

Focus Enhancement: A University Classroom Intervention Experience

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Abstract

Focus plays an integral role in learning, performing in many contexts and daily living. This article presents the results of a focus enhancement intervention that was integrated into a 12 week University course. Students recorded their focusing journey by recording their thoughts, actions and progress in a personal Journal, ten of which were randomly selected for in-depth analysis to better understand their experiences with Focus enhancement. This resulted in themes of preparation, action, reflection and lessons learned which integrated strategies such as goal setting, relaxation, deliberate focusing and creating an optimal focus environment. The focus enhancement experience had a positive impact on students in many areas of their life. Similar action based classroom interventions have the potential to enhance focusing and positive living skills for people of all ages.

Introduction

“Pay attention!” ... “Focus”! Everybody has probably heard this at some point in their life – at school, at home, in sport or in some other performance pursuit. Regardless of one's age, level of talent, desire or urgency, little can be accomplished without focusing or connecting with the task at hand. The ability to focus plays a critical role in learning, in performance and in our daily lives (Abernethy, 2001; Orlick, 2011; Werthner, 2002). While most parents, educators, coaches, performers and students

know, or discover at some point, that focusing is important it is rare that people at any age receive specific direction on how to improve their ability to focus. Given the importance of focus in sport and in daily living as well as previous research in similar interventions with youth (Curry and Maniar, 2004; Taylor & Orlick, 2004) we are left to question the potential impact of a focus enhancement intervention delivered in a university classroom context. This article shares the results of research that examined

student experiences during a University course on focus enhancement.

Importance of Focus

Orlick (2011) defines focus as “a complete, positive connection with an experience, learning opportunity, performance, action or interaction” (p. 101). Focus is reported to be a critical element of successful sport performance (Abernethy, 2001; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Orlick, 2008, 2011; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Werthner, 2002). In an early study with 291 Canadian Olympic athletes, Orlick and Partington (1988) found that both successful and disappointing performance outcomes were determined primarily by the athlete’s ability to direct and control focus in situations that count. A similar study with elite classical musicians showed that focus was critical for consistent high level performance among the world’s best musicians (Talbot-Honeck & Orlick, 1998).

The ability to focus in positive ways and refocus following distractions has also been found to be an important factor influencing the quality of daily living (Orlick, 2011). Hester & Orlick (2006) found that teaching relaxation skills and focus enhancement skills to children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder had a positive impact on their daily lives. Taylor & Orlick (2004) found that a classroom based intervention program designed to teach elementary school children relaxation skills and connected focusing skills resulted in helping those children to cope better with stress, fall asleep more easily at night and perform better in school. Improved focusing skills clearly have the potential to enhance the quality of learning, living and performing for many people at many different age levels.

Improving Focus

There is very little literature that addresses the issue of how we can help people learn to improve their focus and sustain a fully connected focus for longer periods of time. However, focusing is a skill, and like any other skill, it can be learned, developed and improved through relevant practice (Orlick, 2008, 2011; Wilson et al., 2006). Currently, as athletes gain experience in a specific sport they often improve focus by trial and error (Williams & Grant, 1999). Leaving focus enhancement to chance may be a waste of precious time and energy and contribute to unnecessary practice errors and less than best performance results (Williams and Grant, 1999).

Some strategies regarding how to improve focus are available. Wilson and colleagues (2006) suggest that “it is best to find cues that focus on positives rather than negatives, the present (current or upcoming moment) rather than the past or future, and the process (proper form or execution) rather than the score or external movement effect” (p. 413). Relaxation techniques also can contribute to focus enhancement as a way to calm the mind by relaxing the body (Bull, Albinson & Shambrook, 1996; Hester & Orlick, 2006; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2006). Nideffer and Sagal (2006) suggested the use of breathing techniques for relaxation purposes. Various strategies or mental skills can contribute to the ability to focus however we must clarify how it might be possible to teach people these skills.

University Classroom Intervention

The value of introducing mental skill intervention opportunities within a university classroom was discussed by Curry and Maniar (2003, 2004). They examined the experiences of student athletes in a U.S.A. Division One university setting

who were introduced to mental training techniques (e.g., cognitive-behavioural strategies) to enhance athletic performance through class presentations and through homework. These researchers concluded that “using an academic classroom to help college students and student-athletes learn, adapt, and use peak performance strategies in sport and life can be effective and may be worthy of consideration on other university campuses” (Curry & Maniar, 2004, p. 312). Since athletes have benefit from improving sport performance through mental training this leaves the question of how a similar training program could impact performance in other relevant life contexts.

Orlick has been using a variety of “self growth” projects, mission to excellence projects, focus enhancement projects and life enhancement projects in his undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Ottawa since the early 1980’s. Student feedback has been generally been very positive, however, this was the first study to explore students’ experience using this approach to enhancing the quality of their focus, learning or performance. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of university students enrolled in a classroom-based course which included a focus enhancement project.

Research Design

Given the purpose and exploratory nature of this study a descriptive, qualitative research design was used. Phenomenology was chosen to explore the perspectives and personal experiences of university students through the 12-week focus intervention process. An assumption made in phenomenological research is that the individual’s lived experience makes sense to that individual and the experience can be consciously expressed (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology was useful because this

approach can be used to search for essential elements that are crucial to identifying an experience. The method best suited to the current study was to use secondary texts, in this case personal journals, to collect data related to the experience of focus and the experience of a focus enhancement intervention. This unobtrusive method made use of written work produced during the intervention period.

Research Context

A fourth-year undergraduate level university course (APA 4116: Applied Sport and Performance Psychology) was delivered by Professor Terry Orlick at the University of Ottawa, Canada, in the Faculty of Human Kinetics. One hundred and twenty-three undergraduate men and women were registered in the course. The purpose of the course was that “through the course materials, activities and a major focusing project, [students] will increase [their] understanding and ability to apply relevant focusing skills in the sport context, as well as in other performance domains” (Orlick, 2007, p. 1). Course readings included selected chapters related to focus from Orlick’s books, *Embracing your Potential* (1998) and *In Pursuit of Excellence* (2008), and self-selected articles related to focusing and positive living skills from the online *Journal of Excellence*.

Focus Enhancement Class Activities

In-class activities exposed students to focus enhancement strategies they could apply in their own daily living. An overview of each class can be found in Appendix A. The course content included professor presentations on what focus is, the value of focus, the importance of deciding to focus, and how a connected focus and positive focus can enhance everyday life, learning and performance in all contexts. Guided focusing exercises were conducted during

most classes; for example, during focused listening students made particular efforts to listen for specific things in conversation or when listening to silence in a quiet room. Guided relaxation exercises such as relaxing to the sounds and images of a flowing stream were delivered using audio tracks (Orlick, 2005). Some videos shown in class included interviews with elite performers and youth talking about applying focusing strategies in their own lives, as well as a movie related to focusing through adversity.

Dynamic question-and-answer style group discussions were held during most classes where many students would share, ask questions and respond to each other and to the professor. Small group discussions with approximately six students per group were also used to encourage shared wisdom and collaborative learning. According to the professor's guidelines for the course, "collaborative learning includes sharing personal experiences, lessons learned and new insights gained from your experiences, performances and assignments" (Orlick, 2007, p. 2). Questions were often posed to all students in the classroom to encourage critical reflection and positive action for ongoing focus enhancement.

Focus Enhancement Project

Each student in the course was required to complete a course project on focus enhancement. The project required an action based component and a written component, both to be completed outside of class. Students were asked to attempt to enhance the quality and consistency of his or her focus in a personally relevant life context. Students had to keep a written or typed journal to monitor these attempts. The journal was intended to encourage them to record their actions, personal goals, personal growth, personal challenges, and to guide ongoing positive action and self-monitoring

of focus enhancement strategies. Orlick (2007) explained in the course outline that "In your Focused Excellence Project Journal you will log your personal journey aimed at improving the quality and consistency of your best focus in a performance domain that is relevant to you. You will include anything you act on to try to improve the positiveness and connectedness of your focus" (Orlick, p. 2). Any journal format was acceptable, including handwritten or electronic notes, and other creative sources such as poetry, drawings or photos were welcome. Students were expected to make entries in the journal on a regular basis, with a minimum of three entries per week.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the final class of the course all students were invited to participate in this research project by allowing their journal to be anonymously included for analysis. It was made clear to the students that consent forms and analysis would not proceed until after all final grades in the course were allocated in order to ensure academic grading was completely separate from the research initiative. Over half (64) of the 123 students gave consent to have their journals analyzed for research purposes. Journals were photocopied and each student name was removed and replaced with a pseudo name to maintain confidentiality.

Initially all 64 journals were read without structured analysis and initial impressions were simply noted (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). For the in-depth analysis, ten journals were randomly selected for inclusion. These journals ranged from 18 to 37 typed pages each, providing a total 268 pages of raw data which included personal stories, self-evaluation exercises and artistic presentations (e.g. photos or graphics used to convey certain experiences and personal reflections on their overall journey).

Using a line-by-line approach (VanManen, 1990) statements were identified according to what participants actually said and acted on to enhance their focus. Statements described focus enhancement experiences, strategies used by participants, perceived impacts of the intervention, and any unique situations (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Emerging themes were labelled in order to identify how participants progressed through the intervention (Smith & Sparkes, 2005).

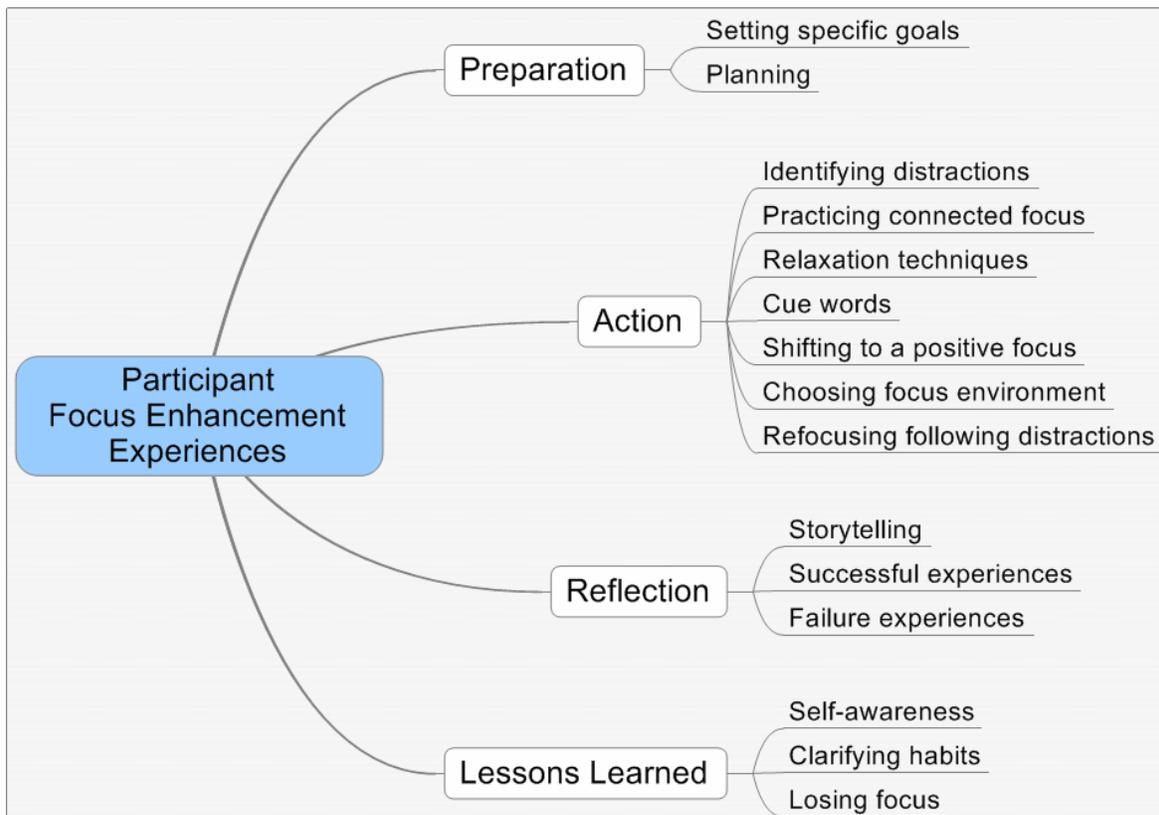
Results

The participants independently selected the life context in which they would enhance their focus. As a result a wide variety of life areas were addressed and a brief summary of each participant's context can be found in Appendix B. The most common life context was academics; participants were trying to enhance focus during lectures, studying, and

on ongoing assignments. Many sporting contexts were also described, including ringette, hockey, soccer, basketball, fitness classes, and weight training. A final context where focus enhancement strategies were applied related to relaxing more and gaining greater control over their thoughts. In addition to their chosen performance context, many participants were able to improve their focus in daily living (e.g. during conversations, falling asleep, improving stress control, and managing emotions such as anger).

Focus Enhancement Experience

Analysis of participant journals revealed four key components of effective focus enhancement; preparation, action, reflection, and continuing to act on focus lessons learned.



Preparation

Preparation to enhance focus began with students learning about high quality focus, reflecting on their own focus, and becoming familiar with focus enhancement strategies. This occurred in class and through Orlick's (2008) course materials. Participants reported undergoing a process of focus enhancement through the following strategies.

Setting specific goals.

Participants often began with bigger goals such as "I am going to try and incorporate positive energy into my life everyday because I believe it will guide me to a more confident me." (Elaine). They then narrowed down that larger goal into smaller parts by targeting a specific task and timeframe for action, such as "So today I figured out my 7 goals, tomorrow I will work on the plan" (Jennifer). Several participants did a task breakdown.

Instead of focusing on what little time I had, I decided to break down my time and set mini goals for myself that would minimize the stress. I decided to finish 2 of 3 parts for my project before I went to soccer. It was a goal that I knew that I could achieve if I just buckled down, stayed focused and stayed positive that I could actually accomplish the goal. It actually worked. (Hope)

Some participants used specific goals from the start while others applied this strategy only after several weeks. For example, during the third week of the course Pete became aware of his own need for more precise and definite goals which he then set.

I feel that the [course material] readings that I have done have given me a lot of valuable information that

I can use to help improve my focus and overall quality of life. Nevertheless, I have not narrowed the focus of what I want to improve. Today I will set myself specific goals that I want to use this new found knowledge for, and will give myself constant reminders of what I am trying to improve (Pete).

Participants began using smaller, specific goals to avoid becoming overwhelmed and to target their focus on what was within their control. "A problem that I experienced was that ... I became overwhelmed with work load and felt a sense of panic because there was so much work to be done and I was already behind" (Christine). When Christine was beginning to feel overwhelmed by her aspirations for academic success she avoided unnecessary distractions through specific goal setting.

Today I wrote down grades, learning objectives and other goals that I hope to achieve in terms of school work. I envisioned what I wanted in each of these areas for the remainder of the semester. I found that this approach gave me a sense of where I want to be and where I am, as well as goals that need to be achieved. This allowed me to improve my connected focus during class time, because I wanted to learn the material and achieve my learning objectives. I was also able to reconnect after losing focus because I was aware of what I needed to do.

This approach of breaking down tasks into manageable parts was referred to by several participants as taking things "one step at a time" (Christine). Nicole literally took her focus step-by-step when she counted each step that she took, counting up to ten and

then over again repeatedly, to make her way through a gruelling, long distance climb. Participants found a way to focus effectively in potentially overwhelming situations by breaking tasks into smaller sections and keeping their focus in the present moment.

Planning.

For many participants planning consisted of making basic plans for how they wanted to focus. Creating a written schedule for the upcoming week was helpful to four participants (Elaine, Christine, Julia, and Jennifer). Many participants planned for a specified period of time, and set specific goals for what to focus on.

Today I made a schedule and a list of goals for each day over the next week in order to pace myself for the upcoming midterms and projects. I found that this exercise relieved a great deal of stress because I was able to look at everything I need to do. I broke it down by day and it made it seem so much more manageable and bearable. Instead of feeling overwhelmed I now know what I need to do every day to keep up with my goals and to make things bearable. Without the stress I am now able to bring a much greater focus to my work in a much more positive and connected way. I am not worried about things anymore. I can just be connected to the material and positively focus on getting it done. It also helps to refocus because if I don't get my goal done one day, the work gets piled on another day and I really want to avoid that so it helps me refocus to stay on track. (Christine)

One participant created a schedule of daily tasks. “To try and keep focus I plan my days

and my entire week in advance. I make a list of what I would like to accomplish each day for the week and then execute it” (Elaine). Jennifer used course materials guide her weekly planning.

I completed the written reminders and answers to [self-evaluation questions provided in course material] and then wrote down my daily goals in my agenda to check it off when it's complete... I am going to put my reminders in a place I will see them every day, use my agenda to set goals, and do all of the above to reduce my stress. (Jennifer)

Planning for optimal focus was also used in very specific situations. For example, Julia, Pete, and Ken used specific routines such as planning to target specific heavy weights at the gym and even visualized specific focus targets in preparation for optimal focus during workouts. Finally, planning was also used to prepare for recovering from distractions. Matt prepared for enhanced focus by anticipating inevitable lapses in focus and creating an effective distraction control plan.

Tuesday: After class I reflected on the bus ride home about what Terry had discussed about distraction control and how we as students may benefit from making a distraction control plan. So I started to make a plan. My plan consisted of first, saying my reminder. If this was not working I would close my eyes and picture a positive performance. Lastly I would tell myself “I better refocus now because I won't want to have any regrets later.” These three things were incorporated because I believe that they will help me refocus on the task at hand, and also help me

regain confidence and be more positive. I closed my binder knowing now that I had made a plan, but kept in mind that changes and adjustments were bound to be made. (Matt)

and reading anything but textbooks. All of these sources are problematic in terms of obtaining and maintaining my best, most connected and most positive focus. (Christine).

Actions

Participants repeatedly took action aimed at enhancing the quality and duration of their focus. These actions included identifying distractions and creating opportunities to practice connected focus. They also took action using relaxation techniques and cue words, shifting to a positive focus and making choices to create an optimal focus environment. These actions were used to improve focus and to refocus more quickly following distractions.

Identifying distractions.

Identifying and dealing with barriers to effective focus were described by participants as first steps towards enhancing their focus. Christine wrote down her distractions when she was trying to focus on her schoolwork.

Anything that takes me away from my positive focus, my connected focus and my ability to regain my focus will be marked down as a distraction source and it will make me better able to realize these problems and correct them. This task proved to be slightly more alarming than I originally thought. Turns out that I have many more distractions than I thought! The main distractions that I identified during class were talking to friends, dazing off into space, and thinking about things I need to do and doing other school work. The distractions that I identified while doing school work were the television, the internet, the phone, friends, cleaning, cooking

Identifying relevant distractions allowed Christine to become more aware of her personal sources of distraction which helped her to take positive actions to eliminate or minimize their impact. Another way that participants improved focus was to become increasingly aware of the ability to control his or her focus. One example was the Focus Control Rating Scale (Orlick, 2008) that Christine used to bring more awareness to her actions. “Today I was much more aware of my focus and my ability to focus at different tasks throughout the day...I did manage to improve my focus throughout the day because I was more consciously aware of it”. The more aware participants became of unwanted distractions the better they were taking action to enhance focus.

Practicing Connected Focus.

Participants combined awareness of distractions or potential distractions with deliberate attempts to improve their focus. Simply practicing, with the goal of more connected focus and of focus enhancement, helped participants improve. “I practiced using positive focus and connected focus with my schoolwork today. This made the process of schoolwork much more enjoyable and more efficient” (Christine). The participants who made the greatest improvements in their focus were the ones who committed to focus in positive and connected ways on an ongoing basis.

Relaxation techniques.

Relaxation techniques were often used to enhance focus in study sessions, in exam writing, in sports and in stressful situations. Some participants used breathing as a target

to focus on during stressful moments. “I took slow deep breaths, listening to the sound of the air as it entered and left my body, while paying close attention to the feeling of my chest rising and falling” (Julia). One participant’s anxiety was rising during a study session; he used a breathing technique to manage his stress and refocus. “I thought to myself that this might be a good situation to do some of the relaxation and focus techniques that I have been working on throughout the semester” (Pete). On one occasion he took a break from studying to focus on breathing before returning to the task at hand.

The first thing that I did was to take 15 minutes to just lie down on my couch and focus on my breathing. I thought about my stomach expanding and relaxing with every breath. I thought about the air coming into and out of my body, and how with each breath [out] the stress began to exit out of my body. At the end of the 15 minutes I felt much more relaxed and had a more positive focus towards what I needed to get done.
(Pete)

Simply taking a break helped participants to relax and enhance their focus. Matt went to the dressing room when he was struggling during a hockey practice to shift his focus “I think this break helped me because I just needed some time away from the hectic practice. This made it a lot easier for me to focus [when I returned to the ice]”. During games he continued to improve his connected focus to the point where he could perform well physically and maintain a positive focus. “I was relaxed mentally so I wasn’t worrying and yet my body felt good and energized and ready to go”.

Many participants used relaxation and focusing strategies to calm the mind and body for sleep. Christine noticed a link between her trouble falling asleep and her “mind spinning.” Adam commented “My mind is always on the go, and many times at night I find it hard to release my day and fully relax”. He found that relaxing his body physically helped him to calm his mind. He focused on each body segment, trying to let it feel as relaxed as possible. Adam shared what he was doing with his father who also had difficulty falling asleep. “[My father] was very intrigued that this small yet very effective focusing task had the power to literally put me to sleep”. Julia had a similar experience.

After doing this [relaxation] for a few minutes I began to consciously relax every major muscle of my body. I began with my toes, legs, trunk, arms, fingers, neck, and finally head. This process was very relaxing ... [my] main focus was on calming feelings with minimal movement. This was helpful in bringing my mind to a peaceful state as opposed to my normal state where I am thinking about a million things at once.

Everyone who used focused relaxation strategies to help themselves fall asleep applied breathing techniques. They often focused on the sounds and feelings of air entering and leaving the lungs.

Cue words.

Almost all participants reported using cue words (or personal reminders) to initiate positive focused action that helped them connect with their best focus. Each participant’s cue word(s) had personal meaning and was directly related to their

target or focus goal. For instance, Julia wrote:

To keep a connected focus with my fitness goals, I came up with a written reminder to help me stay on task and push myself to my full potential. I have chosen to use the word “strength” to represent my desire to achieve my goal. The reason I feel this word is a good representation is that it signifies what I need both mentally and physically to achieve my goal, and it stands for exactly what I want to achieve in the end: strength. [As a constant reminder of her “strength” she]

- *Taped a printout of the word to my water bottle that I use daily*
- *Taped a printout to my bathroom mirror*
- *Changed my cellular greeting to read 'strength'*
- *Wrote strength on the inside cover of both my rough journal and agenda*
- *Changed my computer Screensaver to read 'strength'.*

Nicole drew lessons from a movie in class and used meaningful cue words to focus and refocus during personal challenges.

The "Touching the Void" movie we watched [in class] about the climbers really helped me this week, I found myself getting discouraged and feeling lost and thinking that I had an impossible task ahead of me, so I used the word “climb” to refocus myself....climb for that next obstacle, push through it, stop complaining and just climb past the next barrier. I found it to be bril-

liantly helpful because every time I thought of climbing I thought of [the movie characters] Simon and Joe and how they worked through what actually was impossible and came through it. It made me remember that what I had to do was not so bad. I kept using the word over and over again ... eventually I used it less frequently because I wasn't panicking as much.

Nicole found that the more she used cue words the better she performed. “I think I have learned a lot in the last two weeks about the importance of keeping a positive attitude and the different strategies that help make that work. Now when something bad happens I tell myself to “climb”. She took a lesson learned about her ability to focus and applied that action in other situations.

Shifting to a positive focus.

During course lectures and discussions Orlick emphasized the importance of focusing on the positives and shifting focus from negative to positive as needed. One method Orlick (2008, 2011) suggested for shifting to a more positive focus was to identify, embrace and appreciate simple highlights that are readily available in daily living. Several participants put this strategy into practice.

During yesterday's lecture, we learned to find a highlight in every aspect of the day. That is what I wrote as the “bottom line” lesson for the lecture. It is a marvelous point and I have started trying to apply it to many different contexts. Here are some of the highlights that I experienced today. During my morning lecture, I correctly answered a question that was posed by the professor. I am usually nervous when

I speak in front of a class, but I was proud that I overcame this fear. During my weight lifting session, I got a personal best in the squat. I was very happy about this accomplishment. (Ken)

Later Ken reported finding simple highlights in nature like watching the sun's rays come down and melt the snow. Looking for the positives helped Christine recover from receiving poor grades.

This activity [looking for the positives or highlights] improved my positive focus, my connected focus and my overall focus. As well, I found it was easier to refocus with a positive outlook than a negative one. One area that still needs work is realizing that I am thinking negatively and consciously deciding to stop doing it. I sometimes sulk for awhile before I decide to be positive. I will work on this tomorrow to reduce the turnover time!

Some participants combined relaxed breathing with a shift to a more positive or constructive focus. Virtually all participants at some point shifted from a negative to a more positive focus and this contributed to focus enhancement in general.

Choosing or creating a more distraction free environment.

Taking action to choose or create a more distraction free environment was a strategy used by some participants. Christine chose to physically move to a better space for her focus enhancement in some pursuits.

Yesterday I was successful in reducing a lot of my distractions just by changing locations and removing myself from an area of distractions

(i.e. my apartment). Today while I am in the library, I will use key words, the word "Here" to make myself refocus when I find myself dazing off into space and thinking about other things.

Choosing a more optimal environment was often applied during academic pursuits and at times with physical activity. Another useful approach was to create a better environment within existing conditions. Ken modified his study space to create a more optimal focus environment.

I turned off the music and signed out of the instant messaging program [on my computer]: these two things will only prevent me from connecting with what I am doing at the moment. I think that is really the key; to empty the mind of thoughts which are irrelevant to the task at hand. I will bring my notebook to my kitchen table and write the journals in that calm setting. I am alone in my house, so the kitchen will surely be a distraction-free zone.

Refocusing following distractions.

A significant part of the participants' focus enhancement experience was learning to manage their response to unwanted or unexpected distractions. The desired response to a distraction was usually to refocus on a positive or preferred area of focus as quickly as possible. Adam was chasing his dream of attending medical school when he received a notice of rejection. He was understandably upset and after a few hours of feeling negative he wanted to shift to a more positive focus. At first he was unsuccessful. He then made a list of all his successes over the years leading up to this moment. This action shifted his focus to his strengths and lifted

his spirits which allowed him to regain a more positive focus. He began to consider other options for his future studies and started to contact professors to gather more information. Shifting to a more positive focus empowered him to take specific positive actions which were within his control.

Some form of relaxation or relaxed breathing was often used in combination with a positive shift in focus. Hope wrote about relaxing to help her shift focus before an unexpected pop quiz in an academic context. When her professor passed out this unexpected quiz here are some of the thoughts that flashed through her mind.

I know that every mark and everything I do counts for my future. I could feel my anxiety level rising. I know myself, and I know that I cannot perform or do anything at the best of my ability when I am stressed. As I was looking at the quiz, I found myself just reading the question and not understanding it because I was panicking ... Then I decided to relax and after I finished my relaxation exercise, I decided that I would read each question one by one and just focus on each individual question. When I broke it down, and started to just have a totally connected focus on each question, I realized that I knew all the answers. Because of my relaxation exercises I was able to focus on the test and disregard the fact that it was a pop quiz. Today just made me an even stronger believer in this whole journal writing thing and that relaxation and focusing really will help me in achieving my goals. (Hope)

Cue words or personal reminders were often used by participants as a refocusing strategy. To draw on an example that was previously mentioned, Nicole regularly used her cue word “climb” to refocus. Adam illustrates how he did this in a conflict with his girlfriend.

When my girlfriend and I argue I usually stick with what I feel is right, and try to argue my side to exhaustion. Yesterday I used my focus skills to calm down during the argument and to hear her side. I told myself to “stop” and “think”. The “stop” thought made me stop all of my thought processes, and “think” allowed me to truly hear what she was trying to tell me. After I calmed down, I helped calm her down. We both took a few deep breaths and then were able to talk out the disagreement instead of arguing. By calming myself down (as well as her), instead of acting on pure emotion, we were able to resolve the conflict a lot quicker and effectively. This example demonstrated to me how I was able to override emotion, to help resolve a conflict. (Adam)

Two of the refocusing strategies taught in the classroom were called “umbalakiki” and “changing channels” (Orlick, 2008). With ‘umbalakiki’, the participant imagines that he or she is actually putting the negative or distracting thought into something concrete like a desk or a tree. Jennifer refocused during her ringette game by using umbalakiki. She symbolically placed anger into her ringette stick, refocused on playing the game and later scored. ‘Changing channels’ was designed to teach young people to take control of their own focus ‘channels’, as you would with a remote control for your television channels. You

simply push a button to change the channel from something undesirable to something more positive. One participant wrote about using changing channels in combination with relaxed breathing to shift focus while waiting for his girlfriend who was running behind schedule.

As I started to feel very impatient, I took a deep breath, knew that she was on her way, and just tried to relax. I realized that it was not the end of the world if we were a few minutes late for class, and decided to change channels.

Reflection

Participants were instructed to keep journals to record their ongoing experiences related to focus enhancement; therefore numerous personal reflections were described. All participants shared reflections throughout their journeys, primarily through storytelling and critical reflection after specific success and failure experiences. Constructive reflection often occurred when a participant took the time to think back to a specific effective or ineffective attempt to improve their focus and extract the lesson(s) learned. For example, Julia reflected on the how she had successfully taken focused action and actually improved her focus.

This project proved to help me stay focused on what was to be done ... unlike before when I was unmotivated and lacked direction ... I was on a strict schedule, I had less time to distract myself and made it to the gym without hesitation. It felt really good to know that I had planned on going to the gym and then actually made it there. This allowed me to see that the direction I take and decisions I make are governed by my own control and that only I can make

what I want to happen actually happen.

Story telling.

At times simply writing the story of an experience provided opportunities for participants to reflect in meaningful ways about their focus and their control of focus. After having a bad night and feeling discouraged, Elaine awoke the next day with a clear mind and applied her focus enhancement strategies at the gym and during her school day. Later on she was sitting outside enjoying gorgeous weather and was inspired to write about her turnaround.

*This beautiful day has lifted my spirits and motivated me to get down to business and finish my paper. I feel fantastic today and I just had to share that with someone. Nothing can beat this feeling at this moment and I have Terry [Orlick]'s guidelines [class content] and encouraging words to thank for it. It's amazing what sunshine can do for a person! Start fresh tomorrow.
(Elaine)*

Personal stories sometimes revealed even unpredictable personal challenges that occurred during the timeframe of this course. Near the end of the course, Elaine shared a moving story about how she coped with the potential death of a loved one by applying newly acquired skills.

This weekend, we were out grocery shopping when I received a phone call from my father telling me that my 91-year-old grandmother was in the hospital with several problems and they weren't sure if she was going to make it. I was devastated of course, but my boyfriend and his

family comforted me ... I continued with the task of grocery shopping ... I focused on the positives [like how fortunate I was to have had her in my life all these years] and told myself that she would pull through. Before this, I was agitated and started to get stressed out about the situation. We then went home and I made some calls to locate my parents and find out the situation. I finally got a hold of my parents and I was told that she had pulled through and could possibly go home that same night! After I hung up the phone, I stayed in my room and did a short breathing exercise to relax myself. It worked! I felt a sense of calm pass over me and I just kept thinking how thankful I was that I had been introduced to Terry's [applied course content for focus and life enhancement]. I had a relaxing, positive weekend during which I maintained a connected focus. (Elaine)

Learning from successful experiences.

One beneficial form of reflection occurred following successful focus experiences. For example, when a small or large goal was reached, it was very helpful for participants to write about this experience in their journal. Positive experiences became a valued asset, worthy of thought, reflection and recording in their journals.

After leaving the class lecture tonight, I felt happy, and at ease. I never once lost focus during the lecture, something that I struggle with in school. I don't know whether it was because of the amazing movie we watched (Touching the Void) or whether I was focusing on being connected, but I managed to not become distracted throughout the

whole lecture. So you can imagine the relief I felt [considering my struggle with my learning disability] when I realized after the lecture that I had maintained focus throughout the three hours (Elaine).

Lessons from successful experiences in one life area, such as academics were often transferred and applied to other unrelated contexts such as sport. Hope explained how this happened for her.

I was able to stay positive while playing in my game and when I got home I not only finished the third part to my project, but I also had time to write this journal. Positive thinking (and focusing) really does alter your own future. It's funny because it is such a simple concept, but when it is applied, it actually works.

Learning from failure experiences.

Success inspired reflection on what was working to enhance focus; however, failures provided a strong incentive to reflect upon the need to improve focus and perform differently. Pete realized at one point in this course that while many of his life areas would benefit from improved focus, he had not yet chosen a context to take action on his focus intentions.

I do not feel that my focus is at the level I want it to be. My mind is constantly racing with anything and everything ... from school work, practice times, and what am I going to eat for dinner ... all of these areas of my life seem to be consuming my thoughts during the day. I am unable to focus all of my energy and potential to one specific task at a time. Although I am having trouble

with this part of my mental training (living in the moment), I believe that I may have a reason for why I am having such difficulty. I do not feel that I have completed the first element of the wheel of excellence: commitment...I need to make my goals more specific, so that I will be able to achieve them.

Pete was realizing that if he wanted to change his focus to improve his performance and his life then he would have to commit to act on making those positive changes. Failure certainly presented opportunities for participants to find and focus on ways to avoid repeating those failures in the future.

Yesterday I didn't really plan out my day and found that I wasted a good portion of time when I could have been working out or doing some homework. Nevertheless, I decided to take yesterday as a learning experience on how I do not want the rest of my days to go. (Pete)

From academics to sports, participants identified specific opportunities to avoid or correct mistakes. Matt made this link from planning to the importance of controlling his focus in his hockey game.

Our game went into a shootout and I was chosen to be one of the shooters. The goalie I was facing was the best goalie in the league. I realized it was going to be hard to score. I started to worry about what others were going to say if I missed. The ref instructed me to go and I missed by a mile. This showed me that worrying about the outcome caused me to have a horrible shootout. From that point on I knew thinking about the final outcome was not something that

would help me boost my confidence in important times. The next time something like this occurs I will use my refocus plan and a previous confidence boosting moment to try to score.

Lessons Learned

Participants drew a variety of focus enhancement lessons from course material and from personal experiences related to focus enhancement. One important lesson for Ken was about being in the moment. “One lesson that has really stuck with me [from the course] is that of being fully connected to each experience... I believe it is a tremendous waste to be mentally absent during a great experience... I think that is really the key; to empty the mind of thoughts which are irrelevant to the task at hand”. For Jennifer the most important lesson learned was that with a quality focus, the quality of an experience changes. “I stayed focused on getting my work done, and found that the time went by a lot faster. I think that is the key ... focus fully on the task at hand and before you know it, you’re done” (Jennifer). The immense value of being fully connected and in the moment in all contexts was specifically mentioned by various participants in the study.

Self-awareness.

Gaining an enhanced awareness about their ability to direct and control their own focus was another huge lesson learned by the participants in this study. Statements towards the beginning of their journal, expressed their need to gain awareness of the ability to focus and to identify relevant focus enhancement targets. For example Christine wrote, “I need to be aware of my focus before I can do further activities to improve it”. The importance of self-awareness became evident when participants began identifying changes in the quality of

their focus. “My focus seems to be going up and down, but I know that it is normal at the start” (Elaine). After attempting to implement different strategies to enhance their focus participants reported additional lessons learned regarding self-awareness. “Even though I did not shift my focus this day to something more positive, it is something that I am aware of and will work towards” (Pete). When participants became more aware of a negative shift in their focus this permitted them to create an opportunity to do something concrete to improve their focus.

By being able to see the effects that my negative focus has on others and on myself, makes me realize that if I am able to 'change channels' and shift to a more positive focus then I will impact those around me in a more positive way. (Pete)

The importance of enhanced awareness was one of the main lessons learned through the focus enhancement experience.

Clarifying habits.

Participants extracted meaningful lessons about their focus by clarifying their habits related to best and less than best focus, interactions and performances. In some cases increased commitment to reflect upon and improve poor focusing habits came after failure.

Tonight I reflected on my focusing abilities of today. I realized that I have horrible focus. I was unable to maintain my focus for any length of time. As well, even when I managed to focus, I found that it was often not a positive focus or fully connected focus. I am easily distracted by any and all sources during classes and schoolwork. My longest attempt at

focusing was much less than 10 minutes. I realized that I need to improve my best focus, my positive focus and my fully connected focus in the face of distractions and unpleasant school work and classes. I will look into different methods of improving my focus to attempt in days to come. (Christine)

During the second week of the course Matt was identifying distractions to improve his focus in hockey. “I realized that the audience was probably one of my greatest distractions. I was always checking to see if any scouts were watching or any hot girls. This was clearly not what I should have been concentrating on”. He identified his distractions and took focused action steps to keep his focus inside the boards and on executing his desired role on the ice. Habits which centered on a negative self-focus, self-criticism, anxiety or worry about poor performances did not contribute to a positive focus and best performances. Choosing to focus on the positives instead of the negatives helped participants to focus on strengths and complete tasks successfully.

Losing focus.

Participant reflections led to lessons learned about the frequency with which they lost or abandoned their best focus. As they progressed individually through their focus enhancement experience, many participants realized the poor or inconsistent quality of their focus. Ken identified his habit of not focusing in classroom lectures. He clearly stated that simply recognizing his lack of focus (early in this course) stimulated his work to gain a better, more connected focus. One month after beginning his focus enhancement project Ken was continuing to improve his connected focus but was still not able to maintain his focus for a full 90 minute lecture.

I suppose I had a pretty good connection during this lecture but I have yet to sit through an entire lecture without spacing out for a period of time. However, I find I am generally becoming more focused as time goes by. I think that realizing I am unfocused was a tremendous first step. (Ken)

Becoming aware of a lack of positive or connected focus and recognizing the added value of enhancing focus was a powerful lesson learned by Ken and other participants.

One way I have noticed that I can check if I am connected is if I can recall what the professor was just talking about. If I am not focused, my thoughts wander and I will often lose track of what is being said. I have been using this simple test to make sure that I remain mentally present during the lectures.

Ongoing reflection on actions taken led to lessons learned and informed future efforts to enhance focus. In this manner, participants repeatedly cycled through the stages of preparation, action, reflection and lessons learned in their focus enhancement experiences.

Impact of the Experience

All participants reported improvements in the quality and duration of their focus over the 12-week intervention period. Their focus improvements included being able to attain and sustain a connected focus for a longer period of time, increased control over their focus, fewer distractions, less negative thinking and, a more positive focus overall. All participants also reported improvements in the quality of their daily living - including

improved stress control, more positive focus and increased confidence.

Increased focus quality and duration.

Participants reported learning how to reach and maintain a higher quality focus for a longer period of time. Pete, for example, improved his focus during study sessions. “I could see how much more focused I was on the work and how I was able to sustain that focus for long periods of time”. Participants learned or refined practical strategies to connect more fully with their current task or experience, relax as needed and use simple effective goal setting to enhance and sustain their focus.

Increased control of focus.

Participants reported experiencing an improvement in their ability to control their own focus over the course of this intervention. This appeared to be a fairly simple process for most participants—however this happened only when they decided or made a clear commitment to work on improving their own focus. Adam explained that “at the beginning of this course, I took a step back and began to look at what I could control and what I could not”. Adam then “surprised” himself with his own ability to shift focus to the positives in a situation that would normally have bothered him. “I was able to accomplish such a [positive] mental shift so simply”. Some participants took more time to begin to gain control of their focus but all participants, at some point, improved their control of focus. These results align with Wilson et al. (2006) who suggested that individuals should “learn to practice with a positive attitude and specified intention” (p.419).

Fewer distractions.

Participants reported having found ways to reduce the distractions in their lives by

removing themselves from distracting environments or not paying attention to potential distractions. For example, Jennifer chose to study away from her home environment. “I studied for a good amount of time, while being fully connected. I did this in the library where it is quiet and there is no MSN [online messaging program] and no distractions”. In a sporting context Matt made a decision to focus fully on the present task. He “eliminated all the external distractions” by keeping his focus on what he was doing and feeling at that moment rather than looking at the crowd or thinking about anything else. In several contexts, distractions remained but participants found ways to focus through distractions. Elaine commented. “I don't know whether it was because I was focusing on being connected, but [for the first time ever] I managed to not become distracted throughout the lecture”. The value to participants of having identified focus targets confirms previous research and applied work indicating the importance of using specific task relevant cues, or focus reminders, to direct focus towards productive thoughts, feelings and actions (Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Orlick, 2008, 2011; Wilson et al., 2006). Through focus planning or environmental adjustments, and the use of specific relevant focus reminders or cue words, participants experienced fewer distractions, more connected focus and overall positive improvements with their focus.

Fewer overwhelming thoughts.

Participants reported having fewer overwhelming or distracting thoughts overall. After completing a focused relaxation exercise Julia commented, “This was helpful in bringing my mind to a peaceful state as opposed to my normal state where I am thinking about a million things at once”. Previous research and applied

work had also supported the value of relaxation, relaxed breathing or clarity of mind to enhance focus (Bull et al., 1996; Gauron, 1984; Hester & Orlick, 2006; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008; Wilson, Peper & Schmid, 2006). By learning to make wise choices regarding what to focus on and how to achieve that focused connection, participants were better able to control, direct or sustain their focus.

Less negative thinking.

Participants reported experiencing an overall decrease in negative thinking and increase in positive thinking during their participation in this focus enhancement project. Matt wrote “Not once did I find myself worried or doubting myself as I made my way down the ice” (Matt). Jennifer recounted how she had her best focus by completely releasing all negative thoughts. “I just kind of let go of all my negativities” (Jennifer). One of the strongest impacts of the experience appears to have been an ability to focus on the more positive elements, opportunities or beneficial aspects of an experience. Elaine makes this point in her journal. “I am a more positive person and my life is less stressful now than before”.

Stress control in daily living.

During their 12-week journey to focus enhancement, participants described feeling less stressed and in some situations stress was gone altogether.

From the class lectures and the readings I have learned to 'let go' of the things which I cannot control [that really don't matter]. I have been using self talk occasionally, but the majority of my efforts have been simply due to dropping these issues [that I cannot control] mentally. I simply do not attend to them ... I tell myself that I cannot do anything

about this particular issue, and therefore there is no sense in thinking about it. (Adam)

Matt made a plan to focus on specific tasks in his life that were within his control. “Instantly I felt some of the stress go away because I was now not so confused as to what I was going to do”. The value of setting specific attainable goals was identified in previous research and applied work as a method of managing stress and sustaining focus during performance (Bull et al., 1996; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008). Christine commented that when she began to focus on what she could control she was able to reduce her stress. “The reduced stress level allows me to focus more positively and in a more connected manner” (Christine). Many participants decided not to be stressed and to shift their focus to more positive aspects of an experience. Adam described the impact of this course on his daily living.

I have noticed since I have been taking this class, that my anxiety attack episodes have decreased substantially. I have been able to stop them when I feel as though one is approaching. I have also noted that I have been less anxious over all, and that aspects of my life which were suffering (relationships & my health), are beginning to get back on track. (Adam)

Confidence and life enhancement.

Participants in this study wrote in their journals about a link between positive focus and confidence. Matt struggled to improve his focus in hockey. He eventually identified a lack of confidence in his own skills as a big part of the problem and took action to use positive thinking along with his focus enhancement strategies. For example, Matt

reminded himself to keep his legs moving while he was on a breakaway and focused on the positives which freed him to play much better. Christine gained confidence when she organized herself at the beginning of her day and decided to bring a quality focus to her pursuits.

This gave me more confidence in myself that I could complete what I needed to get done during the day, which provided me with a more positive focus throughout the day...It gave me a sense of "I can do this" and connected me with my focus and the material...As a result, I felt less stressed and disconnected ... and was able to improve my quality of focus for a longer period of time. (Christine)

When participants chose to draw upon their best focus and acted on that choice, it brought feelings of confidence and personal control to their pursuits. Choosing a preferred focus and acting on that choice helps you to achieve a fully connected focus and find quality in your experiences and in everyday life.

Conclusion

A focus enhancement intervention delivered within a 12 week university class resulted in positive improvements in students' focus in a variety of different contexts. It is strongly recommended that similar action-based course content be offered to students in a variety of educational contexts, for example, through relevant course work in university, college, junior and senior high school and elementary school. Focusing strategies can be readily adapted to the specific needs of any age group using the educational materials available online and in print (Orlick, 2011). It was apparent from this study that there was added value in the

students' use of personal journals to guide and monitor their progress. Even students who were not initially keen on journaling found it to be incredibly valuable and rewarding to strengthen their efforts to continue to enhance the quality, direction and duration of their focus. It may be beneficial to request a sample of each student's journal entries at several intervals during the course in order to provide supportive feedback along the way. Establishing small on-going interactive discussion groups, as we did in this study and as did Curry and Maniar (2004), provides yet another learning advantage. These groups can meet regularly during the course for peer collaboration and guidance

in journal writing and drawing lessons from each of the students' experiences. Students can truly benefit from reflecting upon their successes, failures and lessons learned related to their focus and life enhancement goals.

We hope this positive, action-centered approach to focus enhancement and the strategies that worked best for the participants in this study will be useful as a guide to other teachers, parents, performers, researchers and practitioners. Focus enhancement programs have great potential for generating very real and positive impacts on students and performers of all age levels and in all areas of their lives.

Appendix A

Class	Class Activities Overview
1	Introduction to the course, focus in high performance, personal capacity to control focus, examples and open questions.
2	Focus in extreme sport and student-defined extreme situations discussed, Video viewed
3	Discussion on the ability and strategies for shifting focus, achieving and maintaining positive focus, focusing exercises, video viewed (i.e. Touching the void)
4	Discussion on achieving the impossible, exercises on setting small goals, Student-selected articles from the Online Journal of Excellence openly discussed
5	Discussion related to positive thinking and negative thinking, effective focus strategies and journaling. Interview regarding high performance focus enhancement with astronaut Chris Hadfield.
6	Relaxation techniques presented (audio CD Orlick, 2005), Refocus strategies (e.g. cue words) were introduced, and individuals planned and in small groups gave peer-feedback.
7	Wheel of excellence introduced (Orlick, 2008), planning sheets, athlete panel video, focus project status discussed in small groups
8	Positive living skills for children introduced (see Orlick 2011), discussed relevance of focus enhancement for all ages and project status discussion.
9	Individual Reflection questions, discussion. (E.g. What have you learned about sustaining your positive focus? Your connected focus? What do you still want to change or improve with respect to your focus?)
10	Relaxation exercise using audio CDs (Orlick, 2005), Student-selected articles from the Online Journal of Excellence discussed in small groups.
11	Personal Focus Enhancement Project status discussion in small groups. Positive living skills for children video viewed, open discussion related to focus enhancement with children.
12	Final Reflection questions regarding maintaining personal ongoing learning with respect to quality and sustainability of focus, and long-term goal setting. Open discussion with Orlick, students shared overall experiences and impact of what they had learned.

Appendix B

Participant pseudo name	Context for Focus Enhancement Project (additional areas of application)
Jennifer	Academics & ringette (stress control, career preparation)
Ken	Academics & strength training (enhancing connection in daily living)
Adam	Daily living (social situations, relationship, weight training, academics)
Christine	Daily living (remaining in the present moment, focus to fall asleep)
Pete	Daily living (basketball coaching, relationship, weight training, academics)
Julia	Improve fitness (focus to fall asleep, focus on positive perspectives)
Matt	Hockey performance (confidence, focus on positive perspectives)
Nicole	Daily living (family frustrations, after suffering an arm injury)
Elaine	Academics & self-esteem (focus on positive perspectives)
Hope	Daily living (medical school dream, academics, positive perspectives)

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