

Embedding compassionate micro skills of communication in higher education: Implementation with psychology undergraduates

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Many students struggle with group-based assessments. The pedagogic approach of the 'compassionate micro skills of communication' (CMSC) aims to equip students with the skills necessary to work effectively in group settings. To this end, students studying on a core psychology module involving group-work, received structured CMSC learning in seminars. Following its implementation, analysis of data from four student and one staff focus groups, using thematic analysis, indicated support for the pedagogic approach. Four themes emerged: the use of CMSC for addressing unhelpful group behaviours; employing helpful group behaviours; enhancing inclusivity; and areas for CMSC improvement and roll out. Quantitative data collection is still on-going and will be reported elsewhere. However, our preliminary analysis of the qualitative data provides good support for utilising a CMSC pedagogic approach in Higher Education regarding both its efficacy and potential positive impact.

EVIDENCE is growing that focusing on the cultivation of compassion-based behaviours has important effects on mental states and well-being (Hofmann et al., 2011). Research demonstrates that compassion-focused interventions are effective in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Kirby et al., 2017). Recently, compassion-based initiatives have begun to be embraced within the UK educational system, with Maratos et al. (2019a, 2019b) demonstrating that utilising these approaches in educational settings may hold promise as a way of counteracting negative issues (e.g. stress, lack of group cohesion), thus positively contributing to wellbeing.

In universities and schools, the call for compassion training is set against growing concern with the consequences of the

increasingly self-focused competitive nature of education. While some degrees of competitiveness can be useful, individuals who are overdriven in competitiveness can become narcissistic and callous (P. Gilbert, 2017), while those who feel they are failing can become stressed, self-critical, anxious, depressed and generally mentally unwell (P. Gilbert, 2009, 2017). The role of compassion in Higher Education (HE) is explored by Gibbs (2017), in a range of contexts, where he demonstrates that the pedagogy of compassion can improve student emotional wellbeing and feelings of inclusion.

Pedagogic approach

T. Gilbert (2017) demonstrates the impact of implementing a compassionate micro skills of communication (CMSC) pedagogic

approach in HE, highlighting the benefits this brings to students involved. This is drawn out through focussing on CMSC within seminars in relation to group work and using micro-ethnography to help identify those small communicative behaviours that can enhance group work and cohesion. This approach helps students to identify what is happening during group discussions by focusing their attention towards who is, and is not, becoming engaged in conversation and why this might be. This approach also enables students to develop strategies to ensure everyone feels able to engage in group discussions and fosters a sense of support and belonging. T. Gilbert (2017) argues that this leads to a higher level of functioning for the group and brings psychological and social benefits to all students. To date, however, scientific evidence of the usefulness of the approach is relatively scarce.

Thus, the purpose of the present research was to assess the impact of implementing this pedagogic approach for students and staff. The pedagogic approach developed by T. Gilbert (2017) was further developed within the current research, an outline of which is provided below whereby seminar groups of 20–25 students were taught the five key areas of CMSC through a mixture of group discussion, presentations, handouts and video examples. The areas taught included: understanding compassion; preventing cliques; helpful group behaviours; unhelpful group behaviours; and coping strategies when under pressure to speak. Briefly, the pedagogic approach employed in the present research is summarised below.

Understanding compassion

Students are taught the concept of compassion using the simplified definition of ‘noticing distress or disadvantage in themselves or others and doing something about it’ (T. Gilbert, 2018, personal communication). Students learn that it is everyone’s responsibility to take a compassionate approach and ensure the group communi-

cates effectively. This allows everyone the opportunity to contribute and be heard. Taking personal responsibility is a key component of the CMSC approach, as it encourages self-reflection and self-monitoring, which can contribute to a more compassionate communication style.

Preventing cliques

Within each seminar of approximately 20–25 individuals, students engaged in small group discussions (4–5 students per group) and directed study activities. Each week students are directed by the tutor to work with a different group of 4–5 students to prevent cliques from forming, providing students with a wider social network and encouraging wider inclusion.

Helpful group behaviours

Students are taught to notice and develop helpful group behaviours such as: encouraging everyone to contribute to the discussion; active listening; and supportive body language (open posture, establishing eye contact, etc).

Unhelpful group behaviours

Students learn to notice unhelpful group behaviours in others and themselves through reflection. Importantly, the seminar tutor will highlight that it is the group’s responsibility to address this, not just the individual(s) exhibiting the unhelpful behaviour. Unhelpful behaviours might include: monopolising the discussion; development of an alpha pair (where two group members monopolise discussions); lack of eye contact with others; closed or dominant body language; not listening; not contributing, etc.

Coping strategies when under pressure to speak

Some students may experience shyness or social anxiety during group discussions. Here, other group members are taught to notice this and gently encourage contribution. At times group members may feel

under pressure when they do not feel ready to participate. In this situation students are taught strategies to move the conversation on by using phrases such as 'I'm not quite sure about this as I am still formulating my ideas, what do you think?'. Other group members are taught to recognise that this strategy has been employed, and act accordingly.

In summary, the CMSC approach taught during seminar discussion groups encourages students to reflect and become increasingly self-aware of their own communication style, as well as those of others. This includes equipping students with the skills to develop a more compassionate communication approach to other group members.

The case study reported here, of research in progress, outlines the application of these CMSC teaching methods in HE, alongside evaluation and a summary of findings to date.

Methodology

Pedagogic Approach Employed

The CMSC approach described in the introduction was implemented with 148 first-year undergraduate psychology students studying a core psychology module. The module was delivered weekly for 12 weeks via a one-hour whole group lecture and a two-hour seminar of approximately 20–25 students per group. The module included a group-based assessment and group work along with CMSC learning activities were embedded within the seminars and directed study activities, facilitating the development of CMSC skills generally and in support of this assessment.

Design, participants and procedure

The qualitative data reported below is analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and is part of a larger, mixed methods study. Quantitative data collection is ongoing and is not reported here.

All students enrolled on a core first year undergraduate psychology module ($N = 148$ students) were invited to participate in evaluation of the CMSC approach along with the staff teaching team. Sixteen students,

and all six members of staff responsible for delivering the CMSC approach participated in five focus groups (four with students, one with staff). The focus group discussions explored whether, through the development of CMSC, students were equipped with an improved ability to work effectively within group settings. Participation was voluntary and informed, and the focus groups were conducted by an independent member of the research team not involved in the module delivery.

The focus groups were audio-recorded, and the resulting data were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following guidance from Braun and Clarke (2013). Each transcript was read and reread individually, and important points highlighted. Once each transcript had been coded in this way, the resulting highlighted sections were brought together and patterns across the data were identified. Through this process, clustering similar ideas together from each of the transcripts, four main themes were identified. These are discussed in the following section.

Results

The four themes that were developed from the data are: Addressing unhelpful group behaviours; Employing helpful group behaviours; Enhancing inclusivity; and Areas for improvement and rollout. These are illustrated below with a sample of comments included to reflect the nature of each theme.

Theme 1: Addressing unhelpful group behaviours

One clear theme arising from both student and staff focused on addressing unhelpful group behaviours, particularly monopolising, both in terms of becoming more aware of one's own behaviour and addressing that of others:

I am always thinking about it ...even in normal conversations now I find that I don't want to be like overtaking the conversations or being too quiet. (Student)

Talking about the dominators ...I think it made the students recognise in themselves where they fit into one of those categories. (Staff)

They suddenly discovered they were a monopoliser or a shy person ...it helped them recognise and understand that more clearly. (Student)

Theme 2: Employing helpful group behaviours

A further theme, around the benefit of employing helpful group behaviours, also emerged:

I think the non-verbal skills were really useful to learn. (Student)

They might be used towards you...the eye contact... you make eye contact with people but to make sure like it's inclusive. (Student)

In one case, this was discussed in relation to the students doing group presentations in class with one particularly nervous student:

She said she would get up and do it ...I could see she was starting to tear up and another student came up to her and took the paper off her and read her part ...it was so kind and so nice ...she just sort of came in and saved the day and saved her ...it was lovely and thoughtful. (Staff)

There are people who are ...more dominant and there are quieter ones and it made them more aware of how to handle that. (Staff)

Theme 3: Enhancing inclusivity

In this theme students indicated that they felt more able to include shy students in group discussions:

Some of the students ...were really nervous about the mixing up different groups to start with ...now they actually look forward to the sessions because they felt they would be part of the group. (Staff)

If they are like sitting on the edge of the group ...it's okay ...you know being involved in the conversation, I just make sure I try not to cut them out. (Student)

An exchange student who didn't know anyone ...she goes into this module and sits with other people and doesn't feel like an outsider and she felt part of it. (Staff)

The shy people in my group had some benefit, I saw some real differences, every week. (Staff)

Theme 4: Areas for improvement and roll out

Staff commented that some of the reflective activities became a little repetitive as the same activity was included at the end of a number of seminars:

At the end of each seminar for a while there were a set of four questions that they had to discuss within the new group ...they got very bored of that very quickly ...they seemed fairly repetitive. (Staff)

However, aside from this, there was generally positive support for the approach with both students and staff, indicating that they would like to see the CMSC approach made available to all students on the course:

I don't know if it works just having it in the one module ...I was also teaching on (another) module ...some of the students in the first weeks mentioned the compassionate stuff ...so having that approach throughout. (Staff)

Anyone on the course will benefit from it ... it could be applied anywhere. (Student)

Conclusions

Initial analysis of the focus group data indicates positive support for the implementation of the CMSC approach within this specific HE population, providing support for the work of Gilbert, T. (2017) and Maratos et al., (2019a). A number of

themes emerged concerning the possibility of the CMSC approach to: improve ability to address unhelpful group behaviours; enhance helpful group behaviours; and increased inclusivity for all students. Support for the roll out of this approach more widely was provided by staff and student feedback, and steps are being taken to address this for the following academic year, as well as enhance some of the activities.

To sum up, the application of the CMCS in pedagogic practice demonstrated several benefits, including positive experiences of group work and increased group/social

cohesion. Whilst quantitative data collection and analysis is still on-going, this research highlights that utilising compassion-based approaches within HE promotes positive learning experiences, especially in group-work settings.

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