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CHAPTER 3

Human Strengths: Differences That Bring Us Together

Linda S. Cantwell

His name was Joe. He was male. I was female. He was black. I was white. He was young. I was not. He was a sculpted athlete. I was a sedentary reader. He was a first-generation college student. I was the second generation in my family to attend college. He was raised in a rural farm community of less than one thousand. I was raised in a metropolis of over one million. He was a student. I was an educator. When I asked Joe on the first day of class what he loved and did very well, he quickly responded, ''Football. I just love competing and winning; anything other than studying really. How about you?'' I responded that I was energized by studying and learning about how to best help college students become the persons they were created to be and realize their potential (Anderson, 2004). How could Joe and I be any different?

I admit that I did not look at the fresh faces of the sixty-five freshmen on their first day of class and immediately select Joe or any other student as someone with whom I would make an instant connection. His initial admission that he loved anything other than studying only served to solidify my initial first impression. I thought we were on separate paths to separate destinations. His ''loving football'' response suggested to me that his desired path was to lead our college's football team to a national championship. My path was much different. My path was to continue my scholarly endeavors of reading, writing, and teaching. Simply put, Joe and I were different people on different paths going to different destinations. However, before the second week of the semester had ended, Joe disclosed something deeper and more meaningful that suggested we were headed to the same destination. His disclosure was written at the bottom of his first exam

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when he answered the question, ''What could your instructor do to positively impact your learning this semester?'' His transparently written, one-sentence response was, ''Could you please help me pass just one test for just once in my life?''

As I initially read Joe's request, I was overwhelmed by his honesty. I could not imagine myself disclosing something as personal, introspective, and negative as never having passed a test to a professor as a college freshman. Yet, as I reflected on his transparent disclosure throughout the day, I was profoundly affected by more than Joe's honest admission of struggling to pass exams.

The many barriers Joe had to cross to write his statement at the bottom of his first exam were clear and profound. The first barrier was Joe's admission of being a first-generation college student. By requesting help, Joe's perception that as a faculty member I was concerned about him as a student was in direct opposition to my reading that first-generation college students ''were less likely to perceive that faculty were concerned about students and teaching'' (Pascarella, Pierson, Terenzini, & Wolniak, 2004).The second barrier was gender; Joe was male and I was female. Tannen's (1995) work on gender communication suggests that such an admission of weakness (inability to pass an exam) from a male to a female was noteworthy. The third barrier was ethnicity. Joe was black and I was not. We each belonged to a different race ''... as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings as dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets'' (Disraeli as cited in Hacker, 2003, preface). The fourth barrier was age. Joe was 18 and belonged to what marketing professionals define as the millennial generation, born after 1982. I was defined by the generational marketing experts as an aging baby boomer, born between 1946 and 1964 (Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2008). In short, Joe was a young black man asking an old white woman for help.

Without hesitation, I immediately turned over Joe's exam that I was holding in my hands and I tallied the number of right answers. He had correctly answered thirty-one out of a possible one hundred; a failing grade by any standard.

Because of Joe's honest and transparent written disclosure before he had seen his initial exam score of 31% and my desire to help students become the persons they have the potential to be, we met that day on the basis of our sameness. That sameness could be simply stated as we both wanted him to pass the class, although his terminology was ''helping him to pass one exam for once in his life'' and my terminology was ''helping Joe become the person he had the potential to be,'' which included learning and demonstrating his learning by passing multiple exams resulting in his passing my Introduction to Public Speaking class. Our simple demographic differences paled in comparison to our deeper value in both wanting him to succeed. Although Joe and I met on the basis of our sameness in the same class with the same goal of passing the class, we grew the rest of the term on the basis of our differentness (Satir, 1998).

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STUDENT LEARNING AND TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

Growing on the Basis of Differences

Joe was unaware that 2 weeks before his initial exam, when he enrolled in my 11:00 A.M. section of Introduction to Public Speaking instead of the 12:00 noon section, he had become part of an experiment that would bring us together every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for 42 days over 14 weeks specifically to experiment with ways to maximize our unique differences to impact learning. The experiment was designed to answer one question: ''Do my students learn best when I focus on what they have done wrong and instruct them in what they need to do to improve, or do my students learn best when I focus on their strengths, how they have applied their strengths to perform well, and how they could further apply their strengths to increase performance (Cantwell, 2006a)? To put it differently, I wanted to know the effects on learning by focusing on their unique strengths or differences and managing their weaknesses or ''trying to bring out what God left in, instead of trying to put in what God left out'' (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002, p. 124).

THE STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING

I taught two sections of the Introduction to Public Speaking course in two distinctive manners. In one section, I used a strengths-based approach and in the other, I used a traditional method of most public speaking courses (DeVito, 2000; Frobish, 2000; Lucas, 1990, 2004). The two groups were treated identically with the exception of the presence of the treatment or the strengths-based approach to teaching.

The strengths-based approach to teaching included three steps. The first step was to identify and affirm the strengths and talents of each student in the strengths-based group by administering Gallup's Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 1998) after the students had completed all pretests to control for background and precollege characteristics such as academic engagement, public speaking content knowledge, and speech delivery skills.

The second step involved encouraging and reinforcing Joe and his peers to develop and intentionally apply their strengths and talents in learning and performance activities. More specifically, this included reading their public speaking text, studying for exams, and delivering six speeches during our 42 class sessions together. The process of encouraging students to develop and apply their strengths and talents in learning and performing involved four 50-minute class sessions in which the students (a) shared with each other their five strengths identified through the online assessment, the StrengthsFinder; (b) selected at least one strength that they would intentionally use while reading a chapter in their public speaking textbook; (c) identified at least one strength that they would intentionally use when studying for an examination; and (d) were encouraged to use their strengths more intentionally and consistently as they learned and performed in the Introduction to Public Speaking class (Cantwell, 2006a; Clifton & Anderson, 2002, 2004).

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The third step was an ongoing process of interaction between the class and me, both collectively and individually. For example, after the students gave their speeches, I called attention to the ways in which each student performed best. I then helped the students understand how their specific strengths and talents enabled them to perform highly in that particular aspect of the public speaking process. Then I encouraged the students to think of ways in which they could use their specific strengths to make their speeches even more effective (Cantwell, 2006b). In other words, we started the semester by finding out who the students were rather than who they were not (Anderson, 2004), recognizing that each of us have strengths and talents that enable us to do certain things very well.

The strengths-based (n = 30) and control (n = 30) groups had no noticeable differences in participants. Both groups were exposed to the same course content and had the same examinations and performance expectations. I gave the same lectures and used the same textbook in both sections. The differences in instruction involved three things: (a) When the control group received feedback on speeches, examinations, and other performance activities, I focused on where the students performed least well and where they needed to do the most work in order to improve; (b) In the strengths-based experimental section, students were given an inventory to identify their strengths and talents and were shown how they could apply their strengths to learn and improve their performance; and (c) When I gave the experimental group feedback on speeches, examinations, and other performance activities, I focused on what the students did best and what strengths they had that caused their performance to be high in those areas; I then encouraged the students to apply their strengths even more intentionally to increase performance.

After 14 weeks of the intervention, both groups completed a battery of posttests including the Academic Engagement Index (Schreiner, 2004), Public Speaking Knowledge objective final exam, and a 5-minute informative speech that was videotaped and assessed by independent blind raters using the National Communication Association's speech performance instrument, The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form (Morreale, Moore, Taylor, Surges-Tatum, & Hulbert-Johnson, 1993).

THE FOUNDATION OF STRENGTHS-BASED EDUCATION

It is important to understand certain underlying presuppositions of strengths-based education. Strengths-based teaching is not a group of techniques. According to Lopez, Janowski, and Wells (2005),

> A strengths-based educational approach should not be confused with fads (that are sometimes atheoretical and often are only loosely associated with an education or psychological research base) that have swept through higher education. (p. 5)

Rather, they assert that strengths-based education is a return to "basic educational principles that emphasized positive aspects of student effort

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and achievement, as well as their strengths'' (p. 5). The strengths-based approach represents a philosophy of living that involves perceptions, attitudes, self-expectations, aspirations, approaches to learning, efforts to influence and modes of relating that represent a significant departure from many of the traditional approaches in higher education (Anderson, 2004).

Although grounded in historical principles and practices (Binet & Simon, 1916; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Hurlock, 1925; Terman & Oden, 1947), strengths-based education is built on two current educational objectives. The first includes the measurement of outcomes/achievement (Carey, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2004), strengths, and determinants of positive outcomes (Lopez, 2005). The second is individualization, which encompasses educational professionals' thinking about and acting upon the interest and needs of each student while systematically making efforts to personalize the learning experience (Gallup, 2004; Levitz & Noel, 2000). ''These practices identify and marshal the academic and psychological resources of each student'' (Lopez et al., 2005, p. 4).

Strengths are measured, and students are provided with the results to encourage awareness of their potential (Hodges & Harter, in press). Once students' strengths are identified, the strengths and their definitions provide a unique opportunity for individualization that allows students to make personalized academic choices and set personal goals based on their strengths. Professional educators are able to assist students with attaining their goals and providing personal, relevant feedback (Gallup, 2003; Lopez et al., 2005).

THE STRENGTHSFINDER ASSESSMENT

The decision to use the results from any instrument in working with students should be based upon careful examination of the validity of the instrument and the context in which it will be used. The Clifton StrengthsFinder has been used with over 2.5 million people in 20 languages and over 250 thousand college students in 170 colleges and universities nationwide. Within the strengths-based group, the StrengthsFinder instrument was used to identify the talents students brought with them into the learning environment that they could capitalize upon in order to achieve academic success, personal growth, and development (Schreiner, 2006).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder (https://www.strengthsquest.com) was developed by Gallup after decades of conducting research in 30 different countries to ascertain individuals' natural patterns of behavior, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and motivations (Gallup, 2004). This research consisted of conducting over 2 million interviews, which resulted in Gallup being ''able to identify over 400 themes of talent'' (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 7) using 34 signature themes, or strengths most prevalent in human nature. This online assessment presents individuals with 180-paired items to answers. ''Each item lists a pair of potential self-descriptors, such as 'I read instructions carefully' and 'I like to jump right into things'" (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, pp. 285–286). The descriptors are placed at opposite ends of a continuum. An individual chooses the descriptor that most describes

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him or her; the responses are sorted by Gallup and presented immediately to the individual in the form of dominant patterns of themes of talent (Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Hodges & Harter, in press).

For example, Joe's particular top five themes of talent identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder were competition, empathy, adaptability, developer, and significance:

> *Competition*: People especially talented in the competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.
>
> *Empathy*: People especially talented in the empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.
>
> *Adaptability*: People especially talented in the adaptability theme prefer to "go with the flow." They tend to be "now" people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.
>
> *Developer*: People especially talented in the developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.
>
> *Significance:* People especially talented in the significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others. They are independent and want to be recognized. (Gallup, 2000)

My top five signature themes of talents identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder include:

> *Achiever*: People especially talented in the achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.
>
> *Strategic*: People especially talented in the strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.
>
> *Input*: People especially talented in the input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.
>
> *Learner*: People especially talented in the learner theme have a great desire to learn to and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.
>
> *Intellection*: People especially talented in the intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions. (Gallup, 2000)

APPLYING THE AREAS OF GREATEST TALENT TO NEW OR CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Results from the StrengthsFinder provided Joe and me with a common language to talk about strengths, validated and affirmed our experiences, and provided many talking points for us inside and outside of class. We were able to identify each other's natural way of processing information, interacting with people and ways of seeing the world. For example, Joe's initial

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self-reported "love of winning" the first day we met not surprisingly was later identified as one of his five top themes and labeled as competition. Reading in our StrengthsQuest text (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) that Joe's strength of competition not only served as motivator for himself but also as a stimulator for others to be more productive and to reach for excellence encouraged me to find ways to help Joe to learn, develop, and apply his strength of competition in new and challenging situations. Reading the campus newspaper and hearing Joe's name over the loudspeaker at Saturday football games assured me his competition talent had been well developed and successfully practiced each weekend. The next step was to apply his areas of greatest talent to new or challenging situations, such as earning a passing score on an exam.

Because one of the objectives of strengths-based education is thinking about and acting upon the interest and needs of each student while systematically making efforts to personalize the learning experience (Gallup, 2004; Levitz & Noel, 2000), I incorporated interactive classroom activities to challenge Joe and to find new ways to develop and apply his competition talent in the classroom. More specifically, I conducted an interactive classroom activity using a quiz designed in the format of the television program *Jeopardy!* to assess knowledge of persuasive speaking concepts in our textbook. My experience from teaching the course numerous times was that the persuasive-speaking chapter was one of the most dreaded by students and most difficult to understand for first-semester freshmen.

After deciding to incorporate *Jeopardy!* and announcing it to the class, I asked for volunteers to serve as team captains. Of course, Joe's hand shot into the air first! The next hand into the air was another male football player who also had the identified strength of competition.

After the game had ended, I asked the students for feedback on the class session. One female student wrote in her reflective paper about the experience,

> When I came to class today, I knew I was going to be on someone's team. I read the chapter and all, but I really didn't care all that much. But, somehow after the first few questions, Joe started jumping up and down, whooping and hollering, and got the rest of us excited. All of a sudden, I started to care and before I knew it, I started answering questions, got involved and we won. It felt great! I still don't know how we did it. (Clark, 2004)

Joe had successfully learned, developed, and applied his area of greatest talent (competition) to a new and challenging situation (passing a chapter quiz). Joe had successfully made the connection from his competition talent enabling him as an athlete to lead his team to Saturday football victories to now leading his team in the classroom to *Jeopardy!* victory over persuasive speaking concepts.

The next step was to apply his areas of greatest talent to another new or challenging situation, which was the second midterm exam. Joe scored 47 correct out of a possible 100 possible points. From my perspective Joe had improved, but 47% was still a failing grade. My enthusiasm was well under control and I was not excited to share the scores with the class.

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Growing on the Basis of Our Differences

However, because the research seems clear that college freshmen desire almost constant and immediate feedback (Chickering & Gamson, 1991; McKeachie, 2001), and the strengths-based perspective includes not only individualization with students but also feedback on progress (Lopez, 2005), I brought the students' second exam scores with me to class in an electronic spreadsheet format. The names of the students were disguised with a secret code or color name they had chosen at the beginning of the term. I hesitated when the grades were illuminated on the large screen in front of the classroom, fearful of the students' reactions. I did not want to humiliate or embarrass anyone, and truthfully, I was not very pleased with my part as Joe's teacher with his exam progress from 31% to 47%.

I tried not to make eye contact with any of the students as I displayed the scores on the screen in front of the classroom. However, as soon as the scores were on the screen, I saw this big, burly football player with the strengths of competition, empathy, adaptability, developer, and significance shoot up out of his chair with both arms raised above his head and heard him bellow, "Woo hoo! I went up. I went up!"

Again, in that moment, Joe and I grew on the basis of our differentness. We saw his score completely differently. I perceived his score of 47% as a second failed exam. Joe perceived his score of 47% as 16 points higher than his previous score of 31%. He had compared his two scores and, from his competition and developer perspectives, had won. Also, because of his StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 1998) talent identified as developer, he was able to spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements—hence his raised-arm stance of victory. Joe's different perspective helped me to see progress through the eyes of his developer and competition strengths—strengths that I do not have. He had made progress, and he was grateful for that progress.

The Power of Positive Emotions

Joe had experienced and I had witnessed what heretofore I had only read about in Fredrickson's (2003) and Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki's (1987) work about positive emotions and problem solving. Fredrickson's (2003) broaden and build theory contends that positive affect leads to greater creativity, flexible thinking, increased negotiation and problem-solving skills, resilience to internal and external stressors, an openness to solutions versus problems, and more productivity and happiness (see Figure 3.1). Joe continued his upward spiral (Fredrickson, 2001, 2003) with greater creativity, flexible thinking, and increased negotiation and problem-solving skills after the second exam in two ways. First, he scored 63 out of a possible 100 points on his midterm exam in public speaking—a passing grade. Joe had passed an exam for once in his life and, more important to me as an educator, had made upward progress. Second, he developed, applied, and practiced his talent theme of empathy (e.g., the ability of individuals to sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves

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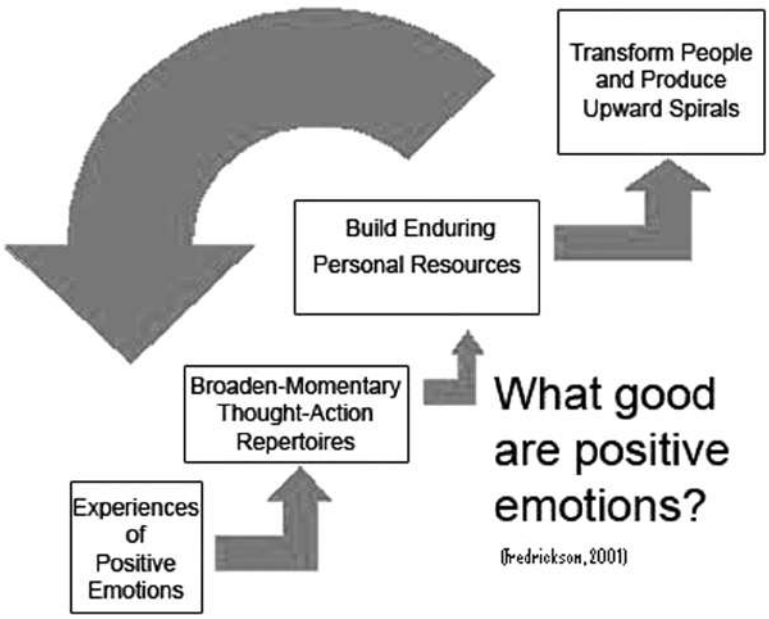

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Figure 3.1. The Broaden and Build Model of Positive Emotions

in other people's lives and situations) by serving as the catalyst for a class project that began the same day as he received his exam score, the Monday following the Thanksgiving break. I shared with the students an announcement from our dean of students about a young man in our class who was not returning to complete the term. His name was Josh. His car had collided with a semi-trailer truck as he was returning to campus after the break, crushing his leg. When I made the announcement in class about Josh, I heard the students' heartfelt sighs.

After class, Joe approached me with the question, "What are we going to do about Josh?" I said, "Joe, I do not know. I do not have the strength of empathy. You do. What do you think we should do?"

We decided to send an e-mail and invite the other six students in the class with the identified talent theme of empathy to collectively brainstorm. Through the flurry of messages, the students commented that the only thing that was different about our public speaking class from Josh's other classes was the fact that we were strengths-based and had a common language to talk about our individual differences. First, we considered buying a typical greeting card for everyone to sign. But one of the students who had the strength of maximizer (e.g., the ability to transform something especially talented into something superb) coupled with empathy suggested sending Josh a giant get well card so that everyone in the class could send a personal greeting. Within a few moments another student with the strengths of ideation (e.g., creativity) and empathy decided that we could each prepare an artistic expression of our five strengths in combination and create a huge greeting card the size of a quilt. She suggested we draw,

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diagram, or sketch on a 10-inch square of fabric. Thus, we purchased a 6-foot square of canvas fabric to make a quilt for Josh to send to him at the hospital as a Christmas gift.

First, I painted a grid on the canvas and affixed it to our classroom wall, next to a table of colored permanent markers. Next, I left the classroom unlocked so that whenever the students had time before class, after class, or on weekends, they could stop by and complete their squares with a unique message to Josh. Because the students had decided the only thing unique about our particular class was the fact we had all taken the StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 1998), the project became known as "The Strengths Quilt."

At first, the students were reticent to produce a creative expression of their signature themes (Anderson, 2003). However, they were able to artistically produce their personal uniqueness and identity as a reflection of their strengths and talents. Thus, every day the quilt became more and more complete. In fact, others on campus who knew Josh saw the quilt and artistically completed squares. For example, our college president, a department chair, and a faculty member in the art department completed the center square with my caricature (see Figure 3.2).

One of my teaching assistants interviewed and videotaped the students as they worked on the quilt. Before long, we had completed a 30-minute videotape full of verbal greetings to Josh to include in the box with our quilt. In addition to the quilt and the videotape, students completed personalized certificates for Josh to redeem when he returned with the assistance of crutches for second semester. Again, those with the identified talent theme of empathy created the five certificates that included (a) carrying Josh's tray in the cafeteria, (b) carrying his book bag to class, (c) carrying his basket of dirty clothes to the laundry room, (d) driving him wherever he needed to go, and (e) assisting him up the stairs if he had a class on the third floor of an old campus building without an elevator. Again I learned from my students whose strengths were different from mine exactly how their unique talent of empathy brought a class and a campus together.

THE REST OF JOE'S STORY

As the semester came to a close, Joe continued coming to class every day on time. He continued to turn in his assignments, sit for exams, and deliver speeches as scheduled. My teaching assistant delivered the final exams to my office late one evening. I quickly perused the 65 exams glancing at the scores and then purposefully finding Joe's.

When I saw Joe's score, I picked up the telephone and called him. When he answered the telephone he said, "Professor Cantwell, do you know what time it is? It is almost midnight. Do you call all of your students this late?" I assured him that although I had the talent theme of achiever, which identified my behavior to work very long and hard, I did not make it a habit to call all of my students after midnight. However, since I had great news about his final exam score in public speaking, I hoped he would forgive my

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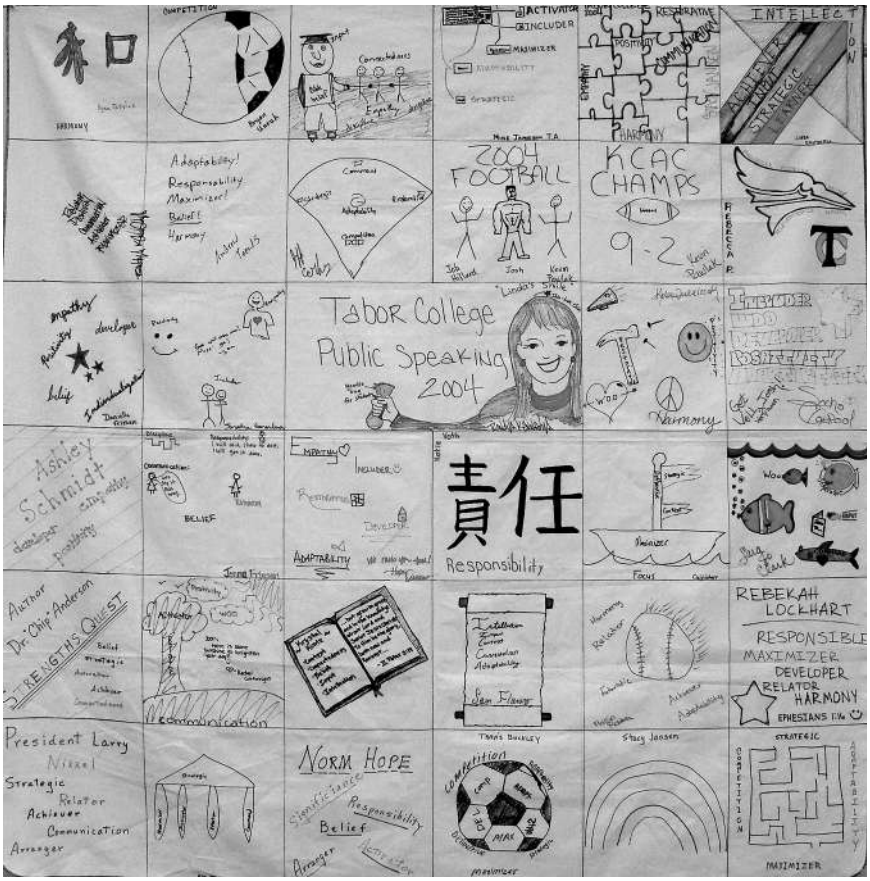

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Figure 3.2. The Strengths Quilt

late-night interruption. Then, I asked Joe to guess his final-exam grade. His first guess was 70 out of 100; an improvement of 7 points from his third mid-term exam score of 63. However, I told Joe his score was higher than 70. He second guess was a very sheepishly stated 73. I told Joe his score was higher than 73. So he boldly guessed 75. I said, ''No Joe. Higher than 75. You scored 85 out of 100 points on the final exam!'' His immediate reply was, ''No way. I am coming to your office to see for myself!'' It was, and he did.

STRENGTHS AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP

At that moment, right in front of me was what I had been reading about. A strengths-based approach to teaching and learning seemed to generate positive emotions and an upward spiral (Frederickson, 2003) and self-authorship (Kegan, 1994).

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Kegan's (1994) concept of self-authorship calls for people to "be self initiating, self-correcting, and self-evaluating rather than depend on others to frame the problems, initiate the adjustments, or determine whether things are going acceptably well …" (p. 168). Kegan's original research focused on women who had reached very high professional levels and suggests that high-achieving women do not allow themselves to be defined or limited by arbitrary sources of feedback. Rather, they selectively take in data from their environment and then, in an act of self-authorship, write a new story for their future. Tagg (2004a) suggests that students moving toward self-authorship embrace "substantive and transformative learning goals at a deep level" (p. 8).

I have personally seen that when students learn about their strengths, they are given a new language and a new confidence with which to begin writing the story of their life. Becoming aware of their strengths helps them rewrite that story so that their past successes and challenges make sense to them. Armed with their new strengths language and strengths-based confidence, these students take up the pen of self-authorship and begin writing a new, more positive future. I stand on this conclusion because I have seen it occur in virtually every student I have taught; not just Joe.

IRONY IN RESEARCH

Often, irony occurs in conducting research investigations. Sometimes the very best discoveries and the very best insights are not captured by the measurements established at the beginning of the experiment. For example, it was thought to be overly ambitious to address student persistence and attrition in this investigation. However, one of the most remarkable findings was that four out of 30 students in the control group officially dropped out of college before the end of the term, while none of the students in the strengths-based group voluntarily left. Moreover, it is noteworthy that all five students admitted to the institution on academic probation (not meeting entrance requirements), including Joe, were retained in the strengths section, particularly when all three of the students admitted on probation in the traditional section withdrew from college halfway through the term.

After only one week of beginning the experiment, I began documenting behavior patterns of the students in both sections. There were enormous differences between the behaviors of these two groups of students. On the most elementary level, students in the strengths-based class typically came to class on time, while students in the traditionally taught class did not. Beyond tardiness, students in the strengths-based class had better class attendance, while students in the traditional class more frequently missed class. In the traditional class, I frequently had to stop my teaching in order to curtail side conversations and disruptive behavior. I rarely had to say anything about side conversations or disruptive behaviors in the strengths class.

The students in the strengths-based class demonstrated by their behavior patterns that they were more academically engaged. In fact, my teaching

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assistants kept logs on such behaviors as the number of questions asked in class and the number of spontaneous contributions to discussions in the class taught with the strengths-based approach versus the class taught with the traditional approach. On average, three times more questions were asked and three times more contributions were made to discussions in the strengths class. Moreover, the level of engagement was more widespread in the strengths section. Virtually everyone participated in discussions in the strengths class, whereas in the control class only a fraction of the students actively participated. These patterns were also evident in how students handled assignments. The students in the strengths class turned in a higher percentage of their assignments, and a higher percentage of their assignments were turned in on time. All of these behavior patterns are direct indicators of academic engagement and are supported by the literature on behavioral academic engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Fincham, Hokoda, & Sanders, 1989).

These differences in academic engagement also were noted outside of class. Records were kept on the number of student-initiated e-mails and how quickly students retrieved feedback on their drafts and results from quizzes. Once again, the students in the strengths class participated outside of class more frequently and in a more timely manner. Finally, records were kept on students who came to the office during office hours, sought advice on their speeches, and attended the examination preparation sessions. Again, it was the students in the strengths section who voluntarily participated more in these academic and educational opportunities. So, it is equally evident that the strengths-based approach generated a series of behavior patterns that are exemplary of what most educators hope to see in their students.

CONCLUSION

This investigation sought to produce learning within students that was deep and permeating. On the basis of the theory and research of Tagg (2003), I implemented a strengths-based approach to teaching in order to increase students' intrinsic motivation and their academic engagement, resulting in deep learning of course content and performance skills. In fact, I attempted to train students in how to use their strengths to produce deep learning by stimulating their intrinsic motivation and reinforcing their academic engagement. The results demonstrated that when students are taught using strengths-based methods, they learn more content knowledge, they learn to deliver more effective speeches, and they become more academically engaged.

The strengths-based approach to educating has five major components (Anderson, 2005). First, strengths-based educating helps students identify their strengths and affirm those strengths as qualities worthy of investment in time and energy. Second, strengths-based educating trains students to employ their strengths to increase their learning and academic performance. Third, strengths-based educating involves professors disclosing their own strengths and talents and how they use their strengths in the various

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aspects of curriculum planning and in-class instruction. Fourth, strengths-based educating involves professors interacting with students on the basis of their strengths, affirming students when they are using their strengths, and encouraging students to complete academic tasks by applying their strengths and talents. Fifth, strengths-based educating encourages all members of the class to provide feedback to one another by pointing out when they see each other being at their best and then noting which of their strengths were at work. In so doing, peers become an extension of the professor in affirming each other as they are using and developing their strengths.

On the basis of the foregoing descriptions of the five key elements within the strengths-based method of teaching, it becomes clear why strengths-based educating would have such a powerful impact on students' engagement as measured by the Academic Engagement Index (Schreiner, 2004). Capitalizing on strengths resulted in higher levels of motivation, greater engagement in the task at hand, personal satisfaction, productivity, and higher levels of performance in objective exams and speech-delivery skills.

There are two additional aspects that might contribute to why strengths-based teaching could lead to students experiencing more intrinsic motivation. Several studies have demonstrated that as students become more aware of their strengths, they experience increased confidence (Anderson, Schreiner, & Shahbaz, 2003, 2004) and increased hope (Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). When individuals experience increased confidence, they experience more pleasure.

The connections between increased hope and confidence and intrinsic motivation seem clear. Hope and confidence are both internally pleasurable experiences. Intrinsic motivation stems from and is based on internal pleasurable experiences. Therefore, as students experience more pleasure in the form of increased confidence and hope through becoming aware of and employing their strengths, they become intrinsically motivated and reinforced by the positive experience of their hope and confidence. Finally, intrinsic motivation increases as a result of experiencing success. It is simply more pleasurable to succeed than to fail. As students are provided with means of increasing their learning effectiveness by applying their strengths, students experience more success. With successful experiences come the intrinsically motivating experience of pleasure resulting from achieving and being successful.

What were initial obvious differences between a professor and her students at the beginning of the semester, such as age, ethnicity, gender, cultural background, and parental education level, were not changed. How could they be? Instead we built on differences that were left in each of us (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999), which were our habits, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs that lead to greater efficiency, unique ways of processing information, ways of interacting with people, and ways of seeing the world identified by the StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 1998). Our new common language of our top-five strengths provided a springboard for our discussions, bridged our initial differences, and sparked students' academic engagement

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in ways that positively impacted their learning. Knowing my strengths and my students knowing their strengths made a difference. Moreover,

> As educators, our challenge and our joy is helping students move to levels of personal excellence by becoming the persons they have the potential to be. And the marvelous thing about this perspective is that in the process we also move toward our own levels of personal excellence, becoming the persons we have the potential to be. (Dr. E. C. [Chip] Anderson, personal communication, February 15, 2005)

PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENTS

Discovering and Capitalizing on Your Strengths

In this chapter, we have discussed a measure of human strengths. We encourage you to learn more about your strengths and to share them with family, friends and colleagues.

Discovering Your Strengths: In about 30 minutes, you can identify your signature personal strengths by completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder (https://www.strengthsquest.com). This inventory was discussed in the chapter. We encourage you to take the inventory, print your Signature Themes Report (found under the Strengths icon after you log in to https://www.strengthsquest.com) and share the results with people close to you.

Gaining Awareness of Your Strengths: There are numerous strategies for gaining awareness of your strengths (see https://www.strengthsquest.com). For now, we would like for you to simply raise your level of awareness of your strengths by printing your Top 5 Certificate from the website (see https://www.strengthsquest.com). Click on the Strengths icon and then click again on Top 5 Certificate. Frame the Top 5 Certificate and place it on your desk or outside of your office door. It will serve as a ''talking point'' for those people you interact with on a daily basis and allow you to gain awareness of your particular five strengths identified by Gallup's StrengthsFinder. Often those closest to us have a different perspective on what we are good at, and their feedback can be helpful.

Claiming and Confirming Your Strengths: In order to receive feedback from those close to you, add your five signature strengths underneath your name before you send your e-mail correspondence. Many programs allow you to add your signature electronically. Adding your five strengths in italic or bold is an easy way for you to invite confirmation from others who may have personally witnessed your particular behaviors, attitudes, and ways of interacting but didn't know what to call them. You have now given them five words—your signature strengths.

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