

Toward a Model of Applied Positive Psychology in Vocational Education and Training

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ABSTRACT

Positive psychology can be applied to vocational education and training (VET) to enable learners and their communities to flourish. Just as positive education in schools is seen as 'education for both traditional learning and happiness', in VET, positive education can similarly be seen as 'education for vocational skills and wellbeing'. In working toward a model of applied positive psychology in VET, this presentation identifies some of the positive features of VET which can potentially enable students and their communities to flourish. These include: recognition of prior learning (RPL), the identification of personal and community strengths and goal setting for achievement. In addition, adult learners can bring both positive and negative expectations and experiences to VET. Hence focusing on strengths, challenging any negative thoughts and assisting students to devise strategies to overcome perceived obstacles to achievement may help to foster resilience.

VET and Wellbeing

Vocational education and training (VET) courses are undertaken by a diverse demographic sector of the population (e.g. workers seeking professional development, adult life-long learners, upper high school students, apprentices). VET can potentially foster the positive wellbeing outcomes which arise from both academic accomplishment and social interaction. Some Indigenous VET students report improving their confidence and/or feeling better about themselves (NCVER, 2004).

VET can also contribute to flourishing communities - particularly when relevant curricula is localised and contextualised to connect with its strengths. Community owned adult learning providers (ACE) can thus be seen as facilitators of health and 'community capacity builders' who improve the mental, physical and emotional well-being of its members (Bowman, 2006). VET has also helped Indigenous learners to get more involved with their community (NCVER, 2004).

Positive VET Education

• **"Positive education is defined as education for both traditional skills and for happiness"**

Seligman et. al. (2009, p. 293).

In VET, positive education can be seen as 'education for vocational skills and wellbeing'. In positive VET education:

- Courses are tailored to meet the needs of the learner/community. Literacy is thus contextualised and existing skills and strengths are utilised - so that VET learning is relevant, authentic and meaningful.
- Goal setting and recognition of prior learning are incorporated into programs - helping students to identify their strengths and to develop resilience.

IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS

➤ Contextualised literacy

Deficit models of literacy focus on what a person cannot do in terms of formal literacy skills. However, there are multiple literacies (e.g. health literacy, financial literacy) - so that both literacy and numeracy are vocationally and contextually specific.

Hence, in a positive VET approach, students are supported to develop the level and type of literacy they need for their purposes; so that literacy is contextualised, embedded, developed and learned within the course (McGrath, 2007).

After all; *"confidence is a belief in one's own abilities to do something in a specific situation."* (NIACE, 2004, p. 3).

➤ Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process that occurs upon entry to a VET course which recognises a student's skills and experience - regardless of the context in which the learning occurred.

✓ RPL focuses on *what a learner can do*.

- By enabling informal learning such as general life experience to be assessed, learners may be surprised to realise that they already have a number of useful personal traits and strengths to draw upon.

- RPL can thus help students to understand their strengths and can have a positive impact on learner confidence and motivation to learn (Smith, 2004). Even when RPL is not being formally applied for, the process of reflection on prior learning, which includes informal skills and knowledge gained through life experience, can be empowering.

➤ Goal Setting and Identification of Values

- Adult learners can bring both positive and negative expectations and experiences to VET. Any prior negative school experiences, alienation or anxieties can have the potential to impinge upon current academic engagement. Self perceived deficits can also be imagined as being impediments to learning success. In an APP approach to VET, negative thoughts are challenged and there is a shift in focus to utilising strengths.

- Goal setting is a powerful activity where identification of values, goals, personal strengths, sources of community strength, social support and plans to overcome perceived obstacles to achievement can be identified by the learner. This self-reflection may help students to become consciously aware of their - 'passion or spark' (Benson & Scales, 2009, p.91). This ideally occurs at the start of a VET course.

FOSTERING RESILIENCE

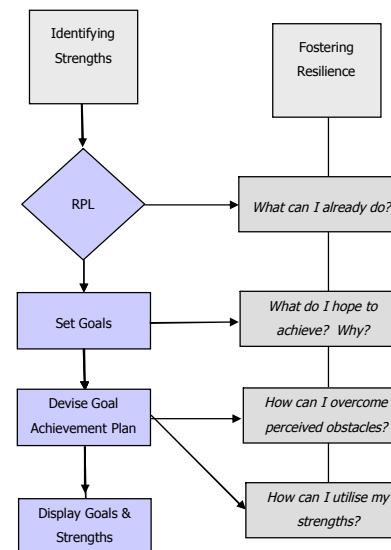
➤ Goal Planning

Given that academic resilience involves adapting to adverse situations such as consistent alienation (Martin & Marsh, 2009), student *planning* to overcome perceived obstacles to achievement may help to foster resilience and a sense of control over achievement.

A study on the goal setting behaviour of adult VET students (N = 40) found that students who reported that they had achieved their goals at the end of the academic year had commonly:

- ✓ Written their goals down
- ✓ Devised strategies to overcome self-perceived obstacles to achievement
- ✓ Displayed their goals where they could regularly be seen (e.g. on fridge or study desk)
- ✓ Reported that goal setting "helped me to think about what I really wanted" and had;
- ✓ Used the strategies to achieve their goals in the past.

(McGrath, 1997)



CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- ✓ Positive psychology can be applied in VET to enable students and their communities to flourish.
- RPL and goal setting can be positive and empowering activities which help students to identify their strengths and potentially foster resilience.
- In future, just as Seligman et al. (2009) argue that the skills for happiness should be taught in school, programs which promote wellbeing and foster resilience should be incorporated into VET curricula. In Australia some local initiatives have emerged; such as a 1.5 hour life care skills program on topics relevant to young men's health and wellbeing - which is offered to VET apprentices (Du Plessis & Corney, 2011).
- Future research is needed on the association between VET completion/retention rates and variables such as goal setting, identification of strengths and values, resilience, social support and wellbeing outcomes. The use of extant measures (e.g. the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths*) should thus be explored. The influence of teacher and instructional design variables should also be considered. Such empirical evidence could provide support for the implementation of positive psychology VET initiatives on a national level.

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