

NLP in Further Education



By Zoé Carroll

I waited on the start line, my race number tied to my handlebars, my heart pounding with the nerves as I looked to my right and left, to the riders who I believed outclassed me by a country mile. I looked at the crowd in the arena and found my coach. He drew a circle in the air with his finger and I remembered his training. I took a tiny step forward into my circle of excellence. I felt immediately taller, faster, more capable. The horn sounded and I pushed my pedals hard, making a great start out of the arena.

That was my first experience of the power of NLP, over twenty years ago. Learning that I could change how I felt by using really simple techniques is a lesson I never forgot.

When I was approached by the head of the Maths and English departments at the college where I was working to see if I could help support their learners, I knew what I wanted to share with them. These students were all retaking their GCSEs, having achieved a result lower than a grade 4 in their secondary education. Anecdotally, the teaching staff in this department felt their students felt like failures because of not achieving the required grade, but there was no data to support this. They felt as though they were teaching demoralised students who had a lack of belief in themselves. Despite being subject specialists, they recognised that they needed help to change the fortunes of their department – and the lives of their learners.

I had been successfully using NLP and other coaching methods in my own department at the college for several years and our results were outstanding. When funding became available for them to add additional support in their department, they knew they wanted to learn some of the magic that my own students had been benefitting from since I first got my NLP diploma in 2018. Having now become a Master Practitioner, using many techniques successfully in classrooms and for online learning, I was the obvious choice to support the Maths and English team.

In his 2011 study, Voldis Kudliskis identified that, in a 6th form environment, some students failed not through a lack of ability, but through a lack of belief in their ability to succeed. I wanted to use the knowledge that increasing self-belief and confidence was the key to improving their performance, with the almost 900 students who were studying for a GCSE in Maths and/or English at the college. I created a programme of workshops, which I delivered to each class of students over an 8-week period. Every class received two workshops during this time.

I wanted to be able to provide data to support the study so, based on the findings of Angelidis *et al* (2019) that showed cognitive performance anxiety impaired people's working



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memory, I adapted an anxiety scale that is widely used in sport, replacing references to 'competition' or 'event', with the words 'exam' or 'assessment'. This scale breaks anxiety into three components: concentration, worry and somatic factors (body feelings). I was interested to see which of these three factors may be the main factor affecting performance. I also included a simple measure of confidence with the question 'Overall, how confident do you feel about your upcoming GCSE Maths or English assessment?' For logistical reasons, the students were surveyed after the first workshop, and again after the second one. Ideally, I would have liked to measure their baseline before I started any delivery at all, but this wasn't practical.

The workshops included information about why they may have experienced stress in high pressure situations in the past, and then moved onto practical techniques to manage state, access information using eye accessing methods, a new behaviour generator process, and some timeline and future pacing techniques. Because so many students reported difficulties in concentration in the first questionnaire, I also included a deliberate break state technique in the second workshop.

I was available on the assessment days to help support students who felt so stressed by their assessments that they were compelled to leave the classroom. Most of these were calmed and returned to the assessment room.

The intervention was deemed a success. The headline result was a 23.5% rise in the overall confidence score of the students.

Where targeted strategies relating to focus and concentration were included, a 30.8% increase was seen between the pre and post coaching results, indicating that students felt better able to concentrate and focus after the coaching input.



While these results were positive, collecting data about the performance anxiety of the students revealed a much greater problem.

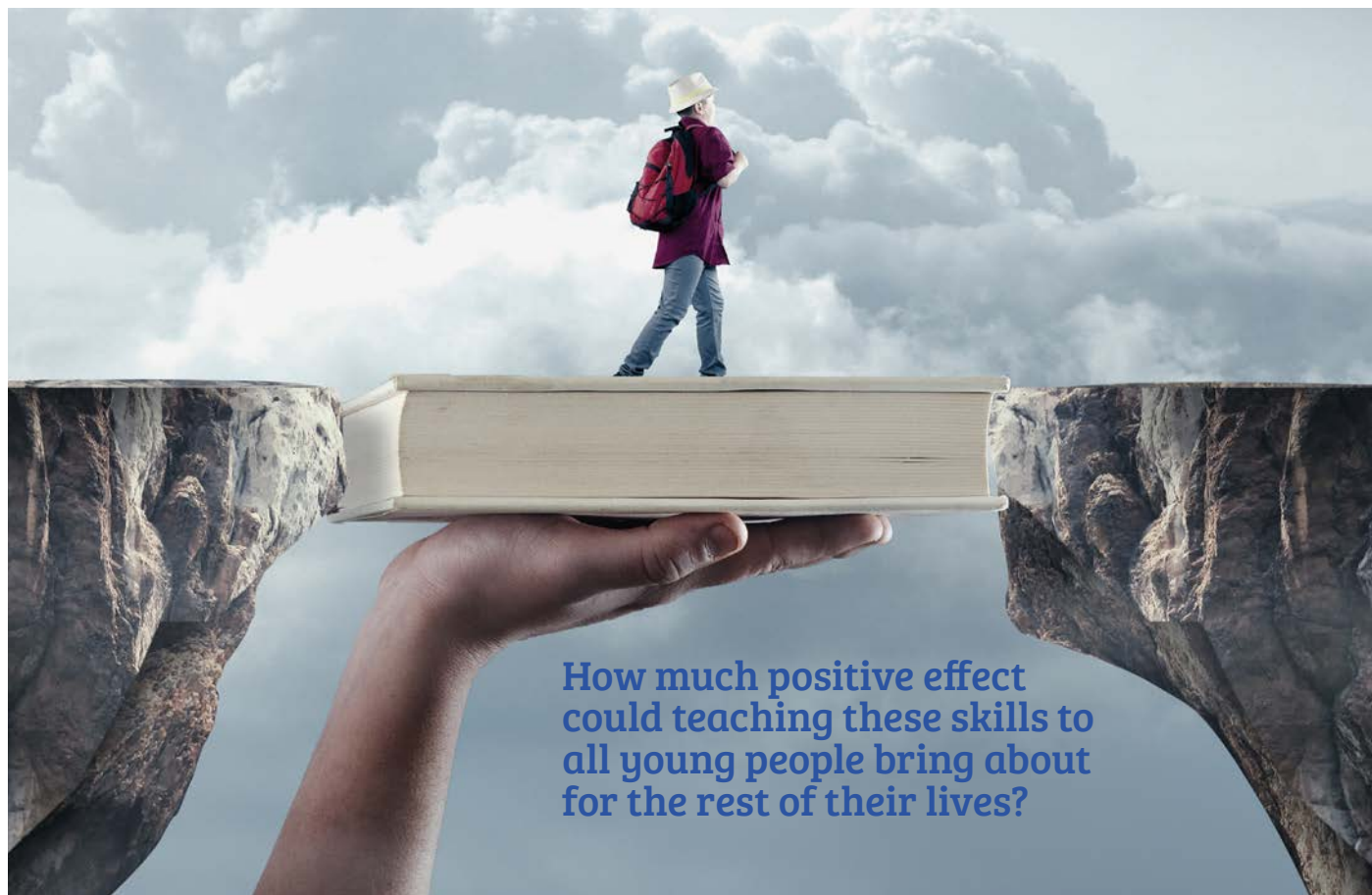
At the beginning of the coaching process, 76% of students fell into either 'very much' or 'pretty much' categories for worry about not doing well in the assessments. This had increased to 92.3% of students in the week before the assessments. It seems that despite feeling more confident, a very large proportion of students were still worried about their performance in the assessments. It seems that despite the focus on achieving a target grade being designed to be motivating, it does, in fact, have the opposite effect, creating worry about what happens if they don't.

This highlights a far wider problem in education more generally; if more than 92% of students are so worried about how well they perform in assessments that it could reduce their performance, how many students are not meeting their potential simply because they haven't been given the tools they need to manage their performance anxiety during exams?

Where targeted interventions using NLP strategies demonstrated a reduction in effect, such as in the focus and concentration part of the coaching process, what would be possible if we could spend time targeting the other aspects of anxiety as well? If we could support young people to know how to bring themselves to being at 'cause' rather than feeling victim to being at 'effect', how much positive effect could teaching these skills to all young people bring about for the rest of their lives?

While the purpose of education is to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours of young people to be effective employees of the future, wouldn't the ability to manage your own state be just as worthwhile as knowledge of Pythagoras's theory?

This project has demonstrated that with only one hour of NLP intervention delivered across two workshops, an almost 25% increase in confidence can be achieved. If this approach was integrated across the entire education system from primary through to university education, how much more of the potential of individuals would be released? And why aren't those in senior positions in education more excited about this opportunity? ■



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References

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