day to enhance the experience of action research and the importance of contributing to a ‘bigger’ picture incorporating the five elements Seligman (2015) found that are essential to human well-being which are positive emotion; engagement; relationships; meaning and accomplishment (PERMA). Students were given feedback on their scores at the end of the workshop.

- *The Values in Action (VIA) Strengths Inventory* (online) (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), which is a simple self-assessment that takes around 45 minutes to complete and the results help understanding of the individual’s so-called *signature strengths*. It is regarded as a central tool of Positive
Psychology. It has well established reliability and validity. It has been used in hundreds of research studies and has been taken by more than three million people in over 190 countries.

**Insert Box 1 here**

- A Reflection on Keys to happier living which recognises individual paths and has identified 10 Keys to Happier Living that consistently tend to make life more fulfilling.

**Insert Box 2 here**

- A focus on a weekly gratitude exercise to recognise the psychological benefit of not taking for things for granted

- Exploring self-compassion and the act of being kind to oneself to help develop a willingness to improve through learning from self-perceived weaknesses and increase optimism

- Identifying people who were positive connections and who helped to support, inspire and energise the relationship with the learner

- Completing a short Self-assessed resilience scale (Duckworth, 2009) that considers how the learner approaches challenges by using personal resources and strengths, such as hope, optimism and self-efficacy in the face of adversity and helps them to rebuild their life after experiencing minor or major setbacks.

This culminated in the formulation of a prioritized three point action plan to help focus the learner into forming clear and personalized short term goals that would be easy to complete and rewarding to continue. These varied throughout the participants and they were encouraged to share those that were meaningful for them as verbalizing intent helps to make it real and more likely to be carried out. Examples ranged from sending out a letter to someone who had been a positive role model to them to taking time to savour experiences and be grateful for the familiar and appreciative things in their lives. Some students were focused on being kinder to themselves and managing
their perfectionism and others wanted to focus on how to continue on the keys to happier living by trying out new things and having direction in goals to look forward to.

**Evaluating the Pilot Project**

Humanistic Psychology has highlighted the negative effect teaching can have on individual learners if facilitation of a positive approach is not employed. But how could an intervention that only lasted five hours be evaluated? Some measures would be unlikely to change over such a short period. To get round this, a very short 10 item questionnaire was designed and administered to participants at the start and the end of the workshop. This had five items that was hoped might change following the workshop and five that were not targeted remain the same. Each participant was asked to rate the 10 items on a scale from 0 to 10. In terms of one of the areas that change was expected, the participants were asked, “*Would you recognise your character strengths right now?*” An item showing something that was not being targeted was, “*To what extent are you comfortable with your finances?*” The results of the Summer School PPI pilot project showed significant and promising results. Following statistical analysis using SPSS, it was pleasing to see significant findings for 2 of the 5 variables being measured i.e. knowledge of character strengths and awareness of self-compassion were increased.

**Insert Box 3 and 4 here**

It was also possible to see that the significant character strengths on the VIA Strengths Test were kindness, fairness and honesty, for this group of Trainee Assistant Practitioners. The scores for each strength from each student in their respective group was counted and then each group was added together to give the total score. Perhaps it is not surprising that kindness, fairness and honesty figured highly, however it is encouraging.

**Insert Box 5 here**
From the workshop evaluation data, the activity most enjoyed by the learners was the online completion of the VIA Strengths Test. This was also available in a dyslexia friendly version, if students preferred to change variables such as font size or background colour (see www.desireabledyslexia.com). The VIA Strengths Scale has the potential to be used as a screening tool for future students on caring courses. It can provide initial strength’s profiles and this should encourage further research on its practical application. This would be especially interesting from a longitudinal perspective to clarify the relationships further between applying transferable life skills across higher education and the workplace.

The learning the students gained was dependent on the experience and the resultant reflection on this experience. Kolb’s learning theory (1984) links active involvement with the gaining of further knowledge and this was effectively connected by their decision making activities, problem solving in scenarios and combining theirs and others perceptions throughout the day in the classroom. These interventions provide a sound basis to further apply the new Positive Psychology techniques in the clinical and home environment and thereby consolidate learning through Kolb’s four-phase cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation as a lifelong model.

Although values are often established early on, experience of education and employment contribute to the understanding of self. Erikson’s (1959) psychosocial stage of Industry versus Inferiority indicated, that it is school where strengths and weaknesses are first noticed and is therefore ripe potential to further enhance or discourage individuals for their future. TAPs have invariably experienced a variety of educational backgrounds and for some this is their first taste of learning since those early days. The support and guidance received in higher education is essential to assist them in realising their potential and actualising their skills and talents via the setting of achievable goals and motivational plans. By the sharing of learning they can be empowered and be part of the ‘bigger picture’ of Positive Psychology to make a difference. On a macro level the bigger picture enables results of research to be published and added to, on a meso level it allows the participants to share their
experiences with colleagues, friends and family and role model positive behaviours and on a micro level the individual's experience will aim to have a positive impact on their neuroplasticity and help them fulfil the 10 keys to happier living by doing things for others, connecting with others and increasing their meaning in life.

**Conclusions**

Research documents (Douglass & Duffy, 2015, Niemiec & Lissing, 2015) the fact that people who use their strengths more at work report lower levels of depression, experience less stress, feel healthier and have more energy, are more confident, experience faster growth and development, feel more satisfied and experience more meaning in their work and are more engaged in their work. This is complemented by other studies (Peterson et al., 2010, Money et al., 2008) that have found that organisations which focus on the strengths of employees also benefit from lower levels of staff turnover and higher levels of productivity. It makes economic and emotionally intelligent sense to allow the maturation of such initiatives, such as this summer school to continue in the higher educational arena. It is clear that utilising individual strengths is the next developmental phase to creating desired personal and professional goals by successfully developing habits that lead to subsequent personal and organisational rewards. The next stage of research will be to emphasise the importance of teaching people (or at least providing people with the resources to teach themselves) on how to build on their character strengths and how to use them more in daily life. While the outcomes of this workshop demonstrate the benefits of learning about one’s character strengths profile, the crucial link between acquiring this knowledge and actually improving one’s wellbeing and personal development is learning about what each of their top strengths means, and how best to utilise these strengths in order to maximise the personal benefits.

**Key Points**

- Self-awareness and utilising character strengths will develop reflective practice
- Focus on abilities and skills for self-development not deficits
- Learning can be transferred to other areas of life to increase wellbeing
- Gainful employment provides opportunity to reward changes in behaviour
- People have the capacity to change
References


Keys to Happier Living http://www.actionforhappiness.org/10-keys-to-happier-living


University of Bolton Mission Statement [http://www.bolton.ac.uk/Home.aspx](http://www.bolton.ac.uk/Home.aspx)

Values in Action (VIA) Strengths Inventory. [https://www.viacharacter.org/www/](https://www.viacharacter.org/www/)
Box 1: A Classification of Values in Action (VIA) Character Strengths and Virtues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WISDOM</th>
<th>COURAGE</th>
<th>HUMANITY</th>
<th>JUSTICE</th>
<th>TEMPERANCE</th>
<th>TRANSCENDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>Zest</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Box 2: 10 Keys to Happier Living

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Giving</th>
<th>Direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relating</td>
<td>Resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising</td>
<td>Emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying out</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Box 5: Summary of Character Strengths for Summer School August 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of beauty</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Box 6: What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is not a new concept but a blend of different historical and recent ideas, practices and beliefs from different cultures and people to improve wellbeing that has been scientifically and rigorously tested over the last 60 years. The recent interest is that there is now a substantial body of evidence that shows increased quality of life when the interventions are applied. We often default to what is wrong with us – positive psychology helps us understand what is right with us and gives us the ability to transfer this to aspects of our life that in turn increases our resilience against the hurdles in life.