



Research Report

Trialling and Evaluating a Strengths-Based Student Engagement Framework

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The project team would like to thank all tutors and learners who have been involved in this project. The learner voices have been particularly encouraging. The project team was impressed with how well learners embraced the strengths-based learning experience and how they used this framework to both enhance their learning, and raise their personal and career aspirations.

Tutor voices have also provided valuable insights into the impact of a strengths-based approach. In particular, tutor perspectives have provided insights about learner motivation, relationships with their tutor and other learners, and learners' future aspirations.

The project team would also like to thank Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence for the opportunity to undertake this project. The project funding enabled the team to evaluate the influence of the *My Voice* framework on learner engagement. The funding did not contribute to any developmental work on the *My Voice Engagement Framework* content or activities.

This project has given the project team added motivation to continue the pursuit of achieving full engagement across all learners, through strengths-based education.

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The Project Partners and Team

Trade and Commerce Ltd

Trade and Commerce Ltd (the lead Collaboration Project partner) is the largest provider of Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) TOPs and Youth Training provision. Trade and Commerce facilitates a range of vocational training programmes throughout New Zealand. The main levels of study learners enrol in are between Level One and Three on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), including the National Certificates in Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level One and Two. Over 1800 learners enrol with Trade and Commerce in any one year. The learner demographic is typically:

- aged 16+ years with no or low formal qualifications
- disengaged from the mainstream education sector
- looking to re-engage with education to gain employment or further study opportunities
- younger learners who have chosen our sector to speed up their educational achievement.

Colin Campbell, Managing Director, Trade and Commerce Ltd

Colin is the founding owner of Trade and Commerce Ltd and has led the strengths-based education initiative within Trade and Commerce. He has been involved from the formative stages of introducing a strengths-based approach into Trade and Commerce. Colin has a particular interest in using technology to drive real-time reporting of learner engagement and achievement.

Lindsay Davis-Goff, Marketing Manager, Trade and Commerce Ltd

Lindsay brings over 20 years' experience in the private training establishment (PTE) sector to the project team. Lindsay's key role at Trade and Commerce is to establish and maintain key stakeholder relationships and develop ongoing business development opportunities. Lindsay left Trade and Commerce in August 2010 to pursue other opportunities.

Mike Hay, Academic Manager, Trade and Commerce Ltd

Mike has extensive experience in both public and private sector education. Mike's passion is in learner engagement and achievement, and he is a key driver of the strengths-based approach. Mike has taken up the role of Project Leader since Lindsay's departure from Trade and Commerce.

Salvation Army Employment Plus

Employment Plus is the vocational training arm of The Salvation Army. Employment Plus facilitates a range of TEC Training Opportunities and Youth Training vocational training programmes throughout New Zealand. These programmes range between levels one to three on the NQF. The Salvation Army Employment Plus learner demographic is similar to that of Trade and Commerce. Over 1400 learners enrol with Employment Plus in any one year.

Cyril Shaw, *National Development Manager, Employment Plus*

Cyril has almost 20 years' experience in the PTE sector. His current role requires him to manage support staff and to assist tutors in engaging learners to ensure Employment Plus achieves the contractual requirements set for Training Opportunities Programme (TOP) and Youth Training providers.

Te Wananga o Aotearoa

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWOA) is one of New Zealand's largest tertiary education providers. TWOA offers a comprehensive range of certificate- to degree-level qualifications to New Zealanders of all ages and walks of life. The kaupapa of TWOA is to provide inclusive holistic educational opportunities in a unique Māori cultural learning environment. Kaupapa also relevant to this project includes providing support, encouragement and guidance to all tauira (learners) in their pursuit of personal development, learning and employment. Over 42,000 students are enrolled at TWOA. Key student demographics include:

- 52 per cent are Maori
- 37 per cent study at level 1 to 2 certificates
- 15 per cent of students are aged 17 to 24 years. TWOA has identified youth as a priority focus area.

Ray Miller, *Associate Director Whakau Kounga Ako (Delivery Directorate), Te Wananga o Aotearoa*

Ray has extensive experience in education, having worked as a teacher and principal and then as a consultant providing services to all four divisions of the education sector: early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary. Ray is currently responsible for the quality of programme delivery throughout TWOA.

Executive Summary

Learner engagement is crucial to success in educational programmes. However, actually engaging students in learning is a constant challenge for tertiary providers. Recognising the influence that tutors have in creating and encouraging positive learning experiences for learners, Trade and Commerce has adopted a strengths-based approach to education, defined as:



Tutors/teachers discovering, developing and applying their strengths in their teaching activities as they help their students do the same in their learning to achieve optimal levels of achievement.
(Adapted from Anderson, 2004)

Achievement NZ Ltd has designed an engagement framework, *My Voice*¹, which incorporates a strengths-based philosophy and activities into existing course curriculum. *My Voice* helps learners focus on their abilities rather than their weaknesses, allowing them to understand themselves from a positive perspective. The framework also considers the influence of strengths on learner well-being, optimism and tutor relationships – important components of the learning experience.

Learners work through four parts of this framework, from setting the scene of positivity, to discovering and using their strengths, to living these as they transition into further study or employment. A comprehensive training and support programme assists tutors to make a positive transition from working in a remedial environment to a strengths-based environment.

Trade and Commerce undertook this project in collaboration with its partners, to try and establish how this strengths-based framework enhances learner engagement. The project focused on the first four weeks of a learner's time in a course, comparing the responses of a trial and comparison group against four key self-reported indicators. These indicators had earlier been identified as important to learners in Training Opportunities Programmes (TOPs), and consisted of:

- course engagement
- hope
- well-being
- relationship with the tutor.

Overall, survey data indicated that both the trial groups and comparison groups increased their level of engagement over the four weeks. The increases were higher, however, in the initial two weeks of the programmes for those using the *My Voice* framework. These results suggest that *My Voice* enables engagement to occur at earlier levels of a course.

¹ While this report is published under a Creative Commons licence, *My Voice*, the programme, is subject to copyright and cannot be used without permission of the copyright owners.

Students comments gained through facilitated focus groups supported the quantitative data that showed the positive impact on student wellbeing and an associated increase in self-confidence. Students recognised that *My Voice* helped to provide a focus and purpose to the initial stages of their learning. Tutors were seen by students as motivators, someone who values their ideas and opinions, a coach, someone who knows how they think and what they can do to help them learn.



Tutors (who were not shown the quantitative results) recognised faster engagement rates, an increase in motivation and students setting higher aspirations than when they first started their course. Tutors agreed that a strengths-based approach provided learners with an increased sense of pride, self-esteem and self-belief. This in turn led to more positive tutor-student relationships, observed through a decline in behavioural problems issues and more focused and attentive students.

Further evaluation to determine if and how the framework contributes to *sustained* levels of engagement and learner achievement is now under way. Trade and Commerce has begun to develop a learner-centred evaluation process to identify and measure the contribution the *My Voice Engagement Framework* makes to individual learner achievement and course outcomes. An ongoing challenge will be to determine how much the strengths-based approach influences a learner's longer-term outcomes, including future personal and vocational successes.

Introduction

Meeting the engagement challenge: Our story

Motivating learners to take responsibility for their own learning has always been a primary challenge for educators (Perry, Hall & Ruthig, 2005), particularly as many educators work with an increasingly diverse group of learners. This challenge is very relevant to the organisations involved in this project. Our learner population is typically aged 16 years and older, and has little or no formal qualifications. The majority of learners are disengaged from the mainstream education sector and are looking to re-engage in education to gain employment, or progress into higher learning opportunities. Many learners also have low literacy and numeracy skills that impede employment or further learning opportunities.

Learners on Training Opportunities Programmes (TOPs) and Youth Training can enrol in a course at any time during the year and can leave to move on to further training or employment when the opportunity arises. Contractually, learners need to attend courses for 30 hours per week, with course durations of between 46 and 48 weeks.

To respond to the challenge of re-engaging this subset of learners, Trade and Commerce facilitated a series of needs-analysis workshops with learners during 2007. At these workshops, learners described their perceptions of an ideal learning experience, as well as their preferences in transitioning successfully to work or further study. Learner comments reflected a desire for a positive and enabling environment:

- 'I want to know what I can do.'
- 'Stop telling me what I am no good at.'
- 'Treat me as an individual not a statistic, I am real person.'

Learners also reported that they wanted providers like Trade and Commerce to help them address a range of broader wellbeing issues such as child care, health needs and financial literacy. Based on these responses, Trade and Commerce began to explore how to best respond to these needs. This needs-assessment exercise prompted an exploration of the concept of learner engagement from a strengths-based approach.

Adopting a strengths-based approach

While exploring the concept of learner engagement, we also began researching engagement strategies for tutors. The starting assumption was that learners will not be engaged in learning if their tutors are not engaged in their work. Thus, Trade and Commerce began developing engagement strategies for tutors that encouraged them to work to their strengths for the maximum time available (Buckingham & Clifton, 2004). This was based on literature that asserts "individuals gain more when they build on their strengths, than when they make comparable efforts to improve

their areas of weakness” (Clifton & Harter, 2003: 112). In short, these strategies focused on adopting a strengths-based approach to achieve learner engagement and achievement.

The key feature of the strengths-based approach is that it is not ‘remedial’. The traditional deficit (or remedial) model of education focuses on ‘fixing’ learners’ areas of weakness. Instead, the strengths-based model recognises and builds on the capabilities that learners bring with them into higher education (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). For example, strengths-based delivery builds on a learner’s abilities, and helps the learner to discover, explore and understand their strengths, and then apply them within their learning environment. In this way, strengths-based education challenges traditional deficit-based approaches to education.

Jenifer Fox (2008) asserts that there are at least three different types of strengths: activity strengths, learning strengths and relationship strengths. Activity strengths relate to the activities that energise a learner; the activities they look forward to doing and want to do more of, for example, researching topics of interest. Learning strengths relate to the learning preferences and environments to which a learner responds most positively. Relationship strengths relate to developing effective and rewarding connections with others, for example, with teachers, friends, whānau members and so on.

Thus, strengths are about more than academic subject areas. While learners can reflect on subject areas they have mastered, a strength is not necessarily ‘a subject a learner is good at’. For example, a learner may be a high achiever at accountancy, but derives no satisfaction from the subject. The focus of strengths-based education is highlighting and enhancing what a learner can do well *and* is energised to succeed and achieve in.



Trade and Commerce became more curious about the ‘enjoyment factor’ or the ‘positive buzz’ that was common among people working to their strengths. This led to further research into positive psychology and the application of a strengths-based approach. Specifically, Trade and Commerce engaged with the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, to understand better the influence of strengths on learner wellbeing, optimism, tutor relationships, and the components of the learning experience previously identified as an important feature by our learner demographic.

Based on this research, together with over 20 years’ experience in the TOPs and Youth Training sector, Trade and Commerce developed a series of critical engagement themes that they believe are likely to result in a learner’s successful tertiary experience.

Early success and positivity

Recognising the importance of learners achieving a sense of early success and positivity as a means to enable learners to make positive statements about themselves and increase levels of hope early in the course.

Making connections with educators

The importance of forming effective and rewarding relationships with their tutors.

Making connections with other learners

The importance of socialisation to form effective and rewarding relationships.

Developing skills to identify personal strengths

The belief that enabling learners to identify their strengths rather than have a diagnostic tool do it for them was more powerful and beneficial for the learner. This enables the learner to continuously add to their strengths profile.

Personal responsibility

Encouraging learners to take personal responsibility in their pursuit of their engagement and achievement. Having expectations clarified, rules explained, course values and traditions integrated into the learner's day-to-day activities were expected to have a positive influence on learners' persistence towards tasks and goal achievement.

Strong support crews

The range of internal (course-related) and external (whānau, community agencies) support networks that support and enhance learner well-being and achievement.

Aspirations aligned to strengths

Aspirations deliver hope and self-belief, an important concept behind learner engagement and well-being. Our courses are future-focused and help learners to develop the skills necessary to succeed in future pathways. Learners are more likely to be motivated to pursue aspirations that are aligned to strengths as they have a higher possibility of achievement. This may also lead fewer learners to withdraw partway through future studies.

Qualification pathway and activities aligned to strengths

Providing the learner with the opportunity to apply their strengths and helping the learner visualise achievement (conceptualisation) in a way that is positive, often through individualised learning plans, makes the course and course material more meaningful for the learner.

Celebrating success

Success means different things to different learners. The collaboration partners acknowledged that many of their learners had not yet experienced success (in the eyes of the learner). Celebrating success in a way that is valued by the learner is seen as an important component of any engagement framework.

These critical engagement themes were used to influence the design of the strengths-based engagement framework *My Voice*.

My Voice Engagement Framework



My Voice is a strengths-based engagement framework designed to help learners focus on their abilities; to help them discover their strengths and to use them on the course as well as in future training and employment. *My Voice* was designed to provide learners with the opportunity to develop a voice of their own, to identify and share their attributes and aspirations and to realise their strengths.

My Voice learners' strengths-experiences start from the very first day they begin their course. Learners participate in a range of activities that help them to understand more about themselves, their tutor and others on the course. With the focus on 'positivity', for many learners this can be the first time they have focused on questions like "What can I do?", "What do I like?" and "What's right about me?"

The *My Voice Engagement Framework* is structured into four parts (see Appendix 1, figure 1).

Part One. Settling In: A Strong Start (Weeks 1–2; 15 hours per week)

Aim: To help the learner experience early success and positivity, become actively involved in their class and to confirm they have made the right choice of course.

Part Two. Discovering My Strengths (Weeks 3–4; 15 hours per week)

Aim: To help the learner identify their strengths and how to use these strengths to achieve their goals on the course.

Part Three. Using My Strengths (Weeks 5+; two hours per week dedicated strengths' reflection and development time)

Aim: To help the learner use their strengths to engage in course activities to achieve their goals, while being supported by people who want to help them and celebrate their achievements.

Part Four. Living My Strengths (Transition weeks)

Aim: To help the learner experience a positive transition from their class to further study or employment that is aligned to their strengths.

Within these four parts, there is a series of modules. Each module has a theme and specified outcomes. Activities have been designed to meet each outcome requirement. The framework and associated content and activities were developed prior to this project. Trade and Commerce invited the collaboration partners to participate in a trial that would measure how this strengths-based approach affected learner engagement within the first four weeks of a course. The evaluation of the trial was supported by Ako Aotearoa, and included Part One and Part Two only.

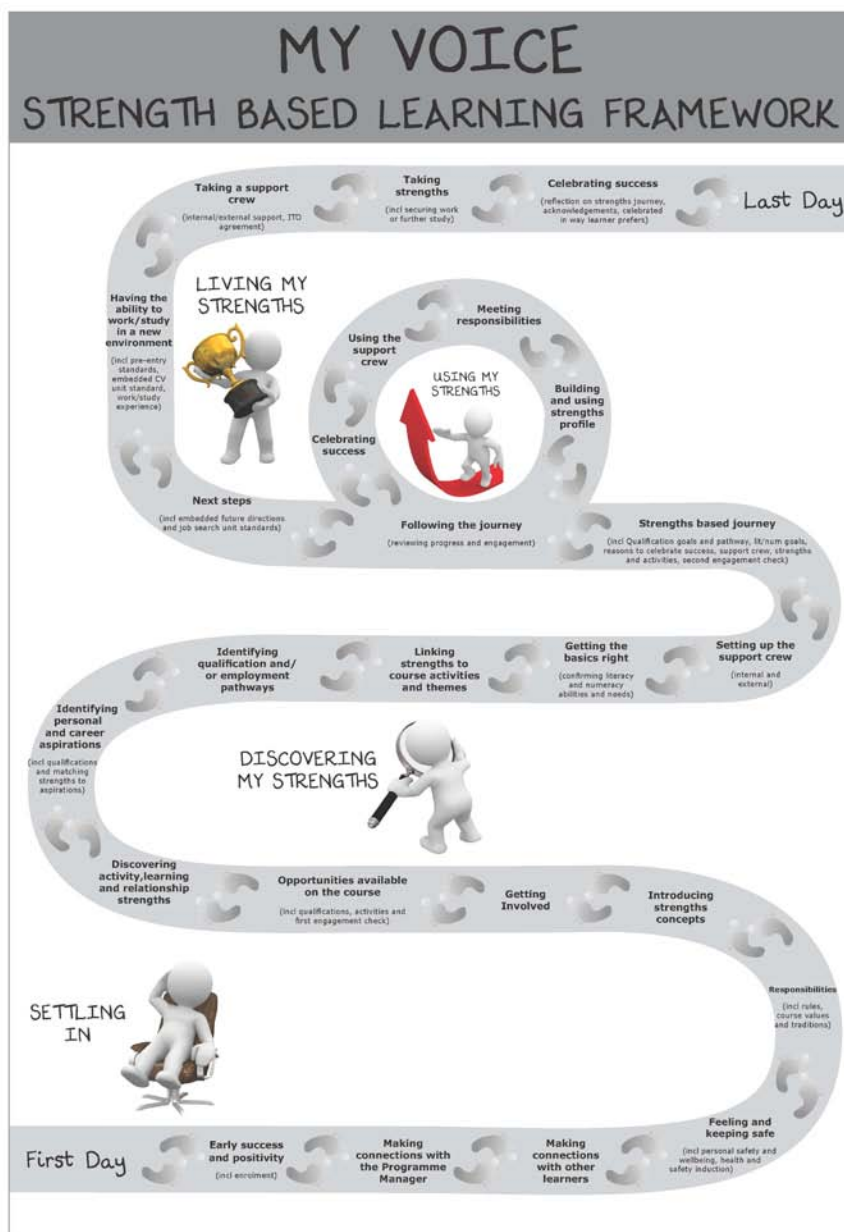


Figure 1: Overview of the My Voice Engagement Framework

Te Whare Tapa Wha and learner well-being

Te Whare Tapa Wha (Durie, 1998) is a holistic health and well-being model. In this model, hauora (well-being) is achieved through te taha hinengaro (psychological health), te taha wairua (spiritual health), te taha tinana (physical health) and te taha whānau (family health). Each dimension of hauora influences and supports the others. This model was considered during the development of *My Voice*, to incorporate a focus on learner well-being. Figure 2 shows the links between *Te Whare Tapa Wha* and *My Voice*.

The whareniui (meeting house) is the symbol used in *Te Whare Tapa Wha* to illustrate the dimensions of well-being. Just as each corner of the house must be strong and balanced to hold its structure, each dimension of well-being must be balanced for health and well-being to exist. This philosophy can be applied to all areas of wellness, including educational and employment goals.

Taha hinengaro focuses on having a sense of achievement, enjoyment and fun. It highlights the importance of effectively communicating thoughts and feelings, being resilient and developing problem-solving and decision-making skills. Relevant activities within *My Voice* (Taku Reo) focus on:

- considering abilities and using positive affirmations
- understanding thoughts and feelings associated with strengths and weakness
- applying and using strengths to manage stress and change
- celebrating success and creating an environment where the learners can confidently state “I believe I can do this course”.



Taha whānau focuses on friendships, helping and mixing with others, whānau, support networks, and a feeling of belonging. Features of *My Voice* relating to this aspect include:

- making connections with the tutor and other learners
- creating and maintaining strong support networks
- taking responsibility
- enhancing collaborative learning so that learners can confidently state “I have the support to do this course”.

Taha tinana emphasises the importance of physical well-being through physical activity, health benefits, nutrition and health initiatives. Feeling safe is a key component of *My Voice*, and is reflected in the following aspects of *My Voice*:

- establishing good study habits
- providing effective learning resources
- helping the learner learn about healthy lifestyles, intended to ensure they can state “I have the resources to do this course”.

Taha wairua relates to spiritual well-being and focuses on an individual’s ‘purpose in life’, their values and their goals and aspirations. The *My Voice* activities relevant to this aspect include providing learners with the opportunity to:

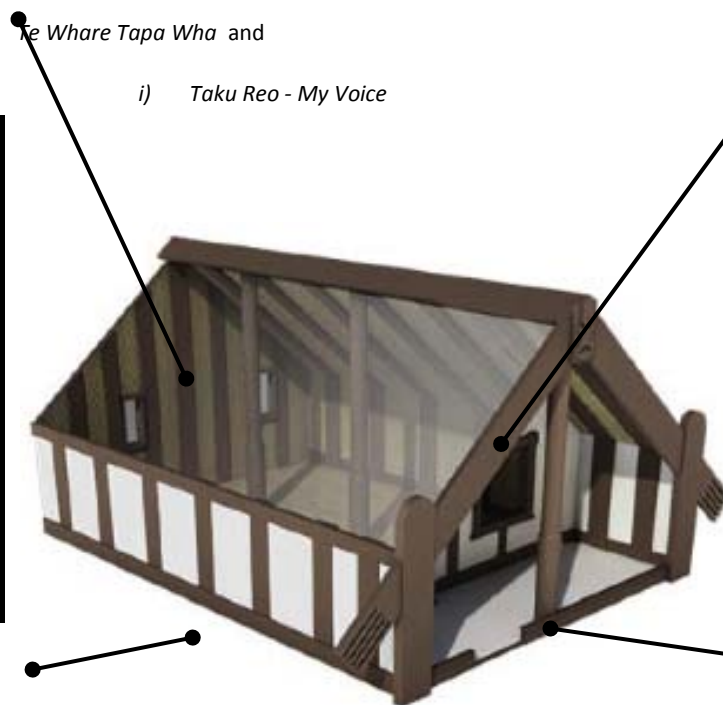
- explore their cultural values
- discover their inner strengths
- articulate their life and career aspirations
- follow a pathway that enables them to confidently state “I can cope with the demands of this course”.

Taha hinengaro
Mental and emotional well-being
"I BELIEVE I can do this course"

ii) Whare Tapa Wha	iii) Taku Reo - My Voice
Sense of achievement Enjoyment and fun Self-esteem	Focus on abilities Positive psychology Positive affirmations Celebrating success
Communicating thoughts and feelings	Thanksgiving Understanding thoughts and feelings associated with strengths and weaknesses Strengths approach to managing stress and coping with change
Resilience Problem solving Decision making	

Taha tinana
Physical well-being
"I have the RESOURCES to do this course"

Whare Tapa Wha	Taku Reo - My Voice
Health benefits	Personal safety Learning resources Study habits
Nutrition Physical activity Weight management Sexuality	Personal health goal setting* Healthy eating* Healthy lifestyle*
	* Under development



Whare Tapa Wha - achieving hauora (well-being) through taha tinana, taha hinengaro, taha whānau, taha wairua in an educational setting. Each dimension of hauora influences and supports the others. Focus first on wairua, tinana and whānau. (Dr Mason Durie)

My Voice - achieving learner engagement, achievement and well-being through strengths-based education.

Taha whānau
Social well-being
"I have the SUPPORT to do this course"

iv) Whare Tapa Wha	v) Taku Reo - My Voice
Friendships Mixing with others Helping others	Making connections with other learners Making connections with educator
Whānau Social support Interpersonal relationships Feeling of belonging	(Manaaki) Forming a support crew Taking responsibility Celebrating success Collaborative learning (Tuakana Teina)

Taha wairua
Spiritual well-being
"I can COPE with the demands of this course"

Whare Tapa Wha	Taku Reo - My Voice
Purpose in life	Innate strengths Aspirations Licence to dream
Being true to yourself	Owning strengths and weaknesses
Personal beliefs Goal setting	Values and beliefs Qualification, literacy/numeracy and life goal setting
Cultural values	Cultural values

Figure 2: Overview of the connections between *Te Whare Tapa Wha* and *My Voice*

Project Methodology

Overview of method

The key focus of this project was to evaluate the effect of the first two parts of *My Voice* on learner engagement. This reflects the importance of the first four weeks on learner engagement. This was done by comparing the engagement levels of trial group learners (new learners² who participated in *My Voice*) with a comparison group at the beginning of the course, and at the end of the first part (approximately two weeks into their course), and again at the end of the second part of *My Voice* (approximately four weeks into their course).

In conducting the evaluation, the project team ensured that:

- the confidentiality of all individual learner responses was maintained
- individual learner responses across each evaluation stage could be tracked
- the language used in the evaluation forms was tailored for each setting, for example, use of teacher, class course. Tutor, learner, learner as appropriate
- trial and comparison groups could be differentiated at all times.

Administration guidelines and evaluation instructions were developed by the project team and discussed with the administration team, tutors and other staff involved in the project.

A comprehensive training programme was facilitated in November and December 2009 for all tutors involved in the trial³. The training included two workshops and was designed to help tutors understand the strengths-based approach and to familiarise themselves with the engagement framework prior to delivery.

Workshop 1 (Two days). The aim of this workshop was to introduce and apply a strengths-based approach to work and education. Learning outcomes included:

- identifying the benefits and challenges of working and training in a strengths-based environment
- identifying personal strengths
- maximising strengths and managing weaknesses in the workplace
- understanding how *My Voice* can be used as a strengths-based approach to enhance learner engagement, achievement and well-being.

Workshop 2 (Two days). The aim of this workshop was to confidently facilitate stages 1 and 2 of *My Voice* in an educational setting. Learning outcomes included:

- being familiar with *My Voice* structure and content
- practising *My Voice* module activities and receiving constructive feedback from course facilitator and peers
- planning the implementation of *My Voice* stages 1 and 2 into current course programmes
- setting up support structures that maximise relationship strengths.

² This evaluation included new students starting courses rather than existing learners who were already enrolled and had already been participating in the course.

³ New tutors that became involved in the trial received the same level of training as the original trial group.

Participants

In total, 31 learners were involved in the trial groups, of which 14 were Māori. It became apparent once the trial commenced that it was best, in practice, to deliver the engagement framework to all learners in courses with trial participants, as the strengths' facilitation and relationships needed to be consistent; that is, a tutor could not be expected to facilitate a strengths approach with some learners and retain their existing facilitation model for others in the same class. There were 28 learners in the comparison group, of which 14 were Māori. In total the trial group included eight courses and the comparison group included nine (see tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Distribution of Trial Groups

Provider	Course	Location	Enrolment	Students
Employment Plus	Worknet	Cambridge	Youth/TOPs	5
	Heavy Trade Driving	Fielding	TOPs	4
	Training For The Future	Waipukurau	TOPs	2
Trade and Commerce	Web Design	Hastings	Youth	5
	Youth Options	Pukekohe	Youth	4
	Computing and Business Administration	Palmerston North	TOPs	8
	Retail and Sales	Hamilton	TOPs	1
Te Wananga o Aotearoa Kauri Centre	Alternative Education	Hamilton	Youth	2
Total				31

Table 2: Distribution of Comparison Groups

Provider	Course	Location	Enrolment	Students
Employment Plus	Introduction to Child Care	Dunedin	Youth/TOPs	1
	Ready for Retail	Dunedin	Youth/TOPs	4
	Heavy Trade Driving	Porirua	TOPs	3
	Introduction to Careers	Dunedin	Youth/TOPs	2
	Landscape Construction	Ngaruawahia	Youth	3
	Retail/Hospitality/ Computing	Cambridge	Youth/TOPs	3
	Business Administration and Computing	Manukau	TOPs	4
Trade and Commerce	Introduction to Computers	Gisborne	TOPs	6
	Careers in Hospitality	Tauranga	Youth	2
Total				28

Measures

Learner survey

The items developed for the learner survey were influenced by existing literature on the following key themes in the learner engagement literature:

- Hope Theory, which asserts that a key motivational force that disconnects individuals from the negative of the past and reconnects them with the possibilities of the future, is based on hope (Snyder, 1996).
- Research conducted by the Gallup Organisation, which asserts that there are three key indicators of success that drive learner achievement, retention and future employment – hope, engagement and well-being (Lopez, 2009).
- Literature relating to the importance of the presence of environmental supports, behaviours, motivational attributes, and cognitions that enhance engagement (Schriner & Louis, 2008).

The items were also influenced by the project partners' experience with learners in their context, and *Te Whare Tapa Wha*. The project group reviewed possible questions to ensure they were 'fit for purpose' for the learner groups involved in the trial. Responses on the survey range between 1 and 5, where 1 = strongly disagree, 3 = somewhat agree and 5 = strongly agree. The final learner survey items represented four key themes (see Table 3):

- course engagement
- hope
- well-being
- tutor relationship.

Table 3: Final items on scale and their associated theme

Items	Theme
I know what is expected of me on this course	Course engagement
I have a friend on this course	Well-being
I am confident that I have made the correct choice of course to attend	Hope
I know my course mates well	Well-being
There is someone on my course that cares about me	Well-being
If I had a problem there is someone on my course that I could go to	Well-being
I know a lot about my tutor	Tutor relationship
My tutor knows a lot about me	Tutor relationship
My tutor cares about me as a person	Tutor relationship
I have experienced success on this course	Course engagement
I feel safe on this course	Well-being
I know how I learn best	Course engagement
I know what my strengths are and how I can use these on this course	Course engagement
I am motivated to get involved in activities on this course	Course engagement
I have been involved in activities I enjoy	Course engagement
My tutor seems to value my contribution	Tutor relationship
I am involved and fully participating in this course	Course engagement
I know what I want to do once I have finished this course	Hope
I know what qualifications I need, to achieve my goals when I leave this	Hope

course	
I have received recognition or praise for what I have achieved so far	Well-being
I am more confident about my own abilities than when I first started	Hope

Learner and tutor focus groups

To elicit further information about the strengths experience, a series of focus groups were held with learners and tutors at the end of the trial period. Learners were to be either interviewed on an individual basis or within a class group. These were held with a subset of the trial groups only, in a semi-formal environment based around a set of pre-determined questions (see Table 4).

Table 4: Learner and Tutor Focus Group Questions

Learner focus group questions	Tutor focus group questions
How has <i>My Voice</i> impacted on your motivation to succeed in your course?	How do you think this strengths-based approach is impacting on your learners' motivation to succeed on your course?
How has <i>My Voice</i> impacted on your behaviour on the course?	How do you think this strengths-based approach is impacting on your learners' behaviour on the course?
How has <i>My Voice</i> impacted on your knowledge of who you are and your strengths?	How do you think this strengths-based approach is impacting on your learners' knowledge of who they are and their strengths?
How has <i>My Voice</i> impacted on where you see yourself going in the future?	How do you think this strengths-based approach is impacting on where your learners see themselves going in the future?
How has <i>My Voice</i> impacted on your relationship with your tutor?	How do you think this strengths-based approach is impacting on your relationship with your learners?
How has <i>My Voice</i> impacted on your relationship with the other learners on your course?	How do you think this strengths-based approach is impacting on your learners' attendance?

Results

Survey data

Course engagement

Trial and comparison group learners reported similar levels of course engagement at Time 1 (baseline). At Time 2 (two weeks) trial group learners showed an elevated level of engagement compared to those in the comparison group. At Time 3 (four weeks)⁴, both groups continued to increase their reported levels of course engagement, with the trial group maintaining a slightly higher level of engagement (Figure 1).

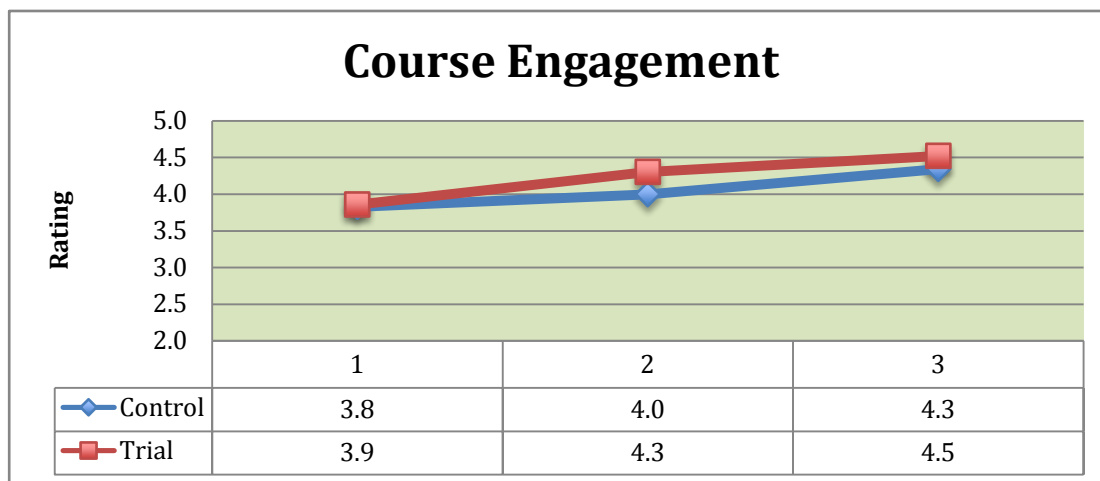


Figure 1: Course engagement scores across time for trial and comparison groups

Hope

At baseline there was no difference between the comparison group and the trial group on reported levels of hope. However, at Time 2 the trial group increased their level of hope, whereas the comparison group reported levels dropped below their Time 1 scores. At Time 3 the levels of hope for both groups increased but their overall score was similar (Figure 2).

⁴ For the graphs that follow, baseline is represented as Time 1, two weeks is represented as Time 2, and 4 weeks is represented as Time 3.

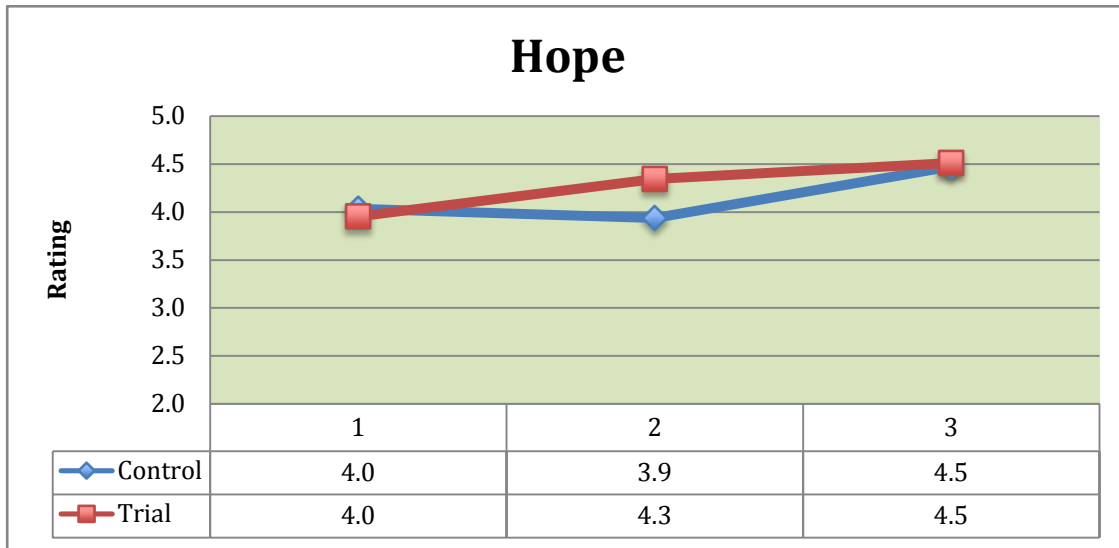


Figure 2: Hope scores across time for trial and comparison groups

Well-being

At Time 1, there were no differences between the trial group and the comparison group. Both groups then reported steady increases in well-being across time, with the trial group reporting a slightly higher increase than the comparison group at both two and four weeks (Figure 3).

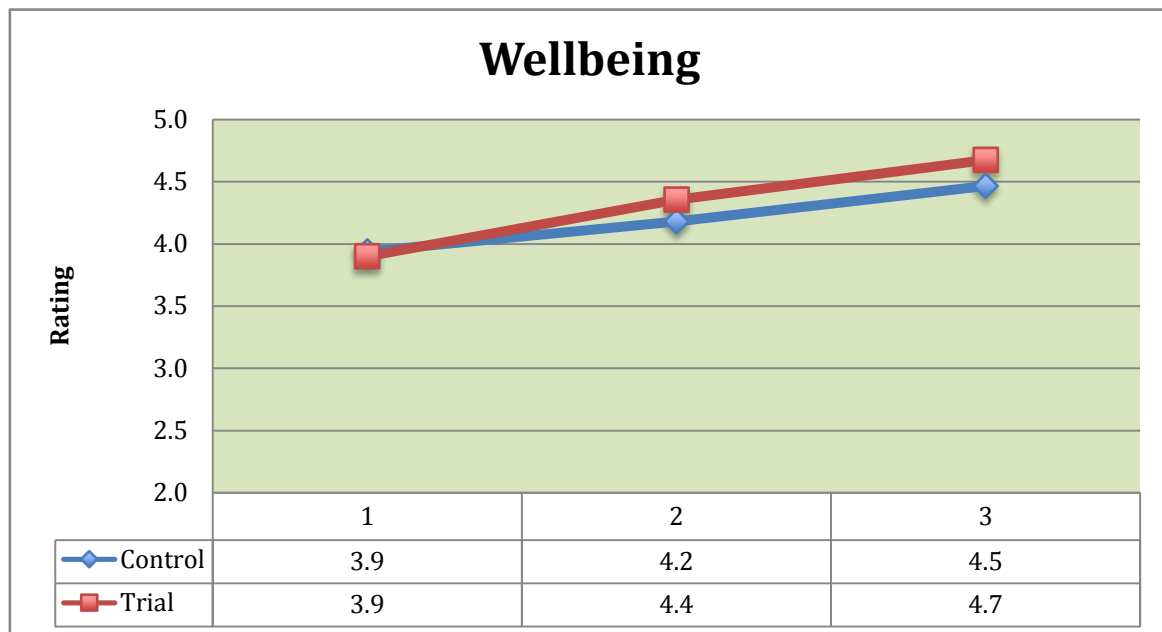


Figure 3: Well-being scores across time for trial and comparison groups

Tutor relationship

At Time 1, the trial group reported more positive relationships with their tutors than the comparison group. At Time 2 the gap had widened between the trial group and the comparison group, with the formal reporting more positive relationships with their tutor. This gap narrowed at Time 3 where the scores were similar (Figure 4).

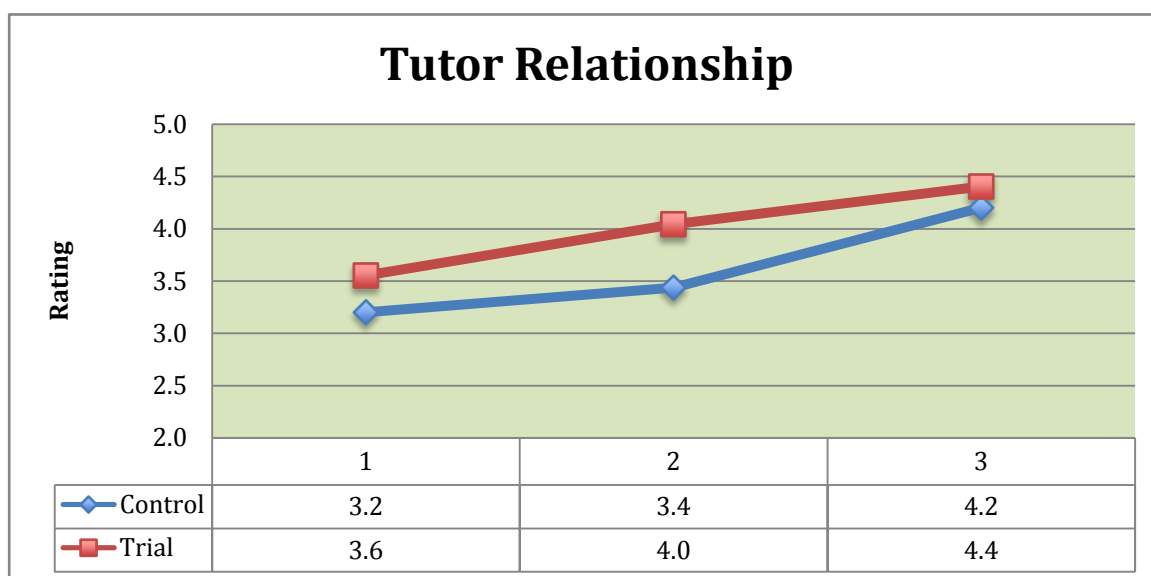


Figure 4: Tutor relationship scores across time for trial and comparison groups

Overall, survey data indicated that both the trial groups and comparison groups increased their level of engagement over the four weeks. The increases were higher, however, in the initial two weeks of the programmes for those using the *My Voice* framework. These results suggest that *My Voice* enables engagement to occur at earlier levels of a course.

Focus groups

The impact of My Voice on learner motivation to succeed in their course

Learners reported that the engagement framework provided a focus and purpose for their learning: “*My Voice* helped me realise what I need to focus on and what I want to do” and “I’m more determined to finish and have fun”. Some responses, such as “It has helped me learn more about my support at course”, highlighted the impact already made, and other comments, such as “Getting my NCEA 1 is priority #1”, refer to the likelihood of future positive impacts on their motivation to achieve.

Learner comments indicate a high level of hope for course completion and achieving future aspirations. For example, “*My Voice* helped me realise I can achieve no matter what I choose to do.

It has motivated me more because I want to achieve. It has helped me believe in myself and what I can achieve and has helped me realise my strengths and how I can use them in my chosen career". This comment indicates a high level of hope for course completion and achieving future aspirations. Learners also demonstrated the use of strengths language such as "I can..." "I like doing..." and "I will..." during the focus groups.

Tutor comments highlighted a perception that learners who participated in *My Voice* engaged faster and demonstrated an increase in motivation, as well as a willingness to continue further study. Tutors recognised that once learners refocused on 'What I want to do' this in turn increased their level of excitement about the activities on the course. For example "They are now focusing on achieving their NCEA and believe they can".

Tutors reported that learners were more engaged in discussing future work or study opportunities, therefore providing more focus and importance on what they were currently doing and creating the motivation to achieve. As one tutor commented, "My learners are easily identifying their strengths and seeing a pathway forward to establishing the link between strengths and work opportunities." Another commented, "an increase in learners wanting to continue further study. More discussion about what's next after the course".

The impact of My Voice on learner behaviour while on the course

Learners did not provide many examples of how their behaviour had changed as a result of being involved in *My Voice*. However, the comments that were made suggest a positive impact relating to their levels of well-being. For example, learners acknowledged an increase in self-confidence and that the engagement framework provided a positive start to the course, clarifying the rules and expectations so that behavioural standards were clear. One learner related their self-improvement to an increase in their attendance.

Tutors commented on the importance of highlighting early on in the course the course values and the collaborative approach to setting behavioural expectations. For example, "We work hard on the course values to set boundaries and confirm traditions. The programme helps to clarify and set behavioural expectations"; "Students contribute towards and agree on the acceptable behaviours and values of the course"; "Rapid decline in adverse behaviour of existing learners, which impacts positively on newcomers".

Tutors also reported that learners are seeing their opinions valued more and that this impacts positively on their behaviour. Indicators of increased well-being are also evident through feedback such as "Showing a little bit more respect towards us because we care and are seen to care a bit more about them as individuals".

Tutors believe learners are showing them more respect, as learners acknowledge that tutors care about them as individuals. Learners are easier to engage, more focused and attentive, and are using their listening skills more. "Due to the group discussions we are finding that our learners are more focused and attentive and that general behaviour has improved", one tutor noted, indicating a link between the facilitation that is encouraged and behaviour that is observed in class. Tutors believed that learners whose attitudes were pessimistic at the start of the course moved towards a more optimistic mind set.

With regards to the impact of *My Voice* on learner attendance, tutors reported mixed views. Some believed the strengths approach provided some motivation to attend. “Learners are more punctual, there is less skiving and we have a better daily course structure” and “This is providing an incentive to come to course” are general comments reflecting the effect the engagement framework may have on attendance rates. Tutors believed that the engagement framework enabled them to individualise a learner’s journey on the course and that this provides a further incentive for the learner to continue to attend the course.

Tutors also highlighted that other factors affect attendance such as “distractions from outsiders and classmates”. Comments ranged from “It has not made a measurable difference in attendance” to “...they never miss a day where possible.” This may reflect the level of rapport a tutor has with their learners and how effectively they are facilitating the framework and their course in general. As one tutor stated, “They are attending every day – [they] know why they are here, what they need to achieve and how to achieve it.”



The impact of My Voice on learner knowledge of who they are and their strengths

Learners reported that the engagement framework helped them to discover and articulate strengths they did not know they had. This shows a strong well-being focus, as learners begin to link strengths to future jobs as demonstrated by this quote: “I am able to identify what I am good at – my talents, activities, interests and think a bit about what jobs might link into my skills and strengths.” Learners recognised that the engagement framework focused on highlighting their positive aspects, turning around their self-perceptions from ‘worthless’ to ‘my true qualities’. “I like *My Voice* because it’s made me realise my true qualities. I don’t feel worthless as before. And I have more idea of what I’m good at and what I’m not.”

One focus group discussed how strengths identification is an ongoing process: “We are identifying one strength a day.” This is increasing their individual strengths profile and providing more strengths-based application opportunities during the course. Learners reported that they were also able to identify how to use their strengths in a positive way.

Some learners recognised that strengths identification wasn’t easy: “It’s hard to think of my strengths.” This comment was made in a youth focus group, where the learner had demonstrated behaviour associated with low self-esteem. One learner commented that they did not like the depth that the engagement framework went to as part of the self-discovery process: “I personally don’t like it much. I don’t like how in-depth it is, as I liked myself the way I was before. Also I still don’t

know what I want to do as I change my mind about things so often.” This learner shows some trepidation in accepting truth and the impact that may have in the future.

Tutors reported that the strengths-based approach provided learners with a sense of pride, self-esteem and self-respect, independence, self-belief and self-acceptance. The focus groups also enabled insights into the process of ‘realisation’ that learners go through. For example, “The learners are starting to realise why they make the choices they do”; “...learners realise that their aspirations can be achieved”; and “My students are more able to identify a self-chosen pathway once their strengths have been established. The idea that ‘I can’ instead of ‘I can’t’ has been discovered.” Tutors considered this an important factor towards increased engagement, noting “students are leading activities they enjoy doing” and “increase in engagement, interactions through activities – starting to have more fun.”

Tutors also recognised that a strengths-based approach (through an engagement framework like *My Voice*) is only ‘one piece of the puzzle’, but discussed the importance and relevance of the insights their learners gain through the engagement framework and how this is influencing their feelings of well-being: “They are valuing becoming more independent” and “starting to think about who they are and accepting who they are”.

The impact of My Voice on how learners see themselves in the future

Many of the learner responses indicated that learners had established clear goals for the future. For example, “I want to go on to polytech”, or stated in more generally positive terms, “It has reconfirmed my direction and goals. I have them written down now”. In some cases learners indicated a higher level of aspiration than when they first started – “We have higher aspirations of ourselves” and “Has made me think that I can do better than what I thought I could” – which have strong links to their levels of hope.

Learners highlighted the constraints and influence other people can impose on their ability and confidence to make their own decisions about their future aspirations: “I don’t need permission from others to be what I want to be”; “Before I started there was ‘nothing to do’, there was ‘nothing going on around here’...now I see lots of job options especially in the auto trades which is where I want to go”; “Maybe I need to rethink the people I hang with”. These statements reflect the influence friends were having on their behaviour and decision making, and the renewed importance of personal well-being.

Tutor comments indicated that, as a result of being involved in *My Voice*, learners exhibited higher aspirations than when they first started their course. Learners are “setting their sights higher” and have “higher aspirations and [are] more aware of where they want to go”. These higher aspirations are recognised in light of the changes that need to be made as part of their decision making about future pathways. “The students see that they continually have crossroads and choices to make along their pathway of learning and goal achievement” and are “moving outside their traditional comfort zones”.

Tutors reported that learners were identifying and then linking strengths to future careers. “Learners are becoming more motivated and seeing new paths open up before them. I link very closely learner’s strengths to their future careers.” Some tutors refer to learners as more ‘hopeful’ in

their discussions. For example, learners are “more hopeful that they will have a better life” and the engagement framework “has given all learners a sense of hope for tomorrow”.

Finally, tutors reported that learners are taking more personal responsibility for their actions and that their goals are more realistic. Learners are also more resilient when it comes to receiving criticism or put-downs. There are impacts on a more personal level for learners who ‘look outside the square’ and ‘move outside traditional comfort zones’.

The impact of My Voice on learner-tutor relationships

Tutors were seen by learners as motivators; someone who valued their ideas and opinions, a coach, someone who ensured the group was inclusive, who cared and who knows how they think and what they can do to help them learn. Learner comments included: “The tutor is one reason we attend”; “I love working with my tutor”; and “It’s good to know they care about us”. One learner was able to link their tutor’s behaviour with their tutor’s strength. “She keeps the environment happy, lots of laughs (her strength) and makes things enjoyable.”

The comment “This programme goes deeper than anything before and I just need to get used to that” shows reservation from some learners who question the need for the tutor to know so much about them and that they need time to get used to the fact that an engagement framework of this nature ‘goes deeper’ than other programmes they have experienced.

Tutors reported that there were definite improvements in their relationships with learners. Tutors commented on the level of trust that now exists between them and their learners and that learners would appear to have more respect for them. This is highlighted in one comment made by a learner to their tutor, “You are not just about bums on seats.” Tutors recognised that “*My Voice* puts the focus on the learner not the course”, and that the outcomes from activities can influence future delivery. “Learning a lot more about them than can be used during the course. Able to focus on skills and strengths that come up during activities.”

Tutor comments also related the impact of relationships to learner engagement by acknowledging that they are “engaging more with our students than in the past” and that “we understand our learners better and therefore can help them because they were able to share their ideas and stories with us”. The strengths-based approach has also extended opportunities to include “...more reasons and opportunities to recognise, acknowledge attributes and success”.

There was also evidence that the engagement framework assisted tutors in their own professional development, “making me (as a tutor) more confident to facilitate in a larger group”.

Conclusions

What are the results telling us?

This project focused on the first four weeks of learners' time on their course. The section of the strengths-based engagement framework used in this project focused on establishing early engagement. Quantitative data for course engagement showed an earlier increase in engagement levels compared to that of the comparison group.



The result suggests that learners who used *My Voice* to understand their strengths and to participate in the activities they enjoy early in the course were motivated to become more fully involved in the early stages of the course. Generally, the comparison groups' engagement increased over time to achieve similar levels to the trial group by Time 3.

These results support Schreiner's theory (2006: 9) that engaged learning is "a positive energy invested in one's own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening in the moment, and involvement in specific learning activities".

The alignment to strengths created by *My Voice* increases learner motivation and focus for both current and future study and/or employment. Learners are more focused on course achievement and understand the importance and relevance of the course content on their course. This is particularly relevant to the learner group involved in this research, as many coming to these courses have previously become disengaged from the education sector and confused or disinterested in future aspirations.

The *My Voice Engagement Framework* supports learners' positive change in self-perceptions and well-being. Learners' views of their own abilities have lifted with higher aspirations and there has been a positive shift in the language used by learners when talking about themselves, for example, "I can...", "I want to..." and "I am going to...". Trial group learners experienced an earlier and far higher lift in the area of well-being than comparison group learners. Well-being showed the highest increase of all survey categories. This result shows a close correlation between the *My Voice Engagement Framework* and taha hinengaro (psychological health) and taha whānau (friendships) and the strength of well-being components included in the framework.

The *My Voice Engagement Framework* also strengthened learner relationships with tutors. Early positive relationships were established and maintained at a consistent level. Recognising the value of the relationship between learner and tutor and the influence this has on learner achievement

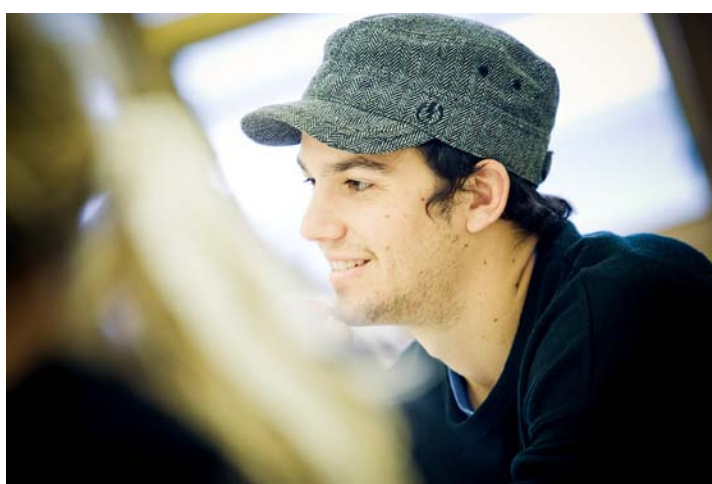
(Gallup), the activities within the framework enhance the opportunity for learners and tutors to engage in a meaningful and valued relationship.

What next?

Further evaluation is now required to determine how the framework (including Parts 3 and 4) contributes to sustained levels of engagement leading to learner achievement.

Trade and Commerce has begun to develop a simple and effective learner-centred evaluation process to identify and measure the contribution the *My Voice Engagement Framework* makes on individual learner achievement and course outcomes.

Part of the evaluation-design process is to determine the achievements and outcomes that should be measured. Trade and Commerce is particularly interested in outcomes that make up the total contribution of the course, not just graduation rates and employment outcomes that are contractual outcomes. Total contribution outcomes cover the essence of the courses and have not traditionally been measured by funding agencies.



Examples of outcomes may include:

- achieving employment goals on the course
- achieving National Certificates available on the course (Youth)
- confidence in abilities to achieve short and long-term aspirations
- achieving the skills to manage changes in employment and remain in the workforce
- progressing into higher learning linked to strengths (FFTO/Youth)
- confidence and competence to move into sustainable employment (work ready)
- confidence and competence to move into higher learning
- attaining sustainable employment that is linked to strengths
- actively using strengths in everyday activities.

There are many factors that contribute to these outcomes, such as the influence of peers and whānau, and economic factors. The challenge will be to determine the actual contribution of a strengths-based approach and how much that has influenced the outcome. For example, learners set their individual qualification goals and pathways, therefore, the time it takes to achieve their qualification varies. It may be relevant to ask them, 'How did *My Voice* and using a strengths approach contribute to the length of time it took to achieve a qualification?'

Of particular future interest to this project group is the contribution the strengths experience has on a learner's personal and vocational success after they have finished their course, for example, the application of strengths in future study, employment and as a key driver for future aspirations.

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Appendix One: My Voice Engagement Framework

My Voice Part One (Weeks 1–2)

Let's Go

The learner will:

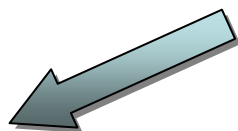
- feel welcomed into the programme
- resolve any questions, concerns or issues with the programme
- achieve an early sense of success and positivity
- confirm that this is the right choice of programme for them.



Making Connections

The learner will:

- identify key support people around them
- share some of their past positive learning experiences with their programme manager
- find out what their programme manager will do to help them achieve on the course.



Getting to Know My Classmates

The learner will: -

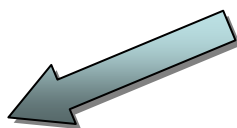
- complete a range of activities to help them interact with other classmates
- identify things they have in common with other classmates
- identify a 'buddy' on the course.



Keeping Safe

The learner will:

- share personal safety levels with their programme manager
- be inducted in fire, earthquake, evacuation and personal first aid procedures
- become aware of the venue hazards
- demonstrate knowledge of workplace health and safety requirements.



My Responsibilities

The learner will:

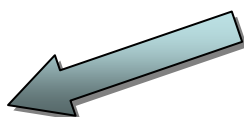
- understand the course rules
- understand and sign up to the course values and traditions.



My Strengths

The learner will:

- be introduced to the concept of strengths
- begin to identify activities that make them feel strong
- identify some of their positive qualities.



Getting Involved

The learner will:

- reflect on their positive experiences to date
- thank others for their help to date
- show, tell or teach something to others in the class.



My Opportunities

The learner will:

- be aware of the options and opportunities this course can lead to
- understand the importance to their future of completing qualification(s) available on the course
- know about the variety of activities and subjects available to them on the course.

My Voice Part Two (Weeks 3–4)

My Strengths

The learner will:

- develop their activity, learning and relationship strength profiles.



Living My Strengths

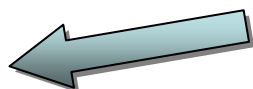
The learner will:

- understand what is meant by 'aspirations'
- match their personal aspirations with their strengths profiles
- identify their career aspirations and match them with their strengths profiles.

My Qualifications Pathway

The learner will:

- identify qualifications required to achieve desired career aspirations
- select qualifications they want to achieve on their course
- identify the study focus included in these qualifications.



My Focus

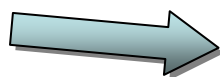
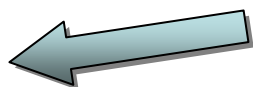
The learner will:

- use their strengths profile to identify parts of the course of particular interest
- develop a learning plan that provides the best order to learn topics of interest.

Getting the Basics Right

The learner will:

- share their attitudes towards reading, writing and maths
- recognise the importance of developing these skills in relation to achieving the qualifications they have selected, getting involved in the course and getting the job of their choice
- gain confidence in their ability to succeed on the course by completing an activity that uses their existing literacy and/or numeracy strengths
- identify their reading, writing and maths strengths and needs.



My Support Network

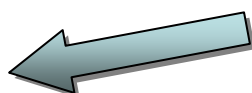
The learner will:

- have support structures and strategies in place with people who can support them through the course.

My Journey

The learner will:

- create a plan (wall poster) that focuses on:
 - qualification goals and pathway
 - literacy and numeracy goals
 - reasons to celebrate success
 - strengths they will use and activities that will engage them
 - the support crew to help them keep on track and achieve
- check their level of engagement
- share 'My Journey' with someone important to them.



My Voice Part Three (Weeks 5+)

Being Supported

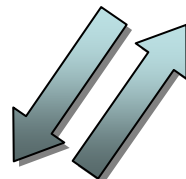
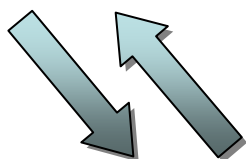
The learner will:

- share their successes with their support network
- identify how their support networks can continue to help them
- review and receive agreement from support networks on support they will continue to give the learner
- identify and make contact with external support agencies.

Celebrating Success

The learner will:

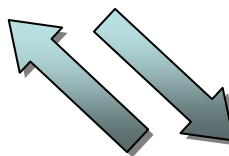
- receive recognition from the programme manager that is in line with how they prefer to receive recognition
- receive recognition from at least one person who is important to them
- celebrate success in a way that is meaningful to them.



Following 'My Journey'

The learner will:

- review their 'My Journey' progress
- experience a strengths-based review session
- identify successes to date
- be motivated to continue to achieve on the course.



Taking Responsibility

The learner will:

- be meeting course rules, living the values and participating in course traditions
- give examples of when they have supported other learners and the programme manager
- be involved in planning course activities and events.

Building On My Strengths

The learner will:

- identify the benefits to date of using their strengths
- use their activity, learning and relationship strengths
- identify and record new strengths
- create a continuous profile of strengths
- present a strengths profile to support people and networks.

My Voice Part Four (Weeks 5+)

My Next Step

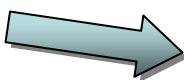
The learner will:

- complete a personal profile
- research job or education opportunities that are aligned with their strengths
- match job or education opportunities with their needs and preferences
- actively look for work or enrol in higher education opportunities
- achieve US 4253 – demonstrate knowledge of job search skills (optional).

Yes I Can

The learner will:

- explore the requirements of the new workplace or study environment
- demonstrate the potential or ability to meet these requirements
- meet any pre-entry requirements
- develop the confidence and self-belief that they can succeed in their new work or study environment.



Taking My Support Crew with Me

This module is best completed when the learner has identified a preferred employer, had their job application accepted or has recently enrolled into a new course of study.

The learner will:

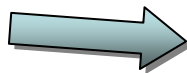
- identify and confirm the support available to them in their new work or study environment
- share their support needs with their support crew.

Taking My Strengths with Me

This module is best completed when the learner has secured employment or enrolled in a new course.

The learner will:

- identify how they can use their strengths in the future
- create a strengths profile in a format they can use in the future.



A Final Celebration of My Strengths

This module is best completed during the final days the learner is on the course.

The learner will:

- identify how they wish to celebrate their successes and achievements
- tell a story that reflects their journey during the course
- celebrate their achievements and receive a farewell
- be supported into their new work or study environment.