

Action Research

ACTION RESEARCH: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT'



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I Know How You Feel: Monitoring and addressing students' feelings to try and improve their learning experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this project arose out of a specific experience two academic years ago. When second years leavers were asked to fill in exit questionnaires to assess their experience on English courses, one student's responses were notably negative, indicating that she had not enjoyed the course or felt comfortable in the class. This was a surprise to me as the student in question was always polite, keen to answer in class and achieved A grades consistently. The questionnaire was anonymous and it was only chance that I noticed who had left that particular response so I was unable to follow it up. Bearing in mind the college initiative on Emotional Intelligence I decided to find a way of regularly monitoring how comfortable students were with the course on the assumption that most students would achieve better if they felt happy and comfortable with what they were doing.

The Observer newspaper of 1.07.08 ran a report on a pilot scheme conducted at William Howard School in Brampton, Cumbria where a mathematics teacher with a low-achieving class focused on 'pupil's [sic] feelings about their work' and in asking how they felt, discovered their anxieties and also that they grew in confidence. Ofsted inspectors noted this increase in confidence and also an improvement in their academic performance. Because of this success the scheme is to be run in Levenshulme High School in Manchester to help low-achieving pupils of 14+.

There is a continuing debate as to whether teaching E.I. is useful in any way. In the Guardian newspaper of 14.01.08 there was a report on the controversy with Antony Seldon, master of Wellington College giving the case for and Frank Furedi, professor of Sociology at the University of Kent arguing that 'how to feel is not a suitable subject for teaching.' This particular debate is more to do with teaching younger pupils to identify their feelings and manage them, but still links feeling happy with confidence and success.

Emotional intelligence interventions have usually been carried out with Primary school pupils. The strategies suggested in the publication 'Emotional Literacy: Assessment and Intervention' [ed. Adrian Faupel] are primarily to change pupils' behaviour by developing emotional and also social competence. Though I did not seek to change behaviour, I recognise that 3 of Daniel Goleman's 5 dimensions: self-awareness, self-regulation and consequent motivation are important to improve students' learning environment. The focus

on teachers' 'personal and professional characteristics' as important to increase a learner's 'self-worth' is relevant and the use of a 'worry bag' where individuals can anonymously express anxieties is the basis of my 'feelings cards'. I felt that by keeping track of student problems and anxieties I could also adjust my delivery to make them feel confident and to resolve any immediate problems.

It has been argued that looking at the effect of 'positive emotions' and their long-term effect has been a neglected area and Barbara L. Fredrickson proposes the 'Broaden and Build' theory to 'broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires' and 'build their enduring resources'. [Fredrickson 1998, 2001]. The value of students' focus on positive thoughts would have effect on their long-term ability and may encourage creative thought. Research carried out by Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels and Conway [2005] involved asking students to log their emotional responses over time and then assess their resilience. The results indicated that those who logged more positive responses had most resilience. Again, the focus was on more general emotion where I wanted to concentrate on course-related feelings.

METHODS USED

I chose to use all three of my A2 English Language classes to participate in the research. Although it might have been easier to choose one or two groups, I felt that, as students had friends in other groups and would therefore share experiences, it would be better to use all three groups, in case one group might feel their feelings were not being taken into account.

The first lesson with each group was an introduction to each other and to the course. For the second lesson each group was given a colour for identification – pink, green and yellow. I handed out copies of the exit questionnaire and asked students to discuss in small groups what needed to happen in the lessons for them to be able to answer positively for every statement. The students fed back their answers and discussed as a whole class what their priorities were. This exercise was to give them a sense that their needs mattered and to establish that I was interested in how they felt.

The activity led in each class to a list of actions which I agreed to carry out in my teaching. These included 'Be available out of class', 'Check understanding', 'Don't use peer-marking'. 'Ask and reassure', 'Don't pick on people when asking questions'. The agreed actions were slightly different for each group. They were printed out, colour-coded and displayed on the

classroom wall so students and I could refer to them[see appendices 1a, 1b, 1c.] .

Subsequently I checked how students were feeling at the end of weeks one, two and three. I did this by asking them to sum up in one or two words how they felt on a colour-coded index card. I asked them to put down on the other side of the card if there was anything I could do to help at this stage and they dropped the cards in a box so that responses were anonymous.

To monitor progress as regards the initial discussion of the exit questionnaire, I conducted this questionnaire anonymously after the first and second half terms.

[See appendix 2 for sample questionnaire].

During the second week of December and the second week in February I gave out a survey sheet with 'smiley faces' on for the students to mark which face matched their mood. The three faces represented happiness, uncertainty and unhappiness. I wanted through these survey sheets to make *them* aware of their feelings. As well as including a small space for them to identify what I could do to help them achieve or maintain a feeling of happiness, I asked them to write what *they* could do to achieve or maintain a happy state.

[See appendix 3 for survey sheet].

Following this, in order to promote positive feeling and to continue to give them some responsibility for their progress, at the end of March I gave out a different 'smiley face' sheet which had only a happy face on and asked students to put their names on these and list three things they were good at in English and one thing they could do to work on.

[See appendix 4 for this sheet].

As well as giving cards and response sheets to students at regular intervals, I took pains to ask the classes from time to time how they were feeling and they were happy to respond orally.

In April I asked each group to feed back on how my action research project had affected them. The Pink and Green group were asked to fill in an anonymous questionnaire [see appendix 5] and the Yellow group were asked to discuss their reactions with a third party, who used my guide questions and prompts of his own. This session was videoed by one of the students in the class.

FINDINGS

Exit Questionnaires

The initial questionnaires, which were discussed in groups, provided some interesting insights into what students felt was important to the delivery of a course. I wanted to focus particularly on statement 2: 'Teachers were helpful', statement 8: 'I felt comfortable in my class', statement 9: 'I knew I could ask for extra help if I needed it' statement 10: 'I felt my teacher cared how I felt' and statement 11: 'I felt everyone was treated fairly and equally'.

The Green group suggested that I needed to be available to talk to students [out of class and in class]. In order to feel comfortable they wanted me to mix groups and to stop every so often and ask them how things were going.

The Pink group also wanted me to be available in and out of class to talk to them and to ask how they felt and reassure them. They also wanted individuals not to be 'picked on' in question sessions.

The Yellow group had similar suggestions, mainly for me to be approachable and accessible and to check how they are through lessons. It was easy to pick out points for action and we agreed these [see Introduction].

Exit Questionnaire 2

These were filled out anonymously and individually.



The statements on the exit questionnaires which were disagreed with were mainly to do with quality of handouts, use of marking grids, usefulness of the English website etc. These were useful responses in that I was able to try wherever possible to improve such aspects of course delivery. However, the responses I was concentrating on were to do with feelings about the teaching environment. These were overwhelmingly positive and showed that the students were feeling comfortable with the classroom atmosphere and with my stance as a teacher concerning their feelings.

Card responses

Week 1

The groups felt optimistic overall with 61% making positive responses. The anxieties described were mainly worries about 'fitting in', 'not making A grade' doing a 'difficult subject' and doing 'independent research for coursework'.

Week 2

There was an increased level of confidence in all the groups with 87% of responses showing positive feelings.

Requests for my input related mainly to the aspects the students were worried by – mainly clause analysis and text analysis. They asked for advice and practice.

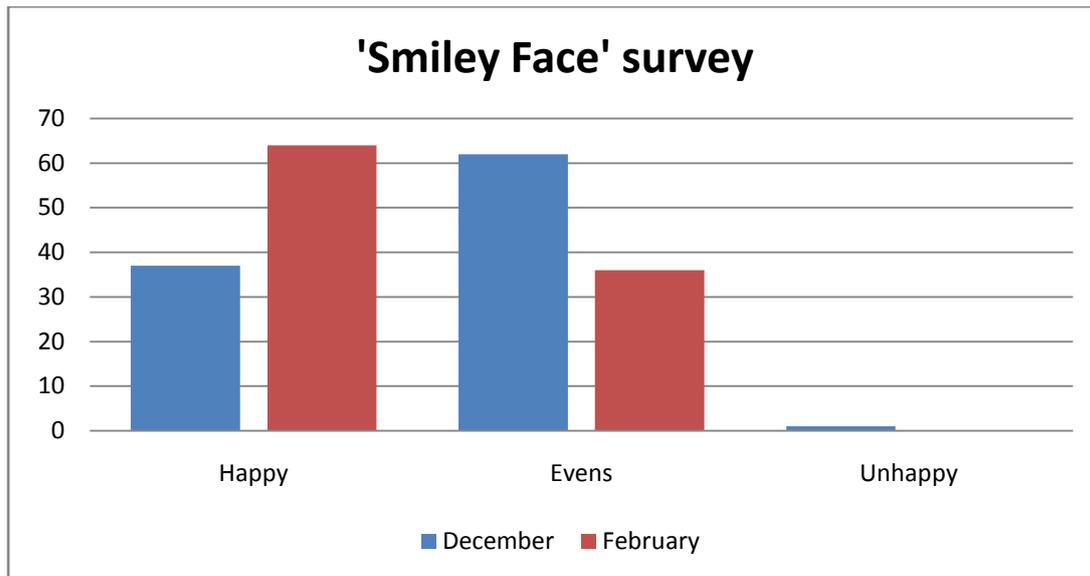
In one group, several students mentioned being happy about the slower pace and detailed explanations, which had been requested by them through the first exit questionnaire feedback.

Week 3

Again, positive feelings were recorded by most students – 88% overall.

Concerns were to do with coursework [which had just been introduced to them.] There were some very positive comments about looking forward to coursework, [e.g. 'excited about coursework,'] and finally understanding how to do analysis and grammar.

'Smiley face' surveys



It was gratifying to see that between December and February there was a significant increase in the number of students feeling happy. This was particularly gratifying because during the intervening weeks the students had been working on their coursework which is a challenging and often worrying part of the course.

Of those who were not completely happy, most felt that they could be happier if they 'did work at home' 'spent more time on coursework', 'got their work completed' 'spent more time learning grammar', etc.

Students did not think that I could change their status but wanted things to continue as they were. They only wanted more exam practice and essay writing, which really I took as a signal for what they would need in the last term. It was interesting to see that these students were able to take responsibility for their own feelings as regards feeling confident about their work.

'What are you good at?' surveys

The Green Group did not do this survey. The Pink group were not asked to fill in an area for improvement because I sensed they were least confident at this time of year and because of time-constraints caused by losing lesson time.

They responded well in that they all found three skills to do with the English course. The Yellow group also found three skills and also recognised sensible areas for improving, for example learning clauses, improving essay writing.

Final evaluations

Final Evaluation		
Question 1	Asked about Initial discussion of exit questionnaire	90% of students were in favour of the process
Question 2	Asked for reactions to being asked how they feel	85% of students were happy to be asked
Question 3	Asked about our awareness of their feelings and its importance	90% happy with both
Question 4	Asked if focusing on feelings affected their work	70% of students felt it help with their work

Question 1 – asked about thoughts on initial discussion of the exit questionnaire.

Comments included: 'valued', 'useful', 'had a positive effect' and 'what we wanted was displayed on the wall'. 'made us feel our ideas were valued', 'showed teacher took an interest in us', 'meant we played an active role', 'we had a say'.

The 2 negative responses were: 'time-wasting' and 'class forums don't work'.

Question 2 – asked for reactions to being asked how they feel.

Comments included: 'liked that I was being cared for', 'good', 'If you had a problem, you could say', 'positive', 'fine', 'it felt like our feelings were being considered', 'made me feel happier'.

The negative responses were: 'confused', 'uneasy', 'indifferent', 'sometimes seems a bit pointless'.

Question 3 – asked about my awareness of their feelings and if this was important

Comments included: 'It is definitely important', 'I think Marilyn has been very aware of how

we are doing as a class'. 'feel calm', 'feel more relaxed', 'focusing on feelings makes a more comfortable environment and I work better', 'reassuring', 'gains more confidence'.

The 2 not in agreement wrote 'I didn't like the group but didn't say so' and 'don't know'.

Question 4 - asked if focusing on feelings affected their work.

Comments included: 'feel calm', 'feel more relaxed', 'focusing on feelings makes a more comfortable environment and I work better', 'reassuring', 'gains more confidence', 'feel more encouraged', 'makes you feel understood and comfortable', 'work better'. Those who did not feel their work was affected made comments such as 'not sure', 'doesn't', 'no effect'.

The Yellow group's responses were less quantifiable because not all students spoke when the class was being filmed and the few who did were fairly dominant male students. The general feeling was that there was no link between focusing on feelings and work in class. There was an acknowledgement that the exit questionnaire discussion had led to targets and specific areas for their particular group. Asking about their feelings was not necessarily felt to be useful. One comment was that people answered as they thought they should and were not open.

DISCUSSION

The initial discussion of the exit questionnaire was obviously valued by the students in the Pink and Green groups. The Yellow group, who had been less positive about sharing their feelings, nevertheless acknowledged the usefulness of having an action plan as an outcome. It seemed to be to be perhaps the most valuable action of the project, as it started the course for these classes on a positive note. The subsequent questionnaires were a good monitoring device and certainly reassured me that all the students in all three groups felt comfortable, fairly treated and cared for.

The 'feelings' cards again were valued by a good majority of the students in the Pink and Green groups, though less so by the Yellow group according to the class interview. I think

they were particularly valuable because they were anonymous and some of the feelings expressed by the Yellow group had been quite open which suggested to me that their evaluation might have been less honest because they could *not* answer openly without feeling in some way judged by the class. The class was sometimes dominated by male students with a somewhat 'macho' attitude and this may have made an open discussion of feelings less reliable, especially as at least 5 female students made no comment at all.

For me, the cards were a very useful way to see what students were concerned about. It often surprised me that they were anxious about some aspects of the course and I was able then to address their concerns by modifying my teaching as necessary. Consequently, the anxieties expressed in week one had diminished by week two and had largely disappeared by week three. Though the anxieties were all related to specific areas of the course, like clause analysis and so by addressing these immediately I could make the students feel better. Card responses indicate that this was happening, for example students in the Pink group commented on the fact that the agreed slower pace was helping them. Someone in the Yellow group said by week three they were now understanding clauses. It made me aware that students were less confident than they might appear at the beginning of A2 but I stopped the cards after three weeks as I felt that all students were feeling happy. It is true that these comments were seen as subject-related by the students and did not explicitly refer to emotion. However, evaluations of the process were couched in terms of feelings of comfort and well-being, so this could be said to link to emotional intelligence.

The 'Smiley face' sheets were more successful than I had hoped as the students in all three groups were obviously focusing on the importance of their own actions in improving their feelings. Again, actions were to do with how they worked, but the link was made to feelings of well-being. For me it was useful to monitor how they felt and it was good to see that they were not feeling unhappy, as indicated by face 3. However, with two groups I added an extra question sheet asking them to say what were their strengths and this was because I had sensed that these groups were feeling less confident at the time. This was as a result of my being generally more focused on how students were feeling and not just their marks, for example.

The final evaluation questionnaires were interesting in that they were more positive than the Yellow group's DVD had led me to expect. I have already discussed the possible reasons for this anomaly. Most interesting for me was the sizeable majority of students in two groups who thought that being asked about feelings affected their work in English. Of course this is difficult to verify and even final exam results cannot be used as evidence of success or failure of this experiment. However, this year all my English language students met the coursework deadline and only 1 student failed to reach a pass grade. Last year three students failed to meet the deadline and 2 failed.

It is obviously difficult to assess how far my focusing on the feelings of the students has affected their success. It is even more difficult to assess whether their own focus on their feelings has had effect. The limitation seems to be that they were focussing on feelings linked to their work and not their general emotional state. I think, however, that students of this age recognise the effect of negative emotional states which are not work-related but deal with them separately. This research therefore could only focus on feelings in college affecting success.

CONCLUSION

The exit questionnaires

- The students and I all benefited from the discussion of the exit questionnaire, as shown by their comments in the evaluation and in their subsequent agreement with the key statements.
- A visual display of agreed actions is good in that it cannot be forgotten and is a constant reminder of what each class wants from the course and the teacher.
- Consequently, the course forums held no surprises as concerns were addressed from the beginning. This alone would convince me to repeat the process and to recommend it to other teachers. The course forum process can be a difficult experience and this would seem to help avoid it being so.

Card responses

- The classes showed in card responses an increasing confidence and happiness.
- This was, again, a very useful monitoring process for me and a good way of checking what was not going well in class.

Smiley Faces

- These were valuable as they moved away from the students wanting me to take action to improve how they felt to their focusing on their own actions which could make them feel better.

Overall

- The whole process probably benefited me more than the students, as it made me constantly aware of the students' feelings and I think made me a more sensitive teacher.
- It also helped that I could address problems which may not otherwise have been revealed.

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Appendix 1a

Yellow Group

**USE VARIETY AND DISCUSS IN MIXED
GROUPS**

CHECK UNDERSTANDING

MORE VIDEO, FEWER POWER POINTS

MAKE HANDOUTS CLEAR

GIVE COMMENTS ON HOW TO IMPROVE

BE AVAILABLE OUT OF CLASS

Appendix 1b

Green Group

GIVE NOTES WITH POWER POINTS

CHECK UNDERSTANDING

BE AVAILABLE TO HELP

**GO OVER HANDOUTS/EXPLAIN WHICH UNIT
THEY ARE FOR**

**GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK HOW TO
IMPROVE**

DO NOT USE PEER MARKING

USE MIXED GROUPS AND PAIRS

REMINDE ABOUT WEB SITE

Appendix 1c

Pink Group

**WORK AT A SLOW PACE AND VARY
ACTIVITIES**

BE AVAILABLE OUT OF LESSON TIME

**SPACE HANDOUTS OR HIGHLIGHT MAIN
POINTS**

**USE GRIDS CAREFULLY AND GIVE PERSONAL
FEEDBACK WHEN ASKED**

DON'T PICK ON PEOPLE

ASK AND REASSURE

Appendix 2

English Language A2

END OF COURSE REVIEW

The English Language teachers wish you all the best in your future careers. We are sure you will achieve good results and we are only going to ask you to do one more thing for us – please fill in our questionnaire!

	Yes	No	No opinio n
1 The teaching was good on the whole	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Teachers were helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 The course included different learning activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 The handouts etc. were of a high quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Resources were appropriate for the course	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 I got useful feedback on my progress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Marking grids were helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 I felt comfortable in my class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 I knew I could ask for extra help if I needed it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 I felt my teacher cared about how I felt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 I felt everyone was treated fairly and equally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 What I have learned on this course will be useful for me in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 I enjoyed the course on the whole	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 I found the English Web Site useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please feel free to add any comments or suggestions below:

Appendix 3

Tick which face best represents how you feel.



If you ticked B or C, write below what **you** could do to make you feel more like A.

Is there anything I can do to make you feel like, or keep you feeling like, picture A?

Appendix 4



NAME.....
.....

Write down 3 things you are good at in English Language:

- 1.***
- 2.***
- 3.***

Write down one thing you need to focus on improving:

- 1.***

Appendix 5

GUIDE QUESTIONS FOR ACTION RESEARCH

At the beginning of the course, you went through the exit questionnaire with Marilyn and discussed what you wanted from the lessons.

What did you think about this?

At intervals you have been asked how you feel in your English lesson.

How did you react to being asked how you feel?

One of the questions on the questionnaires is about your teacher caring how you feel.

Do you think Marilyn has been aware of how you are feeling through the course? Is it important for teachers to know how you feel?

The Action Research Project is being carried out to try and help you succeed in your subject.

How does focussing on your feelings affect how you work in English?

[Please add any other comments you wish to make]