

Can I do that?:

Strategies for developing and recording non
cognitive gains in ILPs

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Abstract

This project focuses on exploring the incorporation of non cognitive gains into individual learning plans (ILPs). It investigates how to record non cognitive gains in a manner which makes them relevant to the learners. The current ILP used by Derbyshire Adult Community Education Service (DACES) within the Skills for Life (SfL) environment does not make any direct reference to recording non cognitive gains. During the initial interview learners often identify non cognitive aims, which are recorded on the initial interview sheet, but do not progress on to the ILP. The result of this is that although tutors observe the non cognitive gains there is no official record for either the learner or the Service to refer to.

The research question/theme developed to facilitate this project was 'Exploring strategies for developing and recording non cognitive gains in ILPs'.

The main findings of the project have included learners reporting an increased level of confidence in carrying out tasks and tutors have stated that for the majority of learners the project has been beneficial because the learners have set their own targets and it has made the learning relevant to their lives outside of the classroom, which has helped motivation. The findings reflect the outcomes of other research literature (Menist,2006, Eldred 2004), which comment that although confidence, self esteem and other non cognitive gains are challenging to measure, the gains experienced by learners impact positively on their learning experience.

Introduction

Derbyshire Adult Community Education Service (DACES) provides a variety of courses for adults, including Skills for Life (SfL), across the county. Provision is offered in a range of settings including adult education centres and outreach centres. Within the SfL curriculum area learners are supported from Pre-Entry through to level 2. Learners come from a wide range of backgrounds and have a variety of reasons for attending classes. The ILP forms an important element of the SfL environment to demonstrate progress and planning; the present ILP records academic targets, but does not include soft targets. 'Exploring strategies

for developing non cognitive gains into ILPs' is the research question/theme that underpins the academic topic under investigation.

Anecdotal evidence is often relayed between tutors about observations of increased levels of learners' confidence, motivation, self esteem and independence at most tutor meetings or during individual discussions, but a frequent source of disappointment is that at the present time it is not recorded on the ILP. As a consequence, the learner cannot see their progress and although the tutor observes it, there is no way of evidencing it. Information is captured during the initial interview when learners often indicate the desire to be able to feel confident to do something such as go into school to speak to their child's teacher, but this information does not transfer across to the ILP.

A key aspect of this research has been to promote a degree of autonomy in the learners, in particular to encourage a 'feeling of ownership' of the ILP. Many learners within the SfL environment are defined as vulnerable adults and as such often have additional issues not directly related to English or maths; however, as other research (Eldred et al 2004, Menist 2006) has indicated the development of non cognitive gains can impact positively on a learner's inclination and ability to learn.

Core findings from this project have come from both the learners and the tutors involved. Retention of learners has remained high, although it must be acknowledged it was a very small scale project and learners were volunteers. Learners have, on the whole, engaged positively with the activity and tutors have stated they feel they now know their learners better because of the discussions they have held with the learners. The majority of targets the learners selected for themselves had direct links to English and maths, such as using English for a specific purpose e.g. having the confidence to buy a birthday card for a family member. A number of learners have reported a sense of achievement after achieving the targets they had set themselves.

Literature Review

In order to consider if there is value for both the learner and the Service in recording non cognitive gains on the ILP, the literature review has been used to examine the theme from a range of perspectives including: confidence, self esteem and motivation, the ILP document, learner autonomy and theory.

There is a substantial amount of research available on the value of hard outcomes including the Skills for Life Strategy (2001); the demonstration of academic achievement and the relationship to funding are two obvious examples. However, there is substantially less material available about non cognitive gains, possibly because of the perception as being intangible and difficult to quantify. This prompted an initial area of interest; how a non cognitive gain can be defined and is it appropriate or necessary to attempt to measure it or is fitting to simply record it? In some literature non cognitive gains are labelled as soft outcomes, perhaps the description reflects the challenge in defining and recording them.

Eldred et al (2004) noted a lack of literature available to facilitate the development of recording such gains in the area of adult learning. Most literature, when identifying non cognitive gains, focuses on confidence and self-esteem; however, for this study, the intention was to look at a wider perspective including such areas as motivation. Brunello and Schlotter (2011) give a more generic definition of non cognitive skills as being personality traits in their research which examined the labour market and education and training systems.

Menist (2006) observed in her work within the literacy, numeracy and ESOL environment with entry level learners who had a background of homelessness that progress in learning supported and developed non cognitive skills including self-worth. She acknowledged by recording soft outcomes in a manner that the learners could comprehend increased motivation to learn. This has a direct correlation to a community education environment where many of the learners are defined as vulnerable for reasons including mental health issues or family or personal problems. Menist's research indicated that recording soft and hard outcomes had a wider impact on their lives, not only in the classroom. This hypothesis has a direct link to this research project; if learners can see their own progress in non cognitive outcomes that do not necessarily relate directly to academic achievement, will it encourage and motivate them to persist with their academic goals?

Returning to one of the initial points raised at the start of the literature review; is it appropriate to attempt to measure non cognitive gain? Eldred et al (2004) comments in their research into 'Catching Confidence', that although it was difficult to use a system of total measurement, it was possible to capture and express changes in confidence. From examining this research it became clear that it would be inappropriate to attempt to measure non cognitive gains in this project, but it would be viable to record gains.

A further facet of this project is to consider the current ILP and to examine if an amendment to incorporate non cognitive aims would be beneficial. Individual learning plans take a variety of forms and are completed in a range of ways depending upon the establishment.

However, there are aspects which are common to all; information relating to initial and diagnostic assessment should be recorded and it should provide a record of learner progress.

The value and role of the ILP has prompted extensive amounts of literature to be written, often with a degree of disparity in the assessment of its effectiveness and purpose. Excellence Gateway publishes a guidance document, *Individual learning plans* (2008) on how an ILP should be developed and used. It explains an ILP is, 'a dynamic working document owned and used by the learner...' It could be argued that this not how it is always perceived; Hamilton (2009) suggests that it has become a method of demonstrating performance indicators and an important arbitrating device between local levels and system goals. She goes on to argue that the ILP is unable to reflect learners' prior knowledge or experience, their needs and crucially places constraints on what counts as learning. This tends to contrast with the Excellence Gateway document which emphasises learners taking ownership of their own learning and the possibility to plan and gain confidence by using their newly acquired skills in a range of settings including at home or in the community. It goes on to note that learners can measure their own success; in an academic sense this assertion can be evidenced, but this does not necessarily move into the non cognitive domain.

An ILP health check list is also provided by Excellence Gateway; again the focus is on academic achievement. Interestingly, at no point does it make direct reference to recording non cognitive aims or skills.

As much of the literature around the ILP appears to be directed towards recording academic achievement with little or no reference to non cognitive gain, it raises a question if incorporating both elements into the ILP would motivate learners to continue to work towards academic targets if they could observe their non cognitive gains on route. Hattie and Timperley (2007) observe student's providing their own feedback to their performance of tasks is a powerful tool.

A key aspect of this project is learner autonomy; an ultimate aim is to encourage learners to take ownership of their learning goals. Derrick et al (2009) observes that a student centred approach to learning, teaching and assessment are key elements in this goal. The aim being to move away from learners being passive recipients of what is being taught to being actively involved in their learning. This contrasts with target and academic achievement being the primary aim that has become the case in much of present day education. Papen (2005) comments on how SfL courses have to a large degree become synonymous with accredited learning, but she notes this is not what everyone attending a class wants to achieve. Her

emphasis places the development of literacy, numeracy and ESOL as social practices, not subjects remote from life.

Looking at the learner as a whole in relation to cognitive and non cognitive acquisitions with a view to developing their autonomy Coffield (2008) examined the acquisition and participation metaphors. The acquisition metaphor focuses on gaining possession of such things as qualifications and skills; whereas participation metaphor moves the emphasis to learning to recognise changes in identity and how this impacts on the individual. This can then be related to learning and teaching and the ten principles of effective teaching and learning. Several of the principles stand out as relevant in relation to this project including the first principle which states, 'Equips learners for life in its broadest sense.' This includes the development of such things as learners' self confidence and making friends; this principle values informal learning, both within the education setting and outside of it. Also the seventh principle relates directly to developing the recording of non cognitive gains by consulting learners about their learning – giving them a voice.

Hamilton (2009) links her research to that of situated learning, an area that Lave and Wenger (1991) have written extensively about. Lave and Wenger assert that social engagement provides an appropriate environment to enable learning to occur. They further observe what they have described as legitimate peripheral participation; they link this to the dynamics of power in relationships. When someone is moving towards a more active, involved role in society, being on the periphery is empowering; however, when someone is prevented from taking a fuller participatory role in society then it is disempowering. This has a direct correlation to the acquisition of non cognitive gains; a person integrating into a group by improving their social skills, taking part in discussions and contributing to the group gains confidence and self esteem. As a community of practice develops the sense of membership or identity becomes linked to the establishment of motivation; this is reflected when a new member of a class moves from the edge of the group to being an active member.

The importance of learner engagement is, as Fielding et al (2005) illustrated, a key feature in transferring good practice. In this project engaging the learners is an essential element. In several cases more than one learner in a group has been involved and it has encouraged other learners to wish to participate.

Research methodology

What was the problem?

The area that was addressed was how to incorporate non cognitive gains into the standard Derbyshire Adult Community Education Service's Skills for Life individual learning plan (ILP). Although non cognitive aims were often identified at the initial interview stage, they were not transferred to the ILP. Progress made by learners, although observed, was not evidenced in the recording system.

As the provision is spread across the county of Derbyshire, tutors approached to join the project came from the three regions, north west, north east and south. A group of nine Skills for Life tutors was approached to see if they were interested in taking part in the research project to look at the value of recording non cognitive gain. Fielding comments on the value of a joint practice approach, taking into account existing practices of tutors (2005). The majority of tutors approached were enthusiastic to take part in the project; although one felt it would create too much of an additional workload. Learners working at entry level 2 or below in either English (including some English as a second language learners) or maths classes were approached to join the project. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and that they would be actively involved in setting their goals. Ultimately eight tutors and fifteen learners took part in the project.

The Intervention

The initial steps were to undertake background reading related to ILPs, self esteem, confidence and motivation and autonomy. A group of volunteer tutors and learners were recruited to the project. In conjunction with this an ILP insert recording learners own personal targets was developed. This was a Joint Practice Development (JPD) activity, as once a working document was created it was discussed with other tutors to get their initial feedback and ideas; this was an opportunity for tutors who normally work in isolation to contribute to a joint project. Gregson et al (2013) comment on the significance of the creation of conditions for JPD where tutors and learners can contribute to sharing and developing good practice. Amendments were made following their comments and then the insert was trialled with the volunteer learners. The project was actively running with both tutors and learners fully involved by the end of January. In the week before the February Half Term, a focus group of tutors involved was held to ask for their own and their learners comments at the half way stage. Tutors had spoken to the learners prior to the focus group and asked how they found the insert to use and if they thought anything was not clear. Their feedback then influenced the modifications needed to make the document more appropriate; it was then be made available for use again until the end of the project at the end of March, when all of the

comments and feedback were collected and analysed. A final focus group meeting took place where tutors explained their experiences on the project and fed back their observations of the impact the project had had on the learners.

In addition to the focus group, a community of enquiry was used with one group of learners, all working at entry level, to establish their thoughts on the purpose of the existing ILP and why they filled it in. This facilitated a clearer understanding of how learners perceive the current ILP and how any modifications may impact on them.

Case Study

This group is an entry level English group with learners working at levels from E1 to E3. It is a mixture of male and female learners ranging in age from 20s to 50s. Many learners have additional learning needs and the group is supported by three learner support assistants.

During a usual class, the individual learning plan (ILP) is completed by the learner, with LSA support if needed, towards to the end of the session. Although the purpose of the ILP was explained to the group at the start of the academic year, I suspected the relevance and value of it may not be entirely clear or remembered.

The class knew I was taking part in some research and when I approached them to take part in a kind of community of enquiry about the ILP they were keen to participate.

We had a couple of questions which were discussed in small groups.

1. What is the ILP for?
2. Is it useful?

Before starting the discussions, the learners were each given some post its to note down their ideas. It was stressed this was not a spelling or grammar task; it was just a way of remembering their thoughts. (See appendix 6)

The mixture of views about the ILP lead into a discussion about what the learners viewed as achievement; as expected all spoke about academic achievement, but they spoke about confidence and feeling able to try and not worrying if they got it wrong. One learner commented he was happy to have a go in class, but he would not feel confident enough to do that outside; others also spoke of their concern about how they are perceived by others because of low literacy skills.

At this point an interesting thing happened; one learner who is part of the research project gave his views. He spoke about several instances (targets he had set himself on the project) and how he has become aware of the distance travelled. He commented that his improving literacy skills have given him confidence; he cited being able to buy a birthday card for a family member and feeling sure he had the 'right card'.

He explained he had bought a computer around Christmas and was having problems with it. He had been able to read the error message that appeared on the screen and had been able to meet one of the targets he had set himself by feeling confident to ring the shop and explain the problem he was having and to be able to read the message to the man on the phone.

John's comments were that it was the first time he had been able to confidently explain his point on the phone and not feel that he wasn't good enough. 'I felt confident to stick to my point and not feel like I was an idiot.' I had not been able to do that before and I felt pleased with myself and satisfied that I could sort it out without help.

These developments echo those of other learners identified in research (Eldred et al 2004).

What I expected to happen

I expected both tutors and learners to have clear ideas about the non cognitive gains that could be worked towards. My initial expectation was that learners would be enthusiastic to set their own goals that they could take ownership of. I expected some of the goals to be more abstract rather than related to specific English or maths tasks. At the beginning of the project I hoped to include a wide mixture of learners from all three areas for SfL, English, ESOL and maths.

Ethical considerations

Participants, learners and tutors, involved in the research project were treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity and without prejudice as outlined in Bera's ethical guidelines (2011). The project was explained to the tutors, who volunteered to take part, and they then discussed and explained it with learners, who again volunteered to take part. All participants had given their voluntary informed consent as defined in Bera's ethical guidelines (2011) to take part in the project; this took the form of verbal agreement supported by a signed informed consent form. The wording of the learner consent form was carefully considered to ensure its clarity and appropriateness for learners working at entry level 2 or below. All participants were aware they were able to withdraw from the project at any time with no detrimental effects.

Personal targets were set by the learners in conjunction with their tutors; this was intended to put the learners at ease. All data and feedback collected was anonymous and confidentiality of the learners' and tutors' identities was maintained. No learners' names were recorded on the personal target document. Data was stored securely and held no longer than necessary for the project.

The amount of paperwork for participating learners and tutors was kept to a minimum in order not to create too much additional work.

At the end of the project the findings/results were available to the learners and tutors as well as the wider research community.

The data and its analysis in terms of themes and categories

The project began with reading around the themes of ILPs, non cognitive outcomes, learner autonomy and relevant educational theories. Simultaneous to the reading, an initial ILP insert was developed, which was discussed in meetings with some of the tutors who formed the community of practice (CoP) for the project. Following their feedback regarding wording, layout and the information recorded, an amended ILP insert was developed (see appendices 1 to 4). This was again shared with tutors in the CoP and deemed suitable to trial with the volunteer learners. The tutors explained the ILP insert to the learners and then the learners involved selected their own aims in discussion with their tutors. Both learners and tutors fed back at the half way stage via the learner and tutor feedback forms (see appendix 4) and in addition, tutors fed back via focus group meetings, one to one meetings, emails or telephone conversations. In addition, a couple of learner interviews were conducted to establish individual learner's comments. Following the feedback, the insert was modified to have easier symbols to work with and an additional column for learners to indicate how they felt when they had achieved their goal (see appendix 5). This was then trialled until the end of the project at the end of March and final feedback was collected and the data analysed. In addition to the trialling of the insert with the cohort, a community of enquiry was held with a group of learners ranging from E1 to E3 to establish their views and perceptions of the current ILP which does not include the insert as standard (see appendix 6).

Of the fifteen learners taking part twelve were English learners, two were ESOL and one was numeracy. Learners were working at either E1 or E2. All learners wanted to link their targets to their subject area; this initially raised some concerns as I had expected learners would choose targets such as feel more confident to talk to other group members, not necessarily directly related to use of English or maths. However, when examining research I realised this was not as moving away from aims of the project as I had originally thought. Eldred et al (2004) examined how using skills gained increased confidence; examples included writing a story and reading it out in class. This linked back into what many learners were saying, the wish to feel confident doing something.

On the ILP insert all tutors reported that learners had quickly come up with ideas that wanted to try for the second and third suggested areas, 'To read ...' and 'To write...'; this may well have been because it related more easily to the subject areas worked on in class. However, the slightly more abstract first and fourth suggested areas; were identified by several tutors as more challenging 'To feel more confident with...' and 'To join in with...'; some learners initially had more difficulty to engage with these goals. This was discussed in detail at both of the focus group meetings and possible suggestions as to why these were more complex to address included that some learners felt it would be a sign of weakness to openly

acknowledge issues with confidence and related areas; this was particularly the case in classes where there may not be a strong sense unity. However, as the project progressed, many of the learners did decide to add their targets – an aim that reoccurred for several learners was to join in with class discussions and ask questions.

An interesting part of the project was the area involving ESOL learners. Tutor feedback indicated the project was useful to support the subject area and learners engaged with areas based on non cognitive gains willingly as their motivation was high. One ESOL learner said she would like to, *'feel confident to join in with and take the lead in a discussion'*. Her tutor commented using the non cognitive targets supported the learner in class, as she was able to *'home in'* on the learner's needs rather than what she needed to pass her test. The second ESOL learner also set one of her targets as joining in with conversations and improving her pronunciation. By the end of the project, she reported that although this is an on-going goal, she does feel more comfortable with speaking and her English mother tongue friends have given her positive feedback.

The numeracy learner related his targets to feeling confident to do practical tasks such as *'feel confident to measure some wood'*.

The biggest sample of learners in the project came from the English classes. Learners' targets were diverse; a couple of learners wanted to feel confident to join in with other groups and one wanted to feel confident to join in with supporting his children with reading. His feedback at the half way point indicated that he now goes to the library more and by the end of the project he commented, *'This makes me feel more involved with my classes...'* Another learner also commented on the feeling that he liked to feel involved. By the end of the project his final feedback reflected how he felt, *'Look! I have completed all my targets.'* Other learners reported they were now able to listen more in discussions and grasp more information. A theme that came through much of the learners' feedback was that they enjoyed doing the project because, *'... I am learning what I need to.'*

Targets that related to writing were allied to having the confidence to try and do things outside of the supported environment of the classroom; Eldred et al (2004) raised the matter of fluctuating levels of confidence. One learner had been able to write and send a text message to his sister, which was very important to him. A learner had set himself the goal of buying a birthday for his sister and being able to read every word on the card without having to ask for help. He also wanted to feel confident to speak on the telephone; he had had bad experiences in the past when he could not articulate what he wanted to say. By using strategies to organise himself before making the phone call, he was able to phone the shop

to explain the problem he had with his computer and resolve his problem. He said he felt proud of himself when he had done it. This relates to Eldred et al (2004) findings, 'Enhanced confidence was related to changing self-image and attitudes...'

Overall tutor feedback has been positive. Tutors have identified specific benefits from learners taking part in the project; this has related to increased levels of engagement, motivation, confidence and empowerment. One learner talked to his volunteer support worker about the 'achievements gained with the form'.

Aspects of the project that were highlighted as areas that could have been improved were time and communication. A couple of tutors indicated they would have liked to run the project over a longer period and another tutor felt there was not sufficient time to spend with learners and liaising with colleagues; this reflects Fielding et al (2005) who commented that four elements are essential in joint practice development for transfer to be effective, two of which are time and communication.

An area which was raised during tutor feedback was that learners may be gaining confidence in their abilities and feeling able to approach tasks which do not relate directly to their formal assessment targets i.e. funding targets and this could have an impact on achievement data. My assertion at the start of the project was that the two sets of targets could run concurrently and complement each other. Research supports this; Menist (2006) found hard and soft targets could have a direct correlation and Eldred et al (2004) develops this further to say that if enhanced confidence impacts so strongly on learning and learners' lives perhaps it should be considered as an intentional outcome of learning programmes.

Findings

This has been a small scale project, eight tutors and fifteen learners, run over a short period of time. The ILP insert was developed to complement the existing ILP and care was taken to make it user friendly in the choice of words and symbols used. Most learners enjoyed setting their own targets and the majority achieved their goals by the end of the project; however, some learners may continue with the insert for the rest of the academic year as they have found it beneficial.

The project group consisted of English, ESOL and numeracy learners, although the majority were English learners. The feedback from both learners and tutors has been essentially positive with reports that there would be value in continuing to use the insert with some

learners in the future. Tutors have all commented that they know the learners better because of the conversations they have had with them about the project. One tutor commented she had a better understanding of how the learners were using numeracy outside of the classroom.

A challenge at the beginning of the project was to define non cognitive gains in a way related to the practical aims of the learners; however, during the discussions with learners it became apparent that the majority of the aims related to learners feeling confident to do something.

Several tutors fed back that learners' motivation had increased whilst taking part in the project as they had felt they were doing what they wanted to do and what was relevant to them. This was reflected in the learner feedback boxes on the insert.

Learner retention was high, with just four learners leaving before the project ended; the reasons for three withdrawals were not course related.

Recommendations

This was a very small scale study; this means that there were limitations to the study. However, several recommendations can be suggested.

Within the SfL curriculum area, the ILP insert could be trialled for a full academic year; this would enable it to be started when the learner initially joins the course and it could be developed in conjunction with the academic ILP over the course of the year.

In addition, the insert could be used with learners working at all levels, not restricted to E2 or below. This recommendation comes as a direct result of the feedback from tutors involved in the project; the majority felt it would be equally valid and appropriate for learners working at higher levels to record non cognitive gains as many learners have issues with confidence, motivation, autonomy or self esteem. The tutors also fed back that learners not involved in the project indicated they would have liked to participate recording their own targets.

It would be advantageous for tutors working with the document to receive initial training and on-going support to use and evaluate the benefits of the document; this could ensure continuity of use and offer the opportunity to further develop and improve the insert.

In other subject areas the findings from the SfL project could be shared in the form of CPD activities/training and the other subject areas could be encouraged to develop their own

versions of an ILP to incorporate non cognitive gains if they felt it would be appropriate to their subject.

As Recognising And Recording Progress and Achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) is already in use within DACES; this could be an area where this project is further developed.

Dissemination strategy

All of the documents related to this project such as the ILP insert, the report and the research poster will be loaded on to DACES moodle platform, where they will be freely available to tutors and managers.

The report will also be forwarded directly to managers who have requested copies.

On a wider basis the report will be available to interested parties.

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