



UNIVERSITY OF
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Faculty of Education

Talk The Talk:

***Confidence, Communication and
Collegiality***

**An evaluation of the training workshops delivered in
schools across England & Wales by Talk The Talk**

**Final Evaluation
John MacBeath and Alex Alexandrou
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Sincere thanks to all staff and students at the following participating schools:

Archbishop Sentamu Academy, Hull

Cams Hill School, Fareham

Castell Alun High School, Wrexham

Cleeve School, Cheltenham

Cotham School, Bristol

The Hermitage Academy, Chester le Street

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Talk The Talk: *Confidence, Communication and Collegiality*

John MacBeath and Alex Alexandrou

This publication follows two years on from the 2016 evaluation *Talking the Talk: with confidence and conviction*. It concluded, on the basis of in-depth study of seven schools, that “The evidence points very persuasively to a highly successful intervention, in particular for shy and reticent students, helping to increase their skills and confidence. The following all appear to be key elements in the success of the programme:”

- The selection, training and skills of the training team
- The review and critique following sessions in the school
- The openness, desire for, and response to, evaluation
- The management of space and physical arrangements of classrooms
- The structure of a whole school day
- The pace, momentum and variety of activities
- The creation of a collaborative and non-threatening ethos
- The use of praise and positive feedback
- The encouragement of peer-to-peer feedback

As reiterated in the previous evaluation, it is all about enabling young people to find their voice, to gain confidence in themselves, dealing constructively with nerves, able to communicate not just in the classroom but also ‘for life’. Confidence has to be expressed not only in schools and classrooms but should travel and be sustained in other settings, in the workplace and in job interviews, for example. The nature of spoken language and body language are seen as closely allied so that identifying and using persuasive language techniques is conveyed by the confidence expressed through an authoritative stance and delivery.

Two years on, these remain salient aspects of the initiative but complemented and enriched by developing insights and a more elaborated and structured programme.

The introduction of internal evaluation and self-rating data measurement for each school visited, and every workshop delivered, has brought its own dynamism and commitment to the programme’s impact in the new academic year.

‘Top-notch communication skills to survive life after school’

In 2018, 2190 students across twelve secondary schools in England and Wales were involved. Eighteen Talk The Talk trainers were involved in delivering these workshops. The evaluation team observed Transition workshops, Communication workshops and Future workshops involving students from Years 6 -12.

In addition to interviews conducted by the evaluation team, follow-up individual and group interviews with students and teachers who had participated in the workshops, lasting on average 10 minutes each were conducted in each of the schools. These interviews were transcribed and analysed with key recurring themes identified by the research team.

An essential element of the internal feedback was the self-rating by young people of their confidence levels on a ten-point scale before and after the workshops. While a small number of highly confident young people had confirmed, rather than increased, their self-rating, there was a consistent trend in improved confidence ratings from all participants.

The following are the substantive issues that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data.

The importance of settings

In a previous evaluation the issue of behaviour settings was commented on but, as school leaders explained, it was not always easy to find the ideal location for the workshop. This did mean that trainers found themselves having to work extra hard to escape some of the familiar connotations, and possibly inhibitions, of the setting. Despite the inappropriateness of some classrooms, all trainers took pains to emphasise the collegial, open and welcoming climate, chairs without desks, arranged in a circle or semi-circle. While a studied attempt to foster a more inclusive and collegial environment, for the more reserved participants it did prove unsettling, as their familiar props, at a desk, left them without somewhere to hide behind. On occasions a student has taken a chair completely, or marginally, outside the circle.

In recognition of these behavioural constraints it required a heightened sensitivity among trainers to know when to intervene or to take a softly softly approach over time. It has been a common feature of workshops for one or two young people to remove themselves when feeling uncomfortable. On a number of occasions, students left the room in an emotional state, their insecurities coming to the fore when a sensitive topic was brought up, most noticeably when bullying was being discussed. There were cases where students found it difficult to cope with the emotional aspects of some of the activities, feelings exposed as a consequence of being invited to talk about themselves. This kind of disclosure might rarely, or ever, happen in the classroom, nor perhaps at home and perhaps never with peers where it could be seen as dangerous to expose any vulnerability. It was a reminder of how close to the surface are the susceptibilities of students whose lives out of school are largely unknown to school staff as well as, more obviously, to the trainer. It may have been the first time that some of the more gregarious young people had interacted with quiet and timid classmates and vice-versa.

“I used to get really really nervous reading in front of the class and I used to stutter quite a lot.”

“I completely hid my face, tried to hide behind my script. I didn’t speak out and tried to hide in a corner.”

The change was often quite dramatic, even 'addictive':

"Confidence is addictive. It makes you want to stand up and do it again."

"Now I feel we're in this together, when you see everyone else do it gives you more confidence."

The ability to widen the circle of contacts, to speak to people you would never have talked to before was a recurring theme. It was often related to prospective work experience and the need to be confident in meeting people for the first time and presenting yourself. Success in dealing with differing social relationships could be measured by students' level of self-confidence. This was not simply a matter of personal self-assurance but also a matter of context and 'critical mass'. A teacher who observed an apparently self-confident student in the workshop commented:

"She gets up out of her seat to help other students who are struggling, yet when she had to start speaking about herself she was less confident, not to do with presentation skills but because it was 28 people as opposed to five people in interview where she is relaxed and persuasive. So, confidence is difficult to judge as it depends on context and audience."

A climate for engagement

Creating a relaxed but upbeat atmosphere from the start takes place when the trainer meets and greets young people at the door, offering a contagious smile and a warm greeting. In one instance some young people were handed a card as they came in. Entry to the room is regarded as important, allowing the trainer to establish, from the very start, a culture and expectations of behavior. When, at the beginning of one session, the trainer asked young people to show their card, only a minority did so, the trainer explaining that these were the participants who had smiled and said 'hello'. On the following re-entry after the break all 25 had received a card.

The first entry to the room may be accompanied by noise and chatter, or perhaps by an expectant silence, as young people jostle to sit beside their friends. As it is their first entry the trainer may remind them of what they have done and suggest that on the next entry they should sit beside someone else, perhaps someone they don't know or would not normally sit beside.

Introducing the aims of the day and general shape of the programme trainers hand out name badges and ask students to write their names, asking them how they liked to be called, pinning them to their shirt or blazer. A boy who stuck his badge to his forehead was asked, with good humour, to replace it like everyone else, a low level friendly assertive statement by the trainer. Then each student would be asked in turn to say their name and something about themselves. One student remarked:

"Wouldn't it be good if a teacher asked you how you would like to be called."

There is sometimes a historical element in how students like to be addressed

and without explicit permission of teachers, or trainers, it can unwittingly perpetuate the hurt that can come with a nickname or label.

A good place to fail

Although the use of names may be seen as a small thing it carries an important message from the outset – asking for permission and showing respect for individuality. As a form of modeling and personal disclosure, the trainer would talk about himself or herself, openly and honestly, admitting to failures and setbacks, perhaps even admitting to not liking, or not doing well at school – a further attempt to dismantle any barriers and put young people at ease. Inviting students to ask questions about the trainer achieved a number of objectives – modelling behavior and self-disclosure. Self-denigration and laughter proved to be an excellent icebreaker.

“He made you feel comfortable and you felt you can trust him so you’re less afraid to talk about yourself and your real feelings.”

“She never talked down to you.”

“He talked about body language at the beginning and you could understand something about the way he stood and moved around that made you feel more relaxed and less worried about what was going to happen next.”

Chatting to students about their plans for the summer was a further strategy to put them at ease, asking about their activities, perhaps what they had done at the weekend. That trainers spoke to students in a conversational register, rather than as an authority, was mentioned by a few students in interview. After the workshop one student commented on the natural way in which the trainer had talked with them, contrasting it with the way in which most teachers addressed the class, what in transactional analysis language would be described as an adult-adult transaction as compared with a parent-child transaction.

“He was talking to you as a person, sort of casual, like you would speak to a mate.”

“He never talked down to us.”

“He told us a lot about himself and how he wasn’t very confident when he was younger and stuff. Teachers never do that, least not the ones I know.”

“Teachers don’t share personal things.”

Preconceptions and misinformation

As a lead-in to the workshop activities trainers explore preconceptions and perhaps misinformation, asking students what they thought, or had been told, as to what they would be doing during the workshop. In post-workshop interviews students said they had appreciated how trainers explained how the event would help them in different ways, socially, in class, and in relation to oral exams. As one 17-year-old girl said in interview:

“I definitely pay more attention and participate in class. I talk to people I didn’t used to. Out of school as well.”

The nature of self-confidence, as one senior student explained, was related to how you hold yourself and the ability to tune in to another point of view

“In meeting the public, it is very important to show confidence, the way you hold yourself and make eye contact and listen. I think I have become better at listening.”

There are important psychological theories in relation to behaviour and feeling, with two complementary explanations. “I am behaving confidently because I feel more confident” is the more common-sense interpretation, contrasting with what is known as the James Lang theory “I am feeling more confident because I am behaving confidently”. In many ways’ students’ testimonies point to the second of these theories, as may be inferred from one student’s comments:

“It was like a surprise to me. I didn’t know I was confident until I felt confident doing my talk.”

Students, in interview, described how they had learned to listen more before speaking, or before simply asserting their own opinion. Some referred back to what trainers had said about listening as a skill. “You have two ears and one mouth”, trainers would say, practising the skill of listening, even when you may not agree with what is being said. Rehearsing eye contact face-to-face underlined how important, but also challenging, this could be for some young people. To practice and maintain this over the course of the workshop did make it less of an unusual or threatening event.

A key message from all the trainers was that students ‘owned their future’. This referred not only to the wider context of their lives but as an aspect of workshops in which it was not about letting the trainer do all the work, but exercising their own initiative - seizing this as an opportunity to engage in activities that would have a positive impact on their well-being, confidence and self-esteem.

Trainers consistently emphasised to students the importance of vocabulary and clarity of speech. For example, students would end phrases or sentences with the word “like”

“What I learned from this was how not to use the fillers, I try not to use the ‘likes’. I learned to take a deep breath and relax.”

Trainers helped students by identifying issues and mistakes and then giving examples of how they could improve their delivery and choice of words. They did this in a way that gave students greater confidence through examples, and enhanced understanding of situational awareness such as how and when to use key words and phrases. They also used humour to help relax students, encouraging them to feel more comfortable about not “getting things right” continuing to work on these issues as the workshop progressed – emphasising

an exchange of ideas over simply coming up with the expected answer right first time.

Giving the wrong answer in class is, for many young people one of the worst things you can do and is a continuing inhibition and source of embarrassment. To overcome this is perhaps the key indicator of change, liberating students to venture further and opening previously closed doors. As teachers commented:

“There are improved relationships in lessons because they know nobody will laugh at you if you get it wrong.”

“When they know the climate in the room is accepting they feel free that they’re not going to be ridiculed or teased.”

“Students are holding themselves better. They have more positive postures, good eye contact, good firm handshakes.”

In the lunchtime break a trainer commented on an implicit purpose in these transactions - to work on social interaction skills without this being made explicit from the outset, sowing a seed that would be revisited later and reinforced.

By the end of the workshop, trainers promised, students would be comfortable in standing up, reminding them that a key aspect of the workshop was to take them out of their comfort zones. It was explained that they would be helped to do this more naturally and spontaneously as the workshop progressed – learning to ‘own’ the floor space. As a teacher testified:

“Her communication is definitely better from a being a timid little thing, and instead of hiding in her shell she will now have a go. A have-a-go attitude.”

Withitness

Being aware of anxiety or discomfort in the early stages of the workshop tests the trainer’s skills and awareness. Kounin uses the term ‘withitness’ to describe the skill of being aware of everything going on around you, picking up the slightest cues or signals of unease. This skill was demonstrated on a number of occasions as in the case of a student (later found out to be the victim of ongoing bullying) who was distressed and nervous and on the verge of tears. While sensitive and compassionate in his response, the trainer continued in a positive way as not to add to the student’s distress while continuing to focus on the direction and flow of the workshop.

A teacher or trainer’s skills can be measured by the trinity of Task, Group and Individual (the TIG principle), sometimes portrayed as three overlapping circles. Attention to one individual can derail the task or group cohesion while too determined a focus on task can be to the detriment of the individual or group. Keeping the whole group cohesive and on task could, in some instances observed, be challenging, especially where there were young people with special needs, perhaps unidentified beforehand. When there was the occasional disruption or lack of attention, trainers were quietly authoritative in what are known as unobtrusive ‘low level desists, such as ‘thankyou guys’, or

an explicit reprimand and reminder of the code of conduct. As one teacher commented:

“It was lovely to see the relationship between [the trainer] and the pupils develop throughout the day – so many pupils left school with a lot more confidence than they came with!”

As it was pointed out by some members of staff, it was not usual for young people to sit still patiently for long periods of time, particularly so for hyperactive students. Trainers had to be patient with restless young people – particularly challenging when a student would stand up or walk around the room. Not always apparent to the trainers was the social and ‘family’ background of some of the students, their complete lack of self-confidence, hypersensitivity and vulnerability which could manifest itself in unexpected ways. Arriving at school late, often without breakfast, disturbed sleep, or domestic violence, subject to bullying in and out of school, could manifest itself in unforeseen ways when students were asked to behave or to perform.

Applauding mistakes

Trainers consistently worked hard at ensuring students felt at ease, accepting and applauding, even the slightest contribution from their peers. In a school environment where making mistakes is treated as something to be denigrated it could be hard work for the trainer to encourage making mistakes as a positive thing, being patient with stuttering or other verbal difficulties, ensuring a non-judgemental environment. The use of praise can be a matter of delicate judgment as what Willard Waller described as ‘cheap praise’ can devalue the currency. Although there were occasions when this did occur, for the most part trainers were careful not to over-praise, rather, giving explicit formative feedback when a student had made significant progress. This was, typically, specific, detailed and positive while allowing praise to be ‘digested’ before moving on.

A constant feature of workshops over time has been the ‘confidence line’ in which students arrange themselves on a spectrum from highly confident to not at all confident. It could be a stark and visible demonstration of perceived self-confidence as a number of students would rate themselves a zero or even, in one case, standing so far away from the line to signal a minus rating. In one case, perhaps exceptional, a student had moved, over the course of the day, from a self-rating of minus five to a plus five.

When repeated at the end of the workshop, the line provides a visible marker of the personal impact of the session, Asked to explain why students had changed places on the line serves as an important element of the evaluation.

“I, like, moved from a zero to a five because I had realised I could do stuff I didn’t think I could do.”

A student who stood self-confidently at the positive end of the line said that she was used to dealing with people in her part-time job and being a ‘parent’ to her five younger siblings. While teachers who are present may, or may not join the

line, in one case where the teacher had given herself a high place the line, the trainer asked why she had assumed that position. The teacher explained that it was because she felt confident in relation to teaching her subject – English. However, she admitted that she would have marked herself lower on the line if the question related to talking to her peers. Such an answer could have been helpful to the students, showing that even their teachers had doubts about themselves. This was remarked upon positively in post workshop discussions, welcomed as a marker of students' own progress.

The five-finger technique

In preparation for their talk, viewed by many students with trepidation, trainers suggested that the talk be structured around five key points, represented by the five fingers, which students then practised with a partner. Using the 'talk to the hand' technique, students could, with each point, pull one finger back. As they practised, the trainer would circulate helping or reassuring students who claimed to be 'terrified' or simply refusing to do it. Tentative attempts would be congratulated with reminders of positive language:

"Molly, try to say "I believe" rather than "I think", and say it like you really do believe it."

That most students were able to deliver their talk, although not always remembering the five points, was owed to the encouragement and support of the trainer. However halting or embarrassed the presentation, it was always applauded by the trainer with encouragement for the group to do the same.

When a few students opted out of making a presentation, trainers were able to turn the negative to a positive by emphasising the student's agency in being able to dissent. This did not, however, prevent them returning at a later stage to offer further encouragement to 'have a go'. While applause could at times be a ritual convention, there were also occasions when there was a spontaneous and authentic recognition of effort and accomplishment.

The OH exercise, designed to raise awareness of tone asked all participants to stand and say 'O' as a way of drawing attention to inflection and meaning of words. This was used in a range of social contexts such as shock, pleasure, questioning, doubt, displeasure, detachment, resentment, anticipation, and surprise. Saying 'O' with a different tone and emphasis was practised in relation to differing social situations such as agreeing and disagreeing with an attitude such as aggressive, polite, sad, confused, doubting, displeasure, resentment, or surprise.

The value of self-disclosure

It was a continuing strand through the workshop for the trainer to offer not only encouragement and feedback but to offer advice and anecdote, sometimes humorous and self-disclosing, reinforcing learned skills and heightened confidence. It is a further attribute to be aware of those students who could be pushed or cajoled and when to back off and give a student space. 'Refusers' did present a challenge, in some cases coming with the pre-determined label.

How to deal with these individuals could be helped when someone, the trainer, a teacher or a student offered a different perspective.

Students giving feedback to their peers was also an important and integral aspect of the workshop, learning how to frame the positives while also suggesting what could have been improved upon. Standing up to give a speech was, for some young people, a traumatic event and it was to the trainer's credit when he or she succeeded in encouraging the student to have a go. One student who had, earlier in the day, been visibly upset, agreed to speak about bullying although it was obviously a very personal and painful issue for her. Soon after beginning she ran out of the classroom, upset and crying. She did, however, return and was able to complete her speech, summing up the courage to give it another try. To rise to the challenge despite setbacks made the accomplishment even more worthy of celebration.

The combination of creativity and persistence were used on occasion to ease a reticent student into speaking in front of his or her peers. For example, following all the presentations, a trainer asked a recalcitrant student to come to the front of the classroom, then asking this student to say a few words, then to elaborate a little and gradually adding a little more, so coaxing the student into his presentation. Conducted in such a way that was both positive and non-threatening, the student was able to overcome his reticence and give a competent and courageous talk. While eventually realising that he had been "set up" he was, nonetheless, more grateful than resentful.

Asked what the highlights of the session had been, students said:

"I didn't think I could and then I could."

"I remembered his jokes and his stories about himself and stuff he did when he was at school."

"I don't know if he's getting paid but whatever it is it's not enough"

It is quite apparent that much of the success can be attributed to the skills of the trainer. They bring to the event observable qualities such as:

- A sensitivity to behaviour settings
- A confidence in one's own authority
- A recognition of young people's authority
- An ongoing monitoring of behaviour and relationships
- Listening skills
- Empathy
- A sense of humour
- Self-disclosure
- Non-defensiveness
- Patience
- Management of time and task

As one teacher commented on a trainer's qualities:

"A good mixture of humour, serious direction and sincere encouragement...He succeeded in reaching every pupil to some degree."

To possess and deploy this complex range of skills is a tribute to the rigorous recruitment and training strategy of Talk The Talk.

Transition workshops

Transition workshops worked particularly well, helping students to develop friendships and dealing with what is, typically, an occasion for both anticipation and apprehension. Trainers dealt empathically with "new big school" anxieties, issues such as bullying, allaying fears and offering positive encouragement and strategies to deal with anticipated challenges. They responded to potential situations that students had cited, such as making new friends, homework, getting lost, moving between classrooms, relationships with older students, tests and being accepted for who they were. This was clearly helpful to their form tutors in alerting them to what they might need to look out for, and to work on, in the initial weeks of the first term. Students also described opportunities they thought were available such as: the after-school clubs, school trips, Art, receiving a good education, and making new friends. This was, again, valuable information for their form tutor teachers or through channels of communication to school staff in general.

The most significant theme to emerge for the student interviews, in their first term of Year 7, was the friendships they made and sustained beyond the workshop. The activities and conduct of the workshops had, they agreed, created a positive atmosphere, making it easy for students to get to know children from different schools in an enjoyable and safe space. Trainers were variously described as 'outstanding' and 'incredible'.

"He was quick to identify and change approach with vulnerable/challenging students".

"Incredible trainer, so much energy and really got all the students engaged!! Highly recommended for any future classes in any schools. A real pleasure to have met him."

A twelve-year old girl said that when she attended the transition day and workshop she did not know anyone, as she was the only one from her primary school. She described how the workshop had helped her meet other children, going on to make friendships, helping her overcome her shyness. Another described her increased confidence in interacting with older people as well as peers. The workshop had helped her acclimatise to the school although she still had a way to go because of the size of the school and the presence of older and bigger students. There were consistent and hugely positive accolades from school staff, emphasising students' 'full engagement' with tasks and

persistence. Recurring accolades were ‘fantastic’, ‘amazing’, ‘inspirational’, ‘excellent’, ‘brilliant’.

“Fantastic day. An absolute joy to watch. Made all the students feel welcome and confident which enabled every one of them to deliver an individual presentation.”

“Excellent session. Trainer was fantastic at engaging the pupils and building their confidence as the session progressed. Trainer was friendly and supportive to all pupils.”

“This really was an inspiring day. [The trainer] focussed the students and really engaged and encouraged all the way! Even had some that would never get up – Did! Fantastic. Really flowed – seamless!”

Teachers referred to the ethos or atmosphere of the workshop as a key ingredient, helping to push some young people beyond their comfort zone.

“The trainer was really involving with the kids. They have all responded very well to his stories and interactions. It was really good how he managed to make students comfortable in doing something which was beyond their comfort zone.”

“The trainer created a purposeful and happy atmosphere in the classroom. Impressive to see how well some of our particularly shy students did. Activities fun and lessons all pacey. I really enjoyed observing/joining in.”

One teacher proposed a possible improvement - “Maybe students could be exposed to video examples of good speeches”.

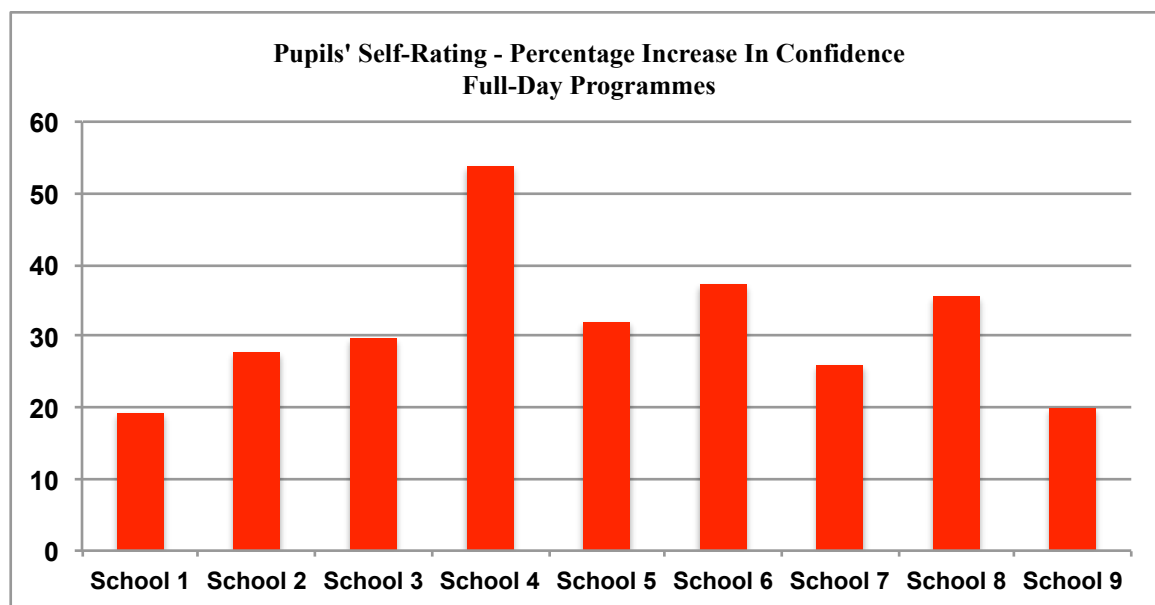
Of the two Transition workshops observed, one took place during the morning and the other in the afternoon. Whilst both workshops were, as teacher and pupil accolades illustrate, very engaging, some students did appear to tire over the course of the afternoon. Having already had a morning of perhaps concerted activity it may have proved too much to give full attention to what could be an intense afternoon. There would seem to be a case for Transition workshops to take place during the morning.

Measures of impact

Measured against six of the Project’s core criteria to what extent have students increased in Self Awareness, Social Skills, Self-Regulation, Empathy and Motivation?

Students’ own self-reports following the workshop show a consistent increase in self-confidence. For example, on three seminal criteria students profess to having become less nervous than they were at the outset, a self-rating from 7.2 out of 10 on the apprehension scale to a mean score of 3.6 following the workshop. There was a more modest increase in response to the question “how

many audiences have you spoken in front of?” from 2.5 to 3.1, while before and after levels of confidence rose from 5.3 to 7.7 on average.



Consistently in interviews students professed to significant attitudinal change, sometimes quite dramatic.

“I felt a lot better afterwards because I had no confidence, none, at the start of the year. I literally wanted to go home. But after the workshop I went from a 1 to a 6.”

“At the beginning I was near the bottom of the confidence line but by the end of day closer to the other side although I’m not fully there yet.”

While powerful, mean scores do not tell the whole story, as there is always considerable variance within groups. It is through follow-up interviews that we get a more fine-grained picture of individual experiences. It could be argued that over the course of one day it would be unlikely for young people to move from a lack of self-belief to becoming suddenly self-confident but, as young people’s own testimonies reveal, it was the workshop experience that brought those latent qualities to the fore.

“I’m fifteen something and I didn’t realise the qualities I had but I now feel I have, like, something to fall back on, confidence that I didn’t realise I had.”

Interviews with teachers offered an opportunity to explore and validate students’ self-ratings. Virtually all staff interviewed offered their own appraisal of a student’s gains:

“To see her come out of her shell and actually speak and make eye contact was such a massive change. I would rate her as going from a 4 to a 7.”

“He needed a lot of badgering and hand-holding when it came to entering the world of work but with a little more support he moved from a 2 to a 4 but it all depends on his teacher and the subject.”

This was an important reminder of the contextual nature of attitudes, how they can be sustained but also easily undone. A teacher offered an important reminder of the extent to which students’ attitudes can fluctuate over the course of a week, or a day, depending on subject, teachers or peers.

“It depends on what day it is. Today was a good day but his confidence levels fluctuate.”

As a counterpoint to lack of confidence there were students whose apparent self-belief could be inappropriate in differing situations.

“He’s always been confident but overly. His emotions were all over the place nothing hidden, we were always having to reign him back in but now he’s thinking before he says it verbally, rather than simply spilling out all his internal thoughts. Now he’s trying to curb his speech, to think about what’s he is about to say, thinking about audience, not filling that space with nonsense.”

As the student himself testified:

“I think about what I’m saying rather than just saying it. I was always getting into trouble in class because I would just say things but now I try to think about what I’m saying and I’m more aware of how teachers, and other people may react.”

As the evidence suggests, the impact on individual self-knowledge and classroom relationships is clearly one of the major gains from the workshop experience.

Formative evaluation

There is, in our view, a cardinal principle - the responsibility of the school to ensure that, before the workshop, students are briefed as to the behaviour and discipline expected. There were too many examples of behaviour that would not be tolerated during a normal school lesson. While teaching staff present did take action, it was often too late as the untoward behaviour had already negatively affected the equilibrium, flow and pace of the activity/session. This raised the question as to whether students have been given, or ought to have been given, the option to participate, or not, in these workshops. It became clear in a number of the workshops that students did not want to be there and had set out to disrupt them. The responsibility for this compromising effect on the workshop lies with the school and their commitment to helping maximise the impact of the training on the large majority. In one exceptional case the workshop clientele was composed of a reluctant, and to some extent disaffected, group that had been left behind while their peers enjoyed a summer trip.

As an observer, it was sometimes easier to recognise forms of low-level bullying or deliberate exclusion. In one workshop, for example, one of the female students who was paired up with another young woman, deliberately ignored her partner and spoke to two other girls who were her friends. With the trainer busy attending to other students this is where teachers and teaching assistants present could have been observing and intervening as appropriate. This is an issue that is being addressed within internal CPD events.

When a student leaves the room, a trainer can find it difficult to deal with as this occurs within the voluntary ethos of the workshop but not within normal school conventions. Teachers have, on occasion, brought the dissidents back and required them to stay. This was not always helpful, in more than one case creating a ripple effect and disturbing the flow and equilibrium of the group. While the focus of the workshops is young people, on occasion it appears that there were a few teachers who would benefit from further training, or sensitivisation, to group dynamics.

There is a strong case to be made for workshops, as far as possible, to be held in distinctive spaces, a less familiar environment which may be invested with negative associations.

The presence and role of school staff

There was virtually always a member of school staff present at the workshop. It was perhaps not clear to them what their role should be or whether they had been briefed about the part they should play. On some occasions teachers present were passive observers or, on occasion, marking assignments or working on their own laptops. As it is important to ensure that students fully engage with workshop activities it is desirable that the assigned dedicated teacher takes an active role. Where this did occur, there was a marked difference in the engagement levels of students and a tangible sense of community learning.

Although disruptive behaviour was uncommon, there were occasions when a series of escalating incidents presented a challenge for the trainer's skills and success in maintaining the flow. On one occasion when the trainer went over to speak to two reticent female students, another student, who had joined the workshop after lunch, threw her mobile phone over to two of her friends who had become disengaged with the workshop, eventually leading to one of the students, who had caught the phone, to be taken out of the room. As this student had not been part of the morning session it is open to question as to why school leadership felt that she should join the workshop when she clearly was neither willing to engage and had not wanted to be part of the workshop in the first place.

The lunch break could be an issue, as the ethos, which had been built up over the morning, could be compromised during the return to lunch room and playground. In some of the Communication and Future workshops it took trainers time to re-establish the ground rules and ethos and get students back on track and focussed. Issues that had arisen over lunch could have a

washback effect on some students although these were not generally disclosed, so putting the trainer at a disadvantage. There were also students who did not return post lunch – most noticeably in the Future workshops. This points to the desirability of structuring the lunch break in a different way, as a dedicated space where the students could enjoy a lunch provided for them. In that way they would stay together but still have space to reflect or “chill out” without getting into confrontations with other students who are not involved in the workshop, an issue currently being addressed.

Vocational benefits

It was common for some students in the Future workshop to stay and chat with the trainer at the end of the day, asking for advice and talking to the trainer about their part-time jobs. Trainers were thanked for the advice and guidance they gave, advice that would not only benefit students in relation to future job and university interviews but also implicit guidance that would help them in their current part-time jobs such as, for example, presentation, addressing customers and so on.

“I had no idea what to expect in an interview. I had never had one but now I know what to do. And not to do.”

“In job interview before I would have been more fidgety and less good at explaining what I know.”

It was evident that the Future Workshop did have a tangible impact as the students realised that they had much to learn in terms of presenting themselves for interview and then learning to project the positive aspects of their character and their achievements, which many students had a tendency to underplay. The feedback they received from the trainer was clearly invaluable, based on his or her personal experiences of interviewing and being interviewed. A teacher commented on the range of skills that accompany greater self-confidence.

“The students have developed strategies in relation to confidence, communication and being able to cope with the pressures of communicating, engaging and interacting in public settings such as the classroom.”

Feedback

As an observer, giving feedback to the trainer after one session it was suggested that rather than going clockwise round the circle of 25 or so over a period of 30 to 40 minutes, students be called on in a more random order. If you are student number 24 or 25, anticipating your turn, it could be difficult to concentrate and listen to others for an extended period.

It was also suggested that when using brainstorming to elicit ideas from the group, that the essential rules of brainstorming be mentioned and reinforced, that is - encouraging a free flow of ideas, all contributions treated equally without comment, without applause or criticism, written down in the exact words used by the student, every suggestion equally valued until, as a second stage,

discussion of what has been produced. Following feedback on this issue from observers this has been addressed.

A third suggestion was that when numbering students from one to four that students say their number rather than the trainer, as it is then much more likely to be remembered and 'owned' – the egocentric principle.

And a fourth suggestion, that when students set up their interviews in pairs they should place their chairs at a forty-five-degree angle rather than the more confrontational directly face-to-face.

Students could also be more explicitly involved in creating a code of conduct for the session, which, in the event of disruption, could be pointed to as *their* rules.

A post script

Without it being a formalised process, trainers could be said to have formed their own professional learning community (PLC). They would often share their experiences before the start of the workshop and during the morning and lunch breaks. They would discuss various aspects of the workshops, how to deal with varying student behaviour or attitudes, and how to introduce more flexibility in workshop delivery as significant issues arise. They constantly compared notes and would pass on practical tips to one another.

Debriefing at the end of the day was an important occasion for formative evaluation, for mutual support and celebration. While invigorating, the investment of effort could be draining physically and emotionally, the need to be constantly active, vigilant, reassuring and positive even when things do not go to plan. Such debriefing is critical in order to avoid trainers going home with self-criticism or rehearsing things that could have been better handled. As this may also be an occasion for catharsis and 'letting off steam', it is important to be aware of teachers, young people or others not only overhearing what is being said but picking up on too obvious body language.

In conclusion

The aspirations for the workshops are to enable young people to find their voice, to gain confidence in themselves, to deal constructively with nerves, and to be able to communicate not just in the classroom but in other social contexts, and with a broader range of people. Greater confidence in classrooms, speaking and volunteering has to be not just expressed in schools and classrooms but should travel to other sites and more challenging situations.

These aims appear to have been quite comprehensively achieved. The most salient testimonies from young people referred to their discovery of their own voice and expression of their latent skills, carrying social and vocational benefits.

There is huge credit from all participants to the skills, patience and enthusiasm of the trainers. Teachers are virtually unanimous in the praise of their skills in their words, their 'inspiration', 'focus', 'skills', 'encouragement' and inclusive approach.

The accolades could be even more impressive if there were consistently more conducive venues, better pre-workshop orientations and selection of participants. What is currently an excellent programme could only benefit from reciprocal contributions and support from the host schools.

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