

Building student's self-esteem through a learning journal

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Abstract

Janet Ollerenshaw graduated from the Herts MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning in 2006. In this article Janet provides an account of the development and evaluation of a 'learning journal' as a tool for promoting the self-esteem of students in a secondary school.

Throughout both my personal and professional life, I have been increasingly aware of the important role that self-esteem plays in learning. This was of particular concern to me as I struggled with low self-esteem in the early stages of my life. I suffered from feelings of inadequacy and became very self-critical throughout my childhood and young adult years. These feelings were occasionally alleviated by the discovery of my talent for Music. I was not very successful at school and left at the age of sixteen, with three O' levels. At my father's suggestion I became apprenticed to a hairdresser. I was moderately successful as a hairdresser and continued with music as a hobby, earning a little money as a folk-singer. Later on I was invited to teach the guitar to children at a local school and gradually developed a career as a peripatetic Music teacher. During these years I witnessed the positive development of young people's self-esteem when they were encouraged to realise for themselves that they could play or sing well enough to perform in public. My own self-esteem improved too. I decided to take steps to become a qualified classroom teacher, embarking first on an Open University degree course and after six years of study, I graduated and completed my teaching qualification under the GTP scheme.

Since qualifying I have been a teacher of English at Barnwell School and increasingly aware of inhibitions to learning. I wanted to explore the extent to which this can be explained by negative self-esteem. Alongside this I wanted to find ways to build self-esteem and counteract negative attitudes towards the self. I explored research already carried out into self-esteem and then decided to

design an intervention tool that would enable students to reflect on their 'selves'. This would be a journal, designed to improve students' self-esteem. It would also provide me with data to inform my understanding about self-esteem and its importance for learning.

Self-esteem and learning

Through an intensive period of reading I was able to clarify the principles that would underpin my intervention. It is generally agreed that self-esteem refers to a person's judgement of their own worth or value, and that it arises in part from feedback from significant others from childhood onwards (Shackleton and Fletcher, 1984). This evaluation of self is usually comparative, both in terms of what is perceived as an ideal self and as a measurement against other people. Self-esteem is the 'bottom line' for successful learning and that, without a belief in one's ability to succeed, the chance of success is limited (Gilbert, 2006). Self-esteem can be seen to be a basic human need. Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps to explain how basic needs motivate us all (1970). His theory has been very influential in the fields of management training and personal development. Maslow's model has layers of needs in a pyramid; needs such as physical and emotional well-being appear at the lower levels with self-esteem appearing higher up just under the pinnacle of 'self-actualisation'. Some writers question the hierarchical ordering; Perera (2005) for example suggests that self-esteem should be placed at the very base of the hierarchy, even before the basic physiological need for food and water. This resonates with my own view that, in order for a child to develop into a psychologically and physically healthy adult, self-esteem should be considered equally necessary as the need for nurture and sustenance.

What was of particular concern to me was the part that schools and teachers can play in the maintenance of pupils' self-esteem. For the young child, going to school presents many opportunities for positive or negative self-evaluation

Success and failure are the principal nutrients in the development of selfhood. Yet we may not be the final arbiters of success and failure, which are often defined from outside according to culturally specified criteria. And school is where the child first encounters such criteria – often as if applied arbitrarily. School judges the child's performance and the child responds by evaluating himself or herself in turn.

(Bruner, 1996:36)

Charlton's illustrative diagram, 'Cycle of Failure' (1992), demonstrates that the experience of academic failure can lead to reduced self-esteem which then leads to less effort and persistence, resulting in academic failure leading to reduced self-esteem and so on.

Self-esteem can be easily damaged by insensitivity to a child's inner feelings and misinterpretation of outward signals and behaviours displayed may lead to teacher reactions which only reinforce a child's perception of him or herself.

The teacher's ability to help students attribute success to effort has a long-lasting, powerful effect on those students' self-concept and feelings of pride ...

(Bocchino, 1999:135)

As Hargreaves (1982) argued many years ago, the ethos of school can destroy students' personal sense of worth even where there is an explicit aim to foster personal and social development. The constant experience of failure and a lack of respect for those things the students themselves value seriously undermines students' personal sense of well-being and self-esteem (Pring, 1984).

As a teacher I realised that there was little I could do to change the foundations of self-image and corresponding self-esteem, but I wanted to see if it would be possible to encourage a child to accept themselves with whatever self-perceived imperfections and idiosyncrasies they may have. I wanted to see if positive attitudes to self could be supported, providing a stronger foundation for a belief in their capacity for learning and achievement.

A project to address the problem of low self-esteem

I designed a project to try to create an alternative cycle of success, thereby raising self-esteem and providing students with techniques to encourage continued emotional stability and balanced self-esteem. I developed a process of problem identification and strategies for supporting those students whose self-imposed limitations appeared to inhibit their progress. I investigated ways of supporting children with negative self-esteem, both to promote positive esteem and to raise achievement in spite of low self-esteem. This came into being the learning journal, which I labelled, "Me, Myself and I".

I began my development project by searching for a tool to assess levels of self-esteem and found the 'Lawseq' questionnaire. This assessment tool has been widely used, in particular, in the 1979 National Child Development Study where it was administered to 15,000 primary-aged students. It was considered to be of high reliability and validity (Lawrence, 2006). It is brief and easy to administer and intended as a screening device for making a quick assessment of self-esteem. I used the questionnaire to identify a focus group of Year 10 students to work with. I wanted to see if the strategies I was developing would be equally applicable in a different kind of school so contacted a teacher at St George's school in Harpenden and invited her to collaborate with me on the project.

I had decided at an early stage that I would ask the students in my focus group to keep a learning journal. Journals can teach us about ourselves, how we feel and what we think; they can give us the perspective of where we were or what we were thinking on a given day and, in hindsight, they can show us the path we were on and what contributed to our decision-making processes (Kradel, 2002). Writing in a journal can enhance our feelings of well-being by helping us to understand more about ourselves (Clement, 2002). I developed a structured journal with specific tasks included to provoke the type of thinking and self-reflection that would help the students to recognise their own strengths and abilities. I knew that students would need considerable support in using such a journal to reflect on their feelings and record significant events; I would need to create quite detailed scaffolding, a structure within which they could write.

Designing the journal

In designing the learning journal I was guided by the five points provided by Rob Barnes in *Positive Teaching, Positive Learning*:

- Ultimately, negative thinking is wasted energy
 - Negative thinking feeds on itself
 - Negative thinking is unnecessarily stressful
 - Positive optimistic attitudes can be developed
 - Pupils can take responsibility for becoming positive
- (Barnes, 1999:3)

Our journal would focus on encouraging students to recognise their capabilities, counteracting negativity and helping them to take responsibility for developing their positivity. I drew on ideas

gleaned from a number of self-esteem assessment tools. As well as helping to promote positive thinking, these would provide me with guidance as to how and what the students felt about themselves, both socially, domestically and as learners in school. Particularly useful for stimulating this reflection is the concept of writing a letter to one's self (Churchill and Churchill, 1992). Since self-esteem is a personal measure of how we see ourselves in comparison with how think we should appear, it was important to place emphasis on being unique. Children are notoriously judgemental of each other and their opinions of each other can have a profound effect on levels of self-esteem, especially where it is low or wavering. Some of the questions in the journal were designed to help the students think about how they perceived themselves in relation to other people and what they believed about themselves.

Emotional reactions can influence self-esteem; for example, as a child, my reaction to personal criticism was to cry, thus reinforcing both my own and other people's opinions of me as weak. For others the reaction can be one of anger or aggression. In the journal I asked the students to consider what things affected how they were feeling. Much of this aspect of the journal was based on the work suggested in Gillian Shotton's (2003) *Feelings Diary* and Barbara Sher's (1998) *Self-esteem Games*. To promote positive self-esteem I wanted to encourage the students to be self-reflective and learn to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses. However, the capacity to effect changes also depends on being able to accept and rationalise feelings of inadequacy. The techniques, suggested by the authors referred to above, are designed to help students take responsibility for their own emotional responses and reactions and to avoid relying on others for feelings of well-being and success, thus promoting positive self-esteem.

Loosely based on an Adjectival Discrepancy exercise was a task based on how students describe themselves and their feelings in specific subject lessons. I chose to focus on the core subjects, Maths, English and Science since they were common to all students in year 10. This was followed by a four-week programme wherein students were asked to complete a page of questions per subject lesson per day. Each week focused on a slightly different aspect of feelings; such as enjoyment, anger and frustration, interaction with friends and learning, thinking positively and being ready to learn.

The use of colour was particularly important in the design of the journal. It needed to be something that the students could take pleasure in looking at and in completing. It also needed to be stimulating and provocative and something quite different from everyday textbooks and resources. I was encouraged when I read that: ‘our perception of colour – is central to visual aesthetics and profoundly affects our emotional state’ (Gregory, 1990:119) and thought that colour could affect how the students perceived the tasks set and how they might respond to the various questions.

All of the questions were designed to promote positive thinking; not placing emphasis on what the students have failed to do, but on what they have been able to achieve. The final task in the diary was to write a second letter to themselves. In this they were asked to write about where they would like to be in a few years’ time focusing on what they need to do in order reach their goals and to be able to think positively about themselves and their futures. In retrospect, there are other ideas that I could have included and hope to develop in future editions of the journal, ideas such as ‘climbing ladders one rung at a time’ or ‘eating a whole box of chocolates but only one at a time’. This would further focus on learning as something that can be done one step at a time, especially when the whole lesson appears to be too daunting.

The journals were personalised for the students and the title, “Me, Myself and I”, was used to emphasis the focus on them as individuals rather than on a whole class or school initiative. In supporting individuals and encouraging them to think and behave differently, I hoped to help them to see that they could also change the way that other people responded and reacted to them (Barnes, 1999). Above all I wanted them to be able to recognise their own strengths.

Evaluating the journal in action

My colleague from St Georges’ School and I agreed to use the journal with its associated programme of activities over a 4-6 week period. I would keep a research diary throughout to record significant dates and events and comments from the students and other teachers about the journals and about the project in general. Also, at an early stage in the project, I arranged to conduct group interviews with the students in the two participating schools. Having begun the project in September, I had completed journals back from all of the participating students by mid-January.

I now had a wealth of evidence to examine. The students' responses to the questions and tasks in the journals such as the letters to themselves provided rich data, this was further enriched by my own notes and the data from the group interviews. I analysed all this material in order to be able to design a protocol for semi-structured interviews (Drever, 2003). I then set myself the task of interviewing each student who had participated in the project in order to explore their views about the impact of the journal exercise and how it could be improved.

Students were enthusiastic about the journal. Many of them said that they felt more positive about themselves as learners and that they would be able to use the strategies they had learned to support themselves in future learning opportunities. All of the selected students expressed the opinion that a learning journal, such as the one they had used, could be very useful in supporting students with negative self-esteem. They were very positive about its effectiveness and in general about its ease of use. They were critical of some aspects, in particular the size of the journal and of some of the response options to questions. Most of the students thought that their experience of the journal had been valuable to them and that it could continue to serve them as a reminder of their own abilities as learners.

Yes it (the journal) did, it made a big difference, specially in my classes ... it gave me confidence to do well in lessons and that
(Student B4n)

Even the Barnwell student who had been most ambivalent towards the journal at the beginning of the project, agreed that:

[I] could learn a few things about myself, about little things, like writing them down ... probably because it made me think.

An examination of the two 'letters to yourself', one at the beginning of the journal and one four weeks later at the end of the programme, provides some interesting and gratifying points. One student wrote:

I also think that you think about what other people think too much. I know that popularity is important but education should come first.
(Student G2n)

And later:

You need to start thinking about the future and what you want to do and especially how you plan to achieve it. [] ...you would realise your potential and work harder.

(Student G2n)

Here there is an indication of realisation that the onus and responsibility for change lies in yourself.

One of the Barnwell students was extremely critical of the journal at the beginning of the programme.

I haven't learned anything about myself, or my lessons. I don't think this book has helped me at all. It's annoying filling it out every time we have English, Maths and Science. It takes too much time ...

(Student B1p)

However, in the second letter the same student wrote:

Even though I thought it wouldn't help me ... it did a little bit. I am going to concentrate more in lessons ... I will change the way I am in lessons. I will be more confident in myself.

(Student B1p)

This indicated to me an unexpected change as a result of the programme. Even a student who was hostile to the idea of using the journal was able to recognise a change that could benefit them in the long term.

One of the St Georges' students acknowledged a lack of self-confidence.

There are times when you lack confidence and seek reassurance from others. It is not necessary for you to always ask others, have faith in yourself.

(Student G3p)

Nevertheless, later they advocate 'a positive attitude and determination in order to achieve your full potential and never, ever give up.'

These words from one student summarise the overall opinions of the students involved in this project.

You lack so much confidence ... you feel that the world is against you and that everyone seems to secretly hate you ... once you are stuck on something you tend to just tell yourself there's no way out ...

(Student G1n)

But just four weeks later this student said:

I have recently learnt that it pays to be patient. Just because things aren't going well at the moment, it doesn't mean they won't be (better) next week. I know I am going to have to work hard to be more confident and happy, but I know if I'm patient I will get there. I now have aims that I am going to work towards and hopefully achieve.

(Student G1n)

The lowest scoring student who also showed the biggest gain a measured by the Lawseq instrument, wrote:

I am also going to think positive and think ahead about what I am going to do to have a positive attitude about my learning so I can make a big success of myself.

(Student B4n)

Taking the project wider

The next step in this important work was to find ways to utilise the journal further. Fortunately staff at Barnwell School are encouraged to share their development work by making presentations to staff.

Discussions with Learning Support staff at Barnwell resulted in the journal being used with two more students, one in year 9 and one in year 8. Since these two students were displaying negative self-esteem and since the journal had been introduced to other members of staff, it was suggested that the journal be used to try to encourage and support them in their learning. Both students completed the journal, reported that it was '*very helpful*' and that it encouraged them to think differently about themselves and their learning. One of these subsequently requested to use the journal again, implying perhaps that a longer period of use could be beneficial for more adversely affected students.

A presentation of my work to the Senior Leadership Team at Barnwell School was useful and encouraging. The general opinion was that the journal could be used as a whole-school initiative, perhaps through PSICHE (Personal, Social, Citizenship and Health Education) or through the Achievement Support Department.

Another suggestion was that it could be introduced to year 7 on their arrival at their new school in order to support and develop their learning attitudes and provide a positive basis for their self-esteem as learners. Altogether, reactions to the journal and its intentions were very positive and the potential for change and improvement to students' learning experiences recognised and acknowledged.

It became apparent through discussion with colleagues that, although issues of self-esteem were considered by many to be relevant to learning aptitude, little consideration had been given as to how these issues might be addressed. The journal, therefore, has the potential not only to help students but also to raise teachers' awareness of how pupils' self-esteem is affected by their experiences. It also provides an immediate and accessible tool for use in various circumstances.

Already the journal has been used to help re-integrate a long-term absentee from school into full-time attendance by supporting and reinforcing their self-esteem and confidence in their ability to learn. A year 10 student felt that they were unable to meet the expectations of teachers and parents. However, having used the journal for two weeks to support, they are now attending school on a regular basis. There are implications here for a wide range of uses for the journal, such as support for the inclusion of disaffected students and positive thinking for students displaying behavioural difficulties generated by low self-esteem.

Certainly my project seems to reinforce the idea that self-esteem can be raised and a more positive attitude to learning can be encouraged through the use of the journal. However, this was a small-scale experiment so I would like to try using a revised journal, with a year 7 English class of 32 students.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this initial project the key lessons for me were as follows:

- reflection is vital for self-monitoring
- structured reflection can encourage and foster self-acceptance
- the acknowledgement of students' individuality is important for personalised learning
- teachers can gain insight and open their views by reading pupils' journals (provided there is no infringement of personal privacy)

- strategies such as this journal can help to develop emotional literacy in both students and teachers

I began my MEd thesis (Ollerenshaw, 2006) with ‘my story’ and the project described in outline here represents a continuation of that story. My life journey of self-discovery has encouraged me to believe that I can make a difference both for myself and for others, especially my students. In my privileged position as a teacher and as a student, I can appreciate both ‘sides of the coin’. I lead the learning of others and I learn alongside my students. I like to think that it is never too late to learn but I also believe that the earlier good learning practices are absorbed, the better the learning will be. Self-esteem has a major impact on learning and my project has illustrated the advantages of encouraging positive self-esteem for learning. For me, the journey has been invaluable. On a personal level, it has allowed me to understand better my own ongoing issues with negative self-esteem and to come to terms with some of the possible reasons for my own failings. For my students, it has equipped them with strategies and tools with which to enhance and support their self-esteem, ultimately giving them an opportunity to avoid the possibility of becoming trapped in a cycle of failure. For my school, it represents a significant advance in understanding emotional and metacognitive processes and the factors that can diminish students’ capacity to learn. Overall, it raises awareness of the fundamental importance of recognising that an emotionally balanced attitude to self and positive self-esteem is essential for successful learning.

Post-script

My ‘guinea pigs’ were duly rewarded with chocolates and cinema tickets not only as a token of my gratitude for their assistance but also to encourage them to go on believing in themselves. I wanted them to feel that they have succeeded in some way beyond normal classroom expectations thus promoting their self-esteem. One student left Barnwell School at the end of the Spring term so I had not been able to give her the chocolate reward. I posted a parcel to her house and a few weeks later I received a letter thanking me in which she wrote the following,

What I helped you with has helped me a lot. In my lessons it has given me more courage. Thank you for picking me to help you.

(Student’s letter)

This was a gratifying response which reinforced my belief in the value of promoting positive self-esteem for more successful learning.

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