

Research Development Fellowship 2014-15 Final Report

Researchers: Andrew Stork

Ben Walker

Research Question

How does the use of scaling from the OSKAR framework impact upon student progress and emotional well-being?

Research Title

The students don't tell me how they're doing! What can help?

Abstract

Supporting educational coaching conversations with students is an under-developed research area in further education. We have developed experience and expertise in implementing these with students in the context of our practice and have seen the positive impact they have had on students' progress both at an individual level and as shown by the key performance indicators of our organisation. This positive impact is grounded in empirical evidence including informal feedback and observation. We are also interested in exploring the aspects of learning support in relation to the trainee teacher role. Our research will enhance teachers' and personal tutors' knowledge by providing the evidence to inform their practice. This will further support the development of professional practice in this important area.

Introduction

The academic topic under investigation can be summarised as 'How do educational coaching conversations help students to learn - exploring the guided co-construction of knowledge through dialogue within further education'.

We sought to address the difficulty found with students expressing how they feel they are progressing. 'Progressing' here is used in its widest sense, in other words, the individual student's ability to aim for higher grades, understanding of their course, how well they are learning and also aspects of their emotional well-being: their motivation, confidence and reducing feelings of inferiority.

The research question is, 'How does the use of scaling from the OSKAR framework impact upon student progress and emotional well-being?'

In terms of findings, the statistical analysis of questionnaires did not show a significant difference between scaling and non-scaling groups in terms of students' perception of their performance and well-being. The thematic analysis showed that, generally, one to one conversations were received very positively by students. For most students this was a new approach in relation to their experience in previous educational institutions. Scaling was found to be very useful for students to self-evaluate their performance; however, SMART targets were seen as important for progress to be made to move up the scale. Reviewing of targets was seen to be most effective if this was done within a short time frame.

Our research has shown that one to one conversations with students are important to positively impact their learning in addition to effective teaching and learning within the classroom. It is important to note though, the quality of the one to one is key. This quality is determined by the extent to which teachers and personal tutors employ a strong approach to preparation, use of open questions, as well as solution-focused coaching techniques more generally.

Literature review

The concept and key academic idea for this project is the co-construction of knowledge between student and personal tutor.

Fisher (2008) states *"dialogue is important because it is the primary means for developing intelligence in the human species. It is through our capacity to verbalise that thinking, awareness and understanding develop. Our problems are primarily solved and our intelligence developed through the challenge of dialogue with others"*. Unlike traditional teaching methods, with teacher as the expert who imparts knowledge, one to one coaching conversations represent a collaborative process between personal tutor and student to enable the student to reach a greater level of self-awareness leading towards an agreed platform for positive developments in the aspects of both academic

ability and emotional well-being. For students, solutions and knowledge being co-created through non-directive dialogue arguably enables greater ownership and the belief they have the resources to achieve, thus potentially increasing motivation and reducing feelings of inferiority. For teachers, the project contributes to the move away from the traditional model of teachers imparting and imposing expertise on passive learners and the increased use and improvement of non-directive coaching techniques. There is a similarity here to Mercer's (1995) conception of 'cumulative talk' where participants, by accumulation, construct 'a common knowledge'. The project gives the opportunity to provide research evidence for this construction and thus further promote student centred interaction by teachers.

Mercer (1995) also outlines the opposite perspective of traditional teaching where power and responsibility are formally vested in the teacher. What is being explored in this research, in contrast, is a coaching technique embodied by an approach also referred to as 'equal partner, not superior'. Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) argues that *"coaching has a significant and beneficial role to play in challenging students and educators to achieve more of their potential. Coaching, as a person-centred approach, supports the idea of learning as personalised and challenging. It provides a perspective on learning as a personal engagement with change"*.

The OSKAR framework referred to elsewhere in the report was originated in *The Solutions Focus* book (Jackson and McKergow, 2007). The acronym 'OSKAR' stands for the five main sections of the coaching conversation framework which are:

- Outcome
- Scaling (the primary focus of our research)
- Know-how
- Attributes
- Review

One of the other main models which can be used is 'GROW' by Whitmore (2002) where the parts of the acronym stand for:

- Goal
- Reality
- Options
- Will

The coaching training that our personal tutors have undertaken in their job before participating in the research included some guidance on how to use language in one to one conversations with students that is inclusive, promotes the 'equal partner, not superior approach' and reduces feelings of inferiority. As such they have an awareness that language is not a neutral tool for communication (Janks, cited in Hardman, 2008) but needs to be carefully used in order to achieve the desired result, in this case for the student to feel empowered in the conversation.

Closely related to the co-construction of knowledge, the 'equal partner not superior approach', is 'solution-focused coaching' which is the umbrella term for the training our personal tutors have undertaken in this area. Solution-focused coaching has links with cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), which has also led to the development of another strand of coaching called cognitive behaviour coaching (CBC). CBT and CBC are similar but CBC focuses on achieving personal and professional fulfilment, not an understanding of psychological disturbance, which is a core component of CBT (Neenan, 2009). CBC and solution-focused coaching are also similar, however, CBC is a fusion of cognitive behavioural therapy, rational emotive therapy, solution-focused approaches, goal setting theory and social cognitive theory (Palmer & Szymanska, 2008). Even though there are similarities between solution-focused coaching and cognitive behaviour therapy, the main difference is that solution-focused coaching primarily focuses on goal-achievement rather than healing.

Underpinning the key concept of co-construction of knowledge, there are a number of themes relating to this project. Firstly, **self-efficacy**, which can be defined as taking ownership of your own developmental actions. This is enabled through dialogue to raise awareness within the learner to enable greater responsibility which leads to positive actions. Vygotsky (1986) likened mental tools to physical tools and that mental abilities could be improved by the former just as physical abilities could be improved by the latter resulting in enabling us to solve problems and create solutions.

Student **self-evaluation** is where learners are encouraged to reflect upon their progress so far through careful open questions. This is intended to raise awareness of both their progress in terms of academic progress and emotional wellbeing.

Academic progress is a theme that can involve a number of aspects. For the purposes of this project, the focus was students' *perception* of their academic progress over time through questionnaires and focus groups. As such, the questions contained in both of these were on such topics as confidence in achieving submission dates, aiming for higher grades and performing learning tasks within the classroom.

Finally, student **emotional wellbeing** can be highly subjective. In part, this is because you first have

to decide what is meant by emotional well-being. Aspects of emotional well-being tend to include the following:

- confidence;
- motivation;
- self-esteem;
- resilience;
- satisfaction.

It's also worth briefly acknowledging here the complexity of the aspects themselves. Confidence, for example, according to Norman and Hyland (2003) has three elements: *“‘cognitive’ is a person’s knowledge of their abilities; ‘performance’ is their ability to do something; and ‘emotional’ is feeling comfortable about the former two aspects”*.

For these reasons, our questions concentrated on learners’ *perceptions* of how they feel in relation to the aspects previously mentioned, which are:

- confidence;
- motivation;
- self-esteem;
- resilience;
- satisfaction.

The immediate issues relating to this project are as follows.

- **Difficulty in measuring emotional wellbeing.** This is a subjective notion and as such, what is being measured can only ever be a measure of students’ perceptions of their emotional wellbeing rather than any absolute truth. For example, if it is found through a questionnaire or focus group in this study that a student rates themselves highly for confidence or motivation, this does not necessarily mean that the student *is* confident or motivated but, rather, that they *perceive* themselves to be.
- **Difficulty proving correlation.** Did scaling really create self-evaluation? From the outset we were very much aware that there are multiple social and cultural background factors which influence students’ perception of their progress and well-being. As well as one to one coaching conversations with students including scaling, all these factors influence student progress and their own perception of their progress and wellbeing. As Markless and

Streatfield (2006) state, the best that can be achieved with any measuring of impact is to find 'strong surrogates' for impact that provide a close approximation.

- **'Satisfaction survey culture' as a potential barrier to measuring impact.** Whether a student *likes* or is *happy* with their college experience is not the same as impact (impact measures involve change over time and a comparative element). We took account of this by purposefully structuring our questionnaires over a 12 week period and undertook them at 3 points in that period (beginning, middle and end). In addition, we did not use a Likert scale (strongly agree/ disagree). However, as is evident from the findings from the focus groups, students, in common with many people, view such questionnaires as just another satisfaction survey which they are asked to undertake both in education and in their lives generally. As a result, it is questionable whether sufficient thought was given to responses.

The immediate limitations relating to this project are:

- bias (students telling us 'what they think we wanted to hear');
- inconsistency within researcher team (our personal tutors) in terms of training and skills;
- time between the intervention and the focus groups (some students had forgotten the use of scaling in the 12 week period when one to ones took place);
- although the research population was broadly representative of The Sheffield College, arguably, it was not representative of the FE sector as a whole;
- lack of research in this area already means that it is difficult to build upon current ideas and accepted notions.

Research methodology

The impact on students' perception of their learning, progress and emotional wellbeing was measured through quantitative and qualitative measures.

- The research population consisted of a whole control group of 122 16 – 18 year old, full-time students on vocational courses (Levels One and Three).
- All personal tutors identified two of their tutorial groups. For all groups they used the OSKAR framework for the one to one coaching conversations; however they used the tool of scaling with one of their groups and not with the other.
- The impact on students' perception of their progress and emotional wellbeing was measured through qualitative and quantitative measures.

- o Qualitative – focus groups after the 3 month research period using open questions.
- o Quantitative – questionnaires using a graphic rating scale. They were undertaken at 3 points (beginning, middle, and end) within the action research period (beginning of January to the end of March 2015).

What was the problem?

We sought to address the difficulty found with students expressing how they feel they are progressing. 'Progressing' here is used in its widest sense, in other words, the individual student's ability to aim for higher grades, understanding of their course, how well they are learning and also aspects of their emotional well-being: their motivation, confidence and reducing feelings of inferiority.

For example, a level one learner in a one to one conversation with a personal tutor does not have the vocabulary and communication skills to express how they are doing on their course. Therefore, personal tutors and teachers do not have a clear picture of this student's feelings about that. As highlighted by this example, this issue can particularly be the case with lower level learners but this can be an issue for practitioners working with students across levels within a vocational and general educational context.

Intervention

Given this problem, we were particularly interested in a tool from within solution-focused coaching, specifically the OSKAR framework. This tool is scaling, which is where a student is asked to rate themselves on a scale from one to ten, where the desired outcome is ten and one the complete opposite, for example:

"On a scale from one to ten, where ten is you have achieved all this (the future perfect) and one is none of this is happening and you have no idea of how to get there, and you have never managed to achieve any goal, where are you now?"

The tool of scaling is used for conversations on target setting, behaviour, motivation and assessing a learner's commitment to an action. Ideally, allowing learners to place a number on how they perceive, for example, their behaviour, ensures that they have thought about what has happened in comparison to previous experiences. This self-reflection allows them to focus on their current

situation and provides the personal tutor or teacher with an agreed and established platform to co-construct desired future improvements.

This was carried out in The Sheffield College City Campus, a large further education college with approximately 2,750 students on full time 16-18 courses. The researchers were seven of the personal tutors ('Tutorial Mentors') who we manage and ourselves. The former carried out the one to one conversations and questionnaires; the latter carried out the focus groups with all the groups.

Research timetable

- 13 tutorial groups were identified
- 7 control groups (scaling not used), 7 experiment groups (scaling used). *1 group of ESOL learners were divided and one half was the control group and the other was the experiment group.

<u>Month</u>	<u>Actions</u>
November	Speak to personal tutors to ask for volunteers and get buy-in
December	Meetings (two 1 hour – specific project requirements and undertake training) Devise questionnaire (closed questions)
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to ones were carried out over a 12 week period • 3 questionnaires were completed by students at the beginning, middle and end of the 12 week period • Personal tutors undertook the action research. • Questionnaires were undertaken at the beginning of January, middle of February and end of March. • Focus group questionnaires were devised (open questions) • Start literature review
February	
March	
April	Focus groups took place with all 13 groups in April
May	Collation and analysis of data

Ethical considerations

Summary of ethical points related to how we will conduct our research, with direct reference to *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 2011*.

Through undertaking this research project we aimed to extend the knowledge and understanding of the impact of scaling (predominantly using a solutions-focused approach) within one to one

conversations with learners on their performance and emotional wellbeing.

Our research was conducted within an ethic of respect for:

- the person;
- knowledge;
- democratic values;
- the quality of educational research;
- academic freedom.

Responsibilities to participants

We ensured that we:

- considered the ethical implications of denying one group of students the technique of scaling when it may be appropriate and imposing its use on the other when it may not always be appropriate;
- considered the observational bias on the side of both the teacher and student;
- respected all participants without any discrimination;
- had voluntary informed consent and participants understood they were taking part;
- were aware Tutorial Mentors had a dual role as researcher and personal tutor;
- were open with participants;
- gave them the right to withdraw and informed them of this;
- would stop one to one conversations if there was any distress or discomfort;
- recognised the bureaucratic burden on Tutorial Mentors by asking for volunteers and minimising the impact on their workload;
- informed the students of predictable detriment and minimised the effects of designs that advantage 1 group over another;
- were confidential and anonymous;
- stored personal data in accordance with the data protection act (1998);
- disclosed information if appropriate and after careful consideration;
- informed and debriefed participants of outcomes.

Responsibilities to sponsors of research

We ensured that we:

- informed The Sheffield College about our ethical stance;
- considered a range of research methodology;
- did not bring The Sheffield College into disrepute.

Data and analysis

The main themes which emerged from the research were as follows:

Experimental groups (scaling)

Positives:

- Student self-evaluation
 - o Some students commented that scaling in one to one conversations helped to clarify their priorities, made it easier to assess their on-going progress and that it helps others (personal tutor and teachers) to take action on their behalf.
- Students generally found it easier to articulate current progress through a number than through description.
- Helps elicit positive emotions
 - o Some students commented that scaling helped to improve their confidence and motivation.

Negatives:

- Validity of scaling questioned
 - o Some students questioned whether scaling worked through citing examples such as the scale being meaningless because it is different for every person, it is unreliable because feelings change every day, they could 'lie' or make up a number because they didn't want to admit weakness, the relationship between improvements and scaling is hard to prove and if they are doing well, scaling is not meaningful.
- Some students commented that their motivation and emotion didn't change due to the scaling.
- Some students commented that they had difficulty in choosing a number.

Control groups (non-scaling)

Positives about one to one conversations:

- Elicits positive emotions
 - Examples include feeling more motivated, appreciated, comfortable and relaxed. This also led to students feeling they could be more open, honest and that they could offload negative emotions. Many students conveyed feelings of trust and friendliness.
- Approach
 - Students commented on the open minded, personal, calm, caring and informal approach. They also commented that the tutor actively listened and made them think differently about an issue they were facing and that it felt like a two way conversation. Further points showed a holistic approach was taken and expectations were clarified. The message of the personal tutor being an 'equal partner not superior' came across on many occasions.
- Helpful content
 - The content of one to ones was described as helpful in the following ways: it helped students to 'look forward', identify areas for development and identify achievable targets. A key message was that students found it useful to have their targets reviewed within a short time frame.
- Behaviour change
 - Students commented that their attendance, behaviour and time-keeping improved as a result of their one to one conversations.

Negatives about one to one conversations:

- Some students commented that they felt the conversations should have been longer, that they told the personal tutor 'what they wanted to hear' and that they were not useful if not focused on their future plans.

Findings

The primary findings of the research were that the statistical analysis of questionnaires didn't show a significant difference between scaling and non-scaling groups in terms of students' perception of their performance and well-being.

The thematic analysis of the focus groups showed that, generally, one to one conversations were received very positively by students. For most students this was a new approach in relation to their

experience in previous educational institutions. Scaling was found to be useful for students to self-evaluate their performance; however, SMART targets were seen as important for progress to be made to move up the scale. The reviewing of targets was seen to be most effective if this was done within a short time frame.

Recommendations

The primary recommendations of the research were that teachers and personal tutors should carry out one to one conversations with learners using a coaching approach because students significantly value the personal and holistic nature of these and they can result in positive behaviour change. Practitioners should consider using the technique of scaling to help students evaluate their progress. This is particularly useful when a student is facing a difficulty or issue in their studies or in their personal life. Moreover, they should ensure that, after a student has scaled their progress, this is used in combination with SMART target setting and reviewing of these within a short time frame.

Dissemination strategy

Research outcomes will be disseminated for the benefit of our organisation through research posters, illustrative case studies, CPD training sessions, the intranet and virtual learning environment for teaching resources and embedding content and outcomes into teacher training qualifications.

Research outcomes will be disseminated for the benefit of other organisations in the sector through:

- workshop sessions at a conference on best practice models of support to be held at our organisation in September 2016. The conference will be attended by already established contacts who have visited us previously as a centre for best practice;
- liaising with other FE organisations and higher education institutions about building the outcomes into their teacher training qualifications;
- blogging on our own individual websites, LinkedIn and TES website;
- writing papers to be published in academic journals, for example, InTuition – The Journal for teachers and trainers within Further Education and The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education (IJMCE);
- delivering workshops at conferences, such as the Further Education Tutorial Network (FETN) and the National Association of Managers in Student Support (NAMSS) and other teaching conferences;

- delivering guest lectures at other FE colleges and higher education institutions.

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