

which do not encourage creativity or risk-taking. The potential of collaborative learning to develop lifelong learning skills and an orientation to “learning for life” is evidenced by the positive engagement of individuals across generations in a situation which offers an effective learning experience across the intellectual, social, personal, and practical dimensions of learning.

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## LEARNED OPTIMISM: MOTIVATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING IN A PRE-UNIVERSITY PREPARATORY PROGRAM

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### ABSTRACT

Effective lifelong learning is dependent, to a considerable degree, on developing optimistic learners. This paper examines how a pre-undergraduate language course helped to encourage and enable students to become optimistic about their ability to succeed in university studies.

## INTRODUCTION

An important component of emotional intelligence (EQ) – the attribute that links feeling with the thinking process – is optimism, the great motivator (Goleman, 1996). The optimistic individual believes that, despite setbacks and failures, things will generally turn out all right in the end. Pessimists, on the other hand, see failure as part of a personal attribute, impossible to change or control. Optimists are motivated by the need to get it right next time; pessimists lose their motivation because they

“know” that nothing can be changed, since failure is intrinsic. According to the American psychologist and academic Martin Seligman (1990), optimism can be flexible and it can be learned. This conclusion is important for university students since optimism in many ways can predict academic success. Seligman contends that pessimism is not necessarily an innate, fixed trait, but that pessimists can learn the skills to become optimists. In other words, while they can recognise the situations where optimism can produce a positive outcome, they

will also know when a realistic approach is needed.

This paper seeks to examine the way that a Central Queensland University pre-undergraduate program, STEPS, through a holistic language curriculum, encourages and enables students to develop optimism about their ability to succeed in what may be, initially, an unfamiliar and daunting milieu. Effective lifelong learning, in the opinion of the authors, is dependent, to a considerable degree, on optimism, and preparatory programs like STEPS are playing a vital role in developing this attitude.

## EXPECTATION

Jane is typical of many mature-age learners who find their way to university preparation programs. Her parents were country people who had left school after years four and five. After completing year ten, Jane had entered the workforce with the sole aim of working until she was old enough to marry and have children. Married life produced three children, but denied her marital happiness and mental stimulation. Her husband was an alcoholic and she was soon a battered wife, whose writing skills, as she says, were limited mainly to shopping lists. She admits to being timid with no confidence or sense of self-worth. Despite the fact that much of her secondary schooling had been successful, life held few positive expectations for her.

Expectation is an important facet of learning. Anyone who undertakes a learning project, whether in a formal or an informal situation, will hold certain expectations of success or failure. An optimist will usually believe strongly in the likelihood of success, whereas a pessimist may be less confident about the outcome. When, as sometimes happens, the learning project fails, or when the learner encounters a reasonably major setback, the attitude of the individual will play a crucial part in what happens next. The optimist retains a sense of hope; the pessimist is left with a sense of despair.

Like Jane, Marion is another mature-age learner who has faced despair through doubting her quite outstanding abilities, and is a self-confessed pessimist. She writes,

I was bored, depressed, downtrodden, and silently screaming, but I didn't believe in myself. I didn't believe in my abilities. I

wasn't tough enough. I felt I couldn't handle the responsibility of study and family. Self-confidence was a word for my children, not for me. (Marion)

## OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

The American psychologist, Martin Seligman (1990), Professor and Director of Clinical Training in Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, is an expert on motivation. He has made a detailed study of optimism and its effects on people's quality of life. Optimism and its antithesis, pessimism, are attitudes based on expectations. Most people are predominantly either optimistic or pessimistic by nature, though their attitudes may vary in degree according to a range of circumstances. Prevailing attitudes seem to be the consequence of a combination of temperament and experience. Our temperament results from our preferred mode of functioning in a complex and variable society; experience comes from the way in which society impinges on us (Seligman, 1990).

## EXPLANATORY STYLE

Seligman (1990) believes that the way in which we react to the achievements and setbacks, successes and failures, that are integral to daily life, is due to our own particular explanatory style. This can be defined as a habit of thinking stemming from an individual's view of their place in the world; ranging from valuable and deserving to worthless and helpless, as Jane and Marion's worldviews illustrate. Many students display these extreme attitudes, but the self-analyses of others is often more tempered. According to Seligman (1990), there are three dimensions pertaining to each person's explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalisation. Failure can often induce a sense of helplessness, ranging from temporary to permanent reactions. The optimist will find specific causes for misfortune that can be overcome; for the pessimist these causes will seem to be pervasive and incapable of solution. For the optimist, failure can be blamed on external causes; for the pessimist the causes of failure are internal and, therefore, intrinsic. Thus optimism generates high self-esteem, and pessimism generates low self-esteem. Such assessments of self-worth may not be altogether realistic, but they are very real to the individual concerned.

## LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Seligman (1990) shows that learned helplessness lies at the core of defeat or failure. Attitudes about self can so often become self-fulfilling prophecies. This is particularly true for students at all stages of learning where success or failure at school or university can have a significant impact on their future lives and careers. Learned helplessness results not just from a particular explanation someone makes for a particular failure but from the habits of explanation that are developed. A student may respond to setbacks in the learning process with the reaction, "This sort of thing is always happening to me in every endeavour I undertake. I can't succeed because I'm useless." Habits of explanation become so entrenched that they develop into the explanatory style of the true pessimist for whom failure will seem to be permanent, pervasive, and personal. These students probably are not really total failures, but the helplessness they have learned from their own explanatory style will not allow them to think otherwise.

Learned helplessness can affect students' expectations of failure to a degree where they lose all sense of motivation and come to regard learning as a futile exercise. Psychological tests on a range of learners have shown that it is not uncommon for the capable but pessimistic student to achieve lower academic results than the less capable optimist (Seligman, 1990). In a world where it is increasingly the norm for employees to continue to develop their skills and knowledge throughout their working lives, pessimism presents serious obstructions to successful lifelong learning.

## LEARNED OPTIMISM

However, Seligman (1990) argues that optimism can be learned. There are countless adult learners like Jane and Marion who will be seeking to enter tertiary study in the future. Awareness exists at government levels of the importance of lifelong learning and of the need to provide programs that will prepare mature-age learners for a successful transition into university study. However, despite having often gained success in the workplace and in their personal lives, in our experience, many of those adults will still see themselves as failed institutional learners and will re-enter classrooms with trepidation and pessimistic explanatory styles. Nevertheless, the key

element in succeeding and moving on from one stage of learning to the next is motivation. It is unreasonable for a student not to expect to encounter setbacks during the learning journey, but the motivated learner will find ways of meeting the challenges. Pre-undergraduate university programs have a common purpose: to enable prospective students, whatever their former educational experience, to develop the skills, knowledge, and understanding to complete an undergraduate, or perhaps ultimately a post-graduate, degree. It is logical, therefore, to suppose that such students can also be empowered to acquire new attitudes towards their studies by becoming optimistic and motivated learners. A truly effective preparatory program will address ways of developing these attitudes so that today's adult learners will become lifelong learners.

## BALANCED SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

One way this can be achieved in the language component of the program is to recognise the importance of balancing objectivity with subjectivity. American academic Parker Palmer believes that Western education's obsession with the objective world (Palmer, 1983), and its failure to give credence to subjectivity, leave people's inner lives barren and unexamined. We must educate in ways that "might heal rather than wound us and our world," writes Palmer (1983, p. 2). Thinking in the twenty-first century tends, in a number of ways, to move away from the notion of binary opposites towards a more harmonious linking of ideas. For example, reason and emotion, once regarded as diametrically opposed functions of the brain, can now be seen by many philosophers, educationalists, and psychologists as two sides of the same coin. Feeling plays an essential role in thinking. This is the basis of the concept of emotional intelligence, an idea pursued by the behavioural psychologist, David Goleman. Emotional intelligence combines self-awareness and self-discipline, motivation and persistence, and empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1996). Because emotional intelligence is now often seen as the key to successful lifelong learning, it is being cultivated in tertiary education institutions.

## HOLISTIC LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

To help students take on the expectation that they will be successful in a challenging program

such as STEPS, the team has developed a language and learning curriculum that focuses on many of the concepts that Seligman believes are vital in helping to foster optimism. Even the name of the course, *Immigrants into a New Time*, prepares students for an optimistic outcome. Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (1998) remind us that “adults are most ready to learn when the learning meets an immediate life need, and are most motivated when it fills an internal need” (p. 172). Thus, many STEPS students are ripe for transforming learning experiences. Because it is imperative that, from the very beginning, language and learning experiences are positive and bring success, the holistic curriculum emphasises self-awareness while acknowledging the value of community and cooperation. This effective curriculum model, which gives credence to students’ inner landscapes while at the same time developing

their academic skills, has been adapted from Peter Singer’s (1981) “Circles of Concern”.

The first circle focuses on the self. Honouring students’ life-stories and understanding growth are an important part of the STEPS philosophy; therefore, past experiences are valued as essential to the learning journey and the development of worldviews. All early writing is personal and creative. Students are treated as successful writers from the first day, and, after a few times, reading their writing aloud in sharing sessions can become a natural thing to do, even for the reluctant ones. They also are introduced to the work of behavioural science professor David Keirse (1998), and gain an understanding of their temperament types and how these can influence different ways of thinking. Learning styles are evaluated and “whole-brain learning” is introduced.

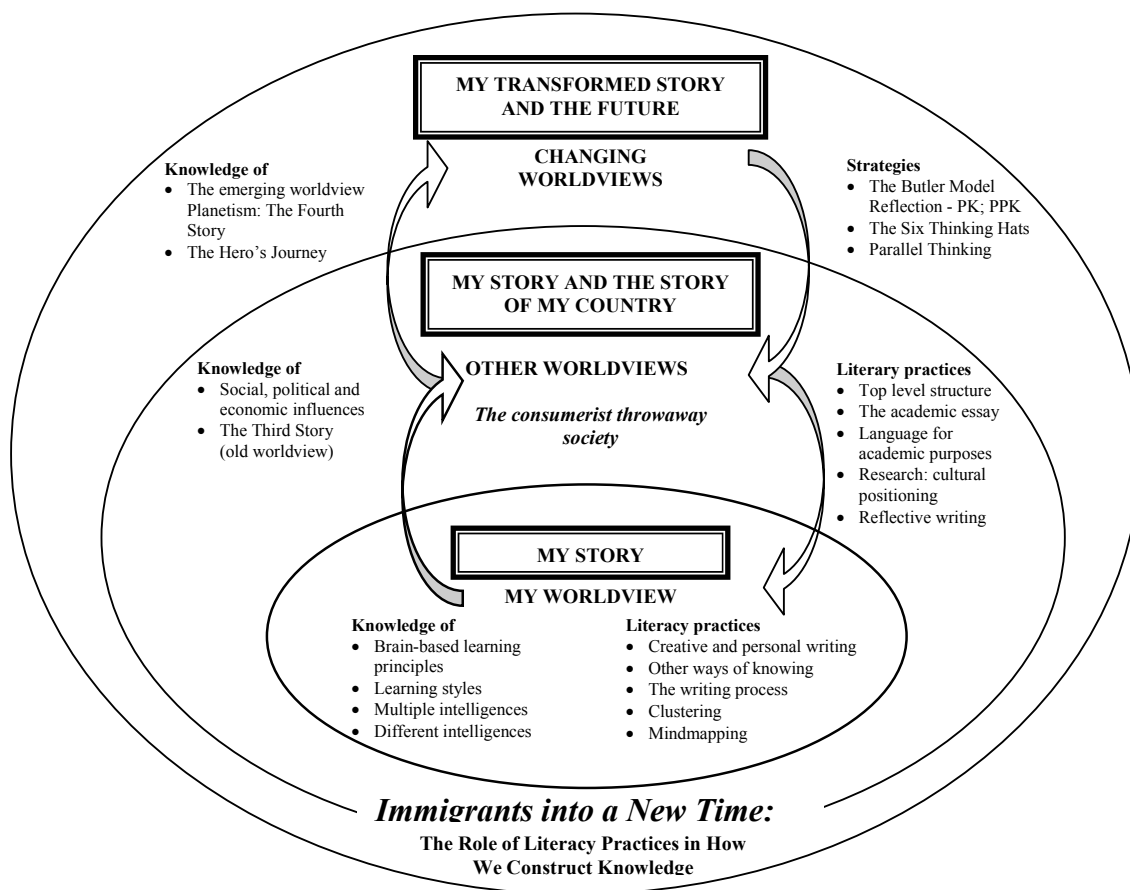


Figure 1. First circle - my worldview<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> From “Immigrants into a new time” by J. Simpson, 2004. Copyright 2004 by J. Simpson. Reprinted with permission.

New learning strategies are essential for many who see themselves as damaged learners as they are reluctant to revisit old ways that have brought past failures. Edward de Bono's (1990) six thinking hats are an effective introduction to thinking in other ways; his yellow hat being a commanding visual representation of an optimistic explanatory style. While the black-hat is not meant to represent pessimism but rather to herald caution and judgment, when black hat thinking is extreme, this hat can serve as a useful exemplar of pessimistic explanatory styles.

To many students, the most compelling aspect of the first circle is the 12 steps of the "Hero's Journey". These are based on Joseph Campbell's (1993) study of world hero myths. Campbell identified and named identical stages found in all hero myths. Hollywood screenwriter Christopher Vogler (1996) in his book, *The Writer's Journey*, adapted Campbell's stages of the Hero's Journey into the following 12 steps.

### **Second circle – cultural worldviews**

The second circle embodies modern Australian society and its throwaway, consumerist mindset. In 'Flexible Optimism', the final chapter of Seligman's (1990) text *Learned Optimism*, the author examines the notion of how the self, the individual, is exalted in modern Western society. For many, the old beliefs (in God, our nation, the family) are weakening, while the individual has achieved more importance. We have greater personal choice and control, and our material expectations are very high. We are constantly bombarded by the lures of consumerism and advertising. For anyone with sufficient resources, this is a golden world. Many adult students are studying to gain a place in this golden world; often they are returning to institutionalised learning because they have been cast aside as a result of the deconstruction that is creating confusion and "Supreme Ordeals" in a rapidly-changing and increasingly-materialistic society. Australia, along with many societies, is undergoing a Hero's Journey. Supreme Ordeals can breed pessimism; pessimism can breed victimhood.

However, through their academic research and writing on the influences that are impacting on post-modern Australia, students gain greater understanding of their worlds and how cultural worldviews are formed, and are thus better equipped to challenge any former false, pessimistic attitudes. Seligman (1990) suggests

that disputing pessimistic beliefs with evidence can be an effective way of dealing with them. Academic conventions require writers to present alternative views on a topic and Seligman exhorts us to "give them [pessimistic beliefs] an argument. Go on the attack" (p. 218). For example, many STEPS learners who have faced Supreme Ordeals willingly answer the "Call to Adventure" to investigate changed social values in areas such as gender roles, families, and workplaces. By looking more objectively at all the issues involved, and through the reflection that their Hero's Journey research brings, they often come to a deeper understanding both of events that have created their particular adversity, and of their responses to these events. Disputing erroneous pessimistic beliefs through evidence gained from research often brings about a transformation in worldviews.

### **Third circle – changing worldviews**

Lastly, in the outer circle, students are immersed in the vastly changing views of reality that reflect discoveries from both the worlds of the new sciences and personal transformation. Advances in quantum physics, complexity theory, and holistic biology have created a shift in values from separateness to connectedness (Capra & Steindl-Rast, 1991), and, although the shift, which Robert Theobald calls the "Fourth Story", is as yet minimal, many people are tiring of the "cult" of the individual and the lack of purpose that so often transcends our lives, and are yearning for a return to a greater sense of community (Theobald, 1999). Seligman (1990) too, mourns what he calls the "waning of the commons" (p. 284). He writes, "The epidemic of depression [in Western society] stems from the much-noted rise in individualism and the decline in the commitment to the common good" (p. 286). However, as students gain the understanding that conflict and confusion are a natural part of the process of growth and transformation (Butler, 1993), they are led to understand systems thinking. This informs them that they are part of much larger systems and that their positive transformations are contributing to the greater transformation of all the systems of which they are a part – from families and workplaces to the whole of society (Pearson, 1998). Throughout the course, alongside traditional rational, logical thinking, learners have experienced new ways of learning and other ways of knowing, and now are led into an understanding of futures thinking (Theobald 1999). This represents the transformed Hero's

Journey, both in regard to themselves and to their country.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the course, students have, hopefully, gained a deeper appreciation of themselves and others as well as an understanding of the cultural mindsets that have led to challenges faced by modern Australia. However, they have also awakened to the fact that positive changes in the thinking of individuals can bring about positive changes in society. No one is powerless. Butler (1993) shows that, if it does not pass through confusion and conflict, adult learning is less effective. In other words, both challenge and reflection are vital in the learning process for transforming worldviews. This recognition can energise and motivate adult learners. As they accept the benefits to themselves of learned optimism, they can now recognise they have the expertise to be successful lifelong learners. Seligman (1990) teaches skills to reverse negative thinking patterns that are far beyond the scope of language and learning; however, reflection is not beyond this scope, and reflecting on the 12 steps of the Hero's Journey has become a crucial means for students to chart their own learning journeys. Many accounts testify to the fact that what they have chronicled is a journey from pessimism to optimism.

In the last week of STEPS the students are required to write a final Hero's Journey reflection on their STEPS experience. Both Jane and Marion finally came to realise how much they have to contribute both to lifelong learning and to society. These were Jane's final words,

Thus I return with elixir, confident to undertake the Bachelor of Learning Management. I now have faith that I can tackle unusual or difficult assignments or essays. I have belief in myself that I never thought would exist. I now know who I am. I am a new person and I can never go back, nor do I ever want to. I am so happy to have found this new me.

Marion also recorded her pride in her transformed worldview:

The STEPS journey opened my eyes to much of my black hat thinking and,

although I still recognise the black hat as being there, I have also developed a sense of hope. Although I never thought it possible, I do have an elixir. I have confidence. I feel empowered. I'm proud of my achievements and my staying power. It is in this development of hope that I have been transformed.

(Pseudonyms have been used for the student respondents in this paper).

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