
This is the postprint version.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the *International journal for academic development* in 2006, available at:

http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13601440600924447

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Solution Focused Work in Individual Academic Development

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There is one account in the literature of the application of a solution focused approach to individual teaching development at university level (see Devlin, 2003). The solution focused approach is based on Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). The current paper elaborates on the existing account, further outlining and illustrating the techniques that make up the solution focused approach to academic development. The central tenets of SFBT-based academic development and the core components of solution focused work are articulated. Current research in this area is outlined.

Keywords: Academic development; Instructional consultation; Solution Focused Brief Therapy; Solution focused work

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This article outlines individual academic development work using a solution focused approach that is based on Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). SFBT, or solution focused work, is a type of therapy that is typically used in a counselling or clinical setting by practitioners to help clients make improvements to various aspects of their life and/or experience. However, as Devlin (2003) points out, despite borrowing SFBT from psychological literature and clinical practice and being based on the tenets of a type of therapy, it is important to note that solution focused academic development is an adaptation that does not consist of therapy or counselling.

Rationale for the Use of an SFBT-Based Approach in Individual Academic Development Work

There are a number of factors that together make up the rationale for the use of an SFBT-based approach in individual academic development work. These include the suitability of the approach for the academic context and population, the provision of a structured framework for individual consultation practice and the efficacy of SFBT. Each of these factors is discussed in detail below.

The Appropriateness of the Approach for the Higher Education Population and Context

SFBT is a constructivist approach in that it is based on the premise that clients create their own reality. Vinson and Griffin (1999) suggest that constructivism evokes a world view that honors differences and that a constructivist model of interaction, with what these authors describe as its non-pathologising assumptions and collaborative structure, is an appropriate choice for bright, high-functioning populations. Teaching academics are one such population.

In addition, the used of the SFBT-based approach allows recognition of the lecturer as ‘expert’ in their circumstances. Marsh and Roche (1994) found evidence in an Australian higher education teaching development context of the validity of targeting specific components of teaching effectiveness that the lecturer judged to be important. That is, rather than an academic developer or someone else judging or
deciding where a person needs help with their teaching, the individual teacher should judge, on the basis of reliable evidence, as well as an understanding of their own context, where their teaching needs to improve.

The Provision of a Structured Framework

The SFBT-based approach typically used in individual academic development work consists of a series of consultations between the academic developer and the lecturer. There are a number of possible models of consultation including four put forward by Rutt (1979, reported in Brinko, 1990), including the Product, Prescription, Collaborative/Process and Affiliative models. Each of these four models is characterised by its interactions between consultant and client. Product consultants supply products as solutions to diagnosed problems; Prescription consultants dispense advice on diagnosed problems; Collaborative/Process consultants act as partners in assisting clients to provide their own solutions to problems and Affiliative consultants focus on personal problems that impact on teaching and in that sense are similar to personal counsellors (Brinko, 1990). Note that all four models are based on the existence and persistence of a problem. Brinko (1991) added a fifth model – Confrontational – in which the consultant takes the role of a devil’s advocate and challenges the client. The solution focused model outlined in this paper outlines a model of consultation that is most closely associated with the Collaborative/Process model reported by Brinko (1990).

Brinko (1990) notes that individual teaching development is commonly used in universities but that many of those who carry it out are not certain about what constitutes effective practice. Elsewhere, she notes that, “We ...have no empirical evidence to differentiate between strategies and practices that make [individual] consultation successful and those that do not” (Brinko, 1991, p. 48).

Brinko (1990) adds that, “Most instructional consultants report that they are ‘self-taught’ and practice instructional consultation ‘by the seat of their pants’” (p. 65). In particular, argues Brinko (1993), what needs careful study within the practice of individual teaching development is “…the framework within which problems are approached, how problems are named…how… [the consultants] decide to frame a problem… [and] if and how they offer solutions…” (p. 588). The tenets and techniques of the SFBT-based approach to individual academic development work together provide a structured framework for individual teaching development consultation. This SFBT-based approach to development provides one definable method through which individual teaching development can be practiced and examined.

Evidence of the Efficacy of an SFBT-Based Approach

As Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) report, SFBT has grown in popularity and use throughout the world over the past twenty years. These authors report that there is much anecdotal evidence from practitioners and clients of successful outcomes and high satisfaction. Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) conducted a comprehensive review of the available SFBT outcome research to determine the level of empirical support for the effectiveness of SFBT. They reviewed fifteen controlled outcome studies of SFBT and report that five well-controlled studies showed positive outcomes. Specifically, four of these showed that SFBT is better than no treatment or standard institutional services in a range of contexts. The fifth found SFBT to be comparable to a known intervention. The ten remaining studies, while classified as moderately or poorly controlled and therefore of limited reliability, are all consistent with a hypothesis of the SFBT effectiveness. Although Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) caution that the fifteen studies did not allow a definitive conclusion, they conclude that the review indicates preliminary support for the efficacy of SFBT.

SFBT has been shown to be effective in a range of education contexts outside higher education (Ambrose, 1997; Murphy, 1996). An SFBT-based approach to individual teaching development has been successfully used in a trial with a senior lecturer of a large third year subject in an Australian university. In this trial, the approach resulted in evidence of positive change in teaching, suggesting the possibility of its successful applicability more widely (Devlin, 2003). However, the study is a single case study and an evidence-based evaluation of the approach or its potential could not, therefore, be made.

**Solution Focused Brief Therapy**

Based on Steenbarger (1992), Devlin (2003) suggests SFBT can be described as “…a conceptually planned approach where time limits are considered but the primary foci include the change process and the selection of interventions toward an intentional end” (p. 78). SFBT has been described as an approach that focuses on helping clients ‘construct solutions’ rather than ‘solve problems’ (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000).

The use of solution-based approach in individual university teaching development is primarily concerned not with problems in teaching and learning but instead with solutions. The primary focus is firmly on improvement. This is discussed further later in the paper. However, it must be acknowledged that although a solution-based approach is focused on solutions rather than problems, the latter are assumed to exist, in some form, in order for the former to be necessary. That is, although the approach described here is firmly oriented to solutions, individual academic development work accepts that these solutions are likely to be related to some teaching and/or learning deficit, dissatisfaction, issue or matter, that is, ‘problem’, in need of attention. A strictly SFBT approach makes little or no mention of problems but in the solution focused individual academic development work outlined here, the possibilities of both their existence, and their role as an impetus to find solutions, is noted.

**Central Tenets of SFBT and their Application in Individual Academic Development Work**

Based on the work of Ambrose (1997); Berg and Miller (1992); Davis and Osborn (2000) and Osborn (1996), Devlin (2003) has provided a concise synthesis of the major principles and assumptions of a solution focused approach to academic development. These are that:

1. The goal(s) of the development work, and strategies to be tried, are determined by the lecturer, based on his/her context, resources, strengths, and point of view.

   Put simply, the lecturer is regarded as the expert on what aspects of teaching need attention and what might constitute workable strategies within their particular circumstances. The developer’s role is to collaborate with the lecturer in determining those aspects and strategies, with the latter taking the lead.

2. Change and improvement are expected and consistently central and discussions are oriented to the present and future rather than to problems and/or the past.

Gingerich and Eisengart (2000) note that practitioners working with a solution focused method “…assume clients want to change, have the capacity to envision change, and are doing their best to make change happen” (p. 478).

However, a solution focused approach should not and does not deny the possibilities of valuable lessons from the past. The difference between this method and others that encourage reflection on past experience is that
the focus in solution focused reflections is firmly on aspects that worked, are beneficial and may be repeated in the present and/or future. Such solution focused reflection is employed to help lecturers focus on their past successes and work toward extracting elements of these for use in the present and future.

3. Interventions should be strategically and purposefully chosen and employed.

As Berg and Dolan (2001) put it, the three simple principles of SFBT related to this tenet can be summarised as:

1. If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.
2. If it worked once, do it again.
3. If it doesn’t work, don’t do it again. Do something different.

These three general SFBT principles above provide the basis of a solution-based approach to individual university teaching development. A number of core components operationalise these principles and the most frequently used of these are explained in the next section.

**Core Components of Solution Focused Individual Academic Development Work**

1. **Goal Setting**

Goals are central to an SFBT-based approach because they define the objectives of the work to be undertaken. As Berg and Dolan (2001) note, “SFBT is focused first on constructing goals for the client and second on developing ‘solutions’ or the means and ways of reaching those goals” (p. 41).

In solution focused individual teaching development, decisions about goals are made in the context of detailed, valid, reliable feedback from students about and self-reflection on teaching. Ideally, data would provided to a teacher in an easily digestible summary form and then teachers would then choose the area(s) in which they wish to focus improvement efforts.

A study by Marsh and Roche (1993) found evidence that individual teachers in a teaching improvement intervention group had significantly more improvement in the dimensions of a student evaluation questionnaire that they specifically targeted as areas they wished to improve than in other areas not targeted. As Marsh and Roche (1993) explain, “This finding…supports the importance of asking teachers to specifically target particular dimensions [of their teaching for improvement]. In this way, the intervention is individualized to the needs of the teacher and may provide teachers with a stronger commitment to improving their effectiveness in areas of particular relevance to them” (p. 247).

In keeping with the second tenet of SFBT that the lecturer ‘leads’ the process, lecturers are free to choose areas of teaching issues, matters, or ‘problems’, for attention. In contrast to other approaches, a solution focused approach allows that the areas of teaching chosen for attention can be, but do not have to be, those with what would traditionally be defined as ‘problem’ areas.

Equally, because the context in which teaching and learning takes place is so critical to interpreting and understanding feedback on teaching, it may be poor feedback on particular aspects of teaching is due to external influences over which an individual lecturer has no influence or may reflect an aspect of subject or course provision that cannot be changed. For these sorts of reasons, these areas may not be chosen by the lecturer as those in which to focus improvement efforts. Similarly, areas with positive feedback may be
chosen as areas to further improve ahead of those with less positive feedback because these areas have particular significance in the context of the subject in which they occur.

In the current author’s practice, agreed, recorded goals are used to direct individual development work. It is notable that most lecturers this author has worked with in a solution focused model return to their goals again and again to remind themselves of their objectives and to guide their choices about changes to make. From the developer’s point of view, in addition to providing a clear framework, the setting a limited number of goals also helps guard against overenthusiastic attempts to simultaneously address too many dimensions of teaching at once.

2. Searching For and Building on Pre-Session Change

Miller (1992) notes that a feature of SFBT is a focus on ‘pre-treatment change’. In the non-clinical university setting of individual academic development work, this can be termed pre-program or pre-session change. This element of SFBT was formally added during the early development of the SFBT approach when some of those using it noted a “high percentage” (Miller, 1992, p.8) of clients observed some type of change between the time they made the appointment and the time they turned up for the first session with the practitioner.

To determine whether pre-session change has occurred before a teaching development program of intervention commences, a key question is asked in the first meeting between developer and lecturer. This question is usually something like, ‘Many people notice that things change or seem different between the time they make the appointment and now. What have you noticed about your situation?’ (Martin, 2003; Miller, 1992). The response to this question often provides the basis of possible improvements or solutions. In the academic development context where student evaluation of teaching or other data on teaching might have been collected, this question becomes something like, ‘Many people notice that between the time they read the data on their teaching, and now, in relation to their teaching, things change or seem different. What have you noticed about your situation?’

In the current author’s experience, initial responses in an academic development context are often hesitant ‘well, maybe’ type responses that ultimately reveal that the lecturer has begun thinking about their teaching more carefully and/or in a different way. The solution focused developer embraces such change by acknowledging it and offering subtle compliments before teasing out what these changes in thinking might constitute and further building on these. For later sessions, between-session change can actually be facilitated through the practitioner asking the client to focus on their goals and observe “…between now and the time we [next] meet, so that you can report in detail, all the changes that take place…” (Miller, 1992, p. 7). A more specific version of this question to use in the academic development context is: ‘Between this meeting and the next, note all the things your students are doing that you would like to see them continue to do’. Note the subtle focus on students and their learning.

Later sessions, by which time goals have been confirmed and strategies chosen and perhaps even trialled, might begin with a question like, ‘What’s better about your teaching, even a little bit?’ or if a particular lecturer is at that stage sufficiently oriented to student learning, ‘What’s better about your students’ learning, even a little bit?’. These sorts of questions are “…designed to elicit some gain the client has made between … [sessions]” (Berg and Dolan, 2001, p. 14). If the lecturer reports that there has been positive change between sessions, this can be built upon as a further possible solution.
One of the limitations of the search for pre-session change is the likelihood of socially desirable responses. That is, some participants may feel inclined or perhaps even obligated to try to please the academic developer by providing the sort of response(s) the participant perceives the developer may be seeking. In a sense, such inclination is exactly what this component of SFBT is seeking to evoke, in that the solution focused academic developer will be actively looking for evidence of positive change on which to build further. On the other hand, if the reports of improvement from the participants are not genuine, this could have negative repercussions for the development work.

3. Searching for Solutions

3.1 Focusing on success. SFBT-based work is focused on finding and implementing so-called ‘solutions’. One technique used to identify solutions is focusing on success, which typically presents as clients recognising their own progress (Miller, 1992).

In individual academic development work, a focus on success is achieved through a range of strategies. Clearly, focusing and building on pre- and between-session change, as explained above, is one. Another is to specifically draw each lecturer’s attention to the areas of teaching in which feedback from students and elsewhere is very positive. Another more subtle strategy is to talk about ‘further enhancing or improving’ teaching, or ‘building on your considerable teaching strengths’ rather than ‘improving teaching’.

3.2 Using ‘Solution Banks’. Solution Banks have been successfully used in many SFBT-based projects outside higher education. A Solution Bank is a collection of possible solutions submitted to a central depository for shared use on a common topic or issue (Berg and Dolan, 2001). Examples of what might be termed a solution bank that are currently successfully employed within Australian higher education are some of the Australian University Teaching Committee (AUTC) projects.

Australian University Teaching Committee (AUTC) projects. The AUTC was established in 2000 by the Australian federal government with the aim of promoting quality and excellence in Australian university teaching and learning. Among other activities, the AUTC identified emerging teaching and learning issues and awarded grants to projects that identified and supported effective methods of teaching and learning (AUTC, 2005). Successful projects have typically involved the collation and dissemination of advice and resources on a particular aspect of university teaching and learning. Projects often included good practice directories where details of exemplary work in university teaching and learning and the contact details of staff undertaking such work were made available and accessible in a central database. One example of this type of AUTC project in current use is the Assessing Student Learning project (James, McInnis and Devlin, 2002). The functions of the AUTC have recently been taken over by the national Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching, which has already begun the process of funding projects of a similar nature to the AUTC projects described here.

The ASSEQ booklets. On a smaller and more specifically individual teaching scale, there are many ‘solution banks’ of teaching and learning ideas and strategies. One of these banks contains the ‘Teaching Packets’, which consist of a set of booklets adapted by Marsh and Roche (1994) from American research by Wilson (1986). Each booklet contains teaching and learning advice relevant to each of the nine dimensions of teaching identified by the Australian Students Evaluation of Educational Quality (ASEEQ) questionnaire. The ASEEQ is used in a number of Australian and overseas universities both as a measure of teaching and as a diagnostic tool for the purposes of identifying teaching strengths and weaknesses. There is a booklet on each of Learning/Academic Value; Lecturer Enthusiasm; Organisation/Clarity; Group Interaction; Individual

Rapport; Breadth of Coverage; Examinations/Grading; Assignments/Reading and Workload/Difficulty dimensions of the ASEEQ. The advice in each booklet is a combination of Wilson’s (1986) research, feedback on Wilson’s (1986) advice gathered by Marsh and Roche (1993) and the collation of additional and modified strategies from award winning Australian university teachers (see Marsh and Roche, 1994, for further information). The Teaching Packets are currently in use at the University of Western Sydney in Australia.

In solution focused individual development work in a university where the ASEEQ is employed, a copy of the booklets relevant to each lecturer’s goals are provided to him or her as a source of potential ideas and strategies for improving teaching in the chosen areas. A solution bank can also include any relevant resources and materials with ideas, suggestions and readings commonly used in academic development work.

3.3 Using scaling questions. Another method used to focus on successes in SFBT work is the use of scaling questions. Using the goals specified by the lecturer, as explained earlier in the paper, scaling questions involve asking the lecturer to place a numerical value on a number line of progress toward achieving a particular goal. For example, in an academic development context, a lecturer could be asked a question like, ‘On a scale of 1-10, with 10 meaning that you are teaching your students very well and 1 meaning you are just starting to teach them well, where would you put yourself right now?’

Once they have given a response, ‘Y’ to the question above, a lecturer would then typically be asked, ‘What sort of score might you have given yourself when you first started teaching?’ Their response here, ‘X’, is then used in the follow up question: ‘How have you got yourself from an X to a Y?’ The explanations a lecturer gives are then noted and where appropriate, given back to him or her as a reminder of their success as discussed in section 3.1 on focusing on success. The lecturer’s responses are also a source of potential solutions for any current issues.

Martin (2003) notes that the numerical value of the answer given by the client to the scaling question is irrelevant to the overall goal of positive improvement. If, for example, in response to the question, ‘On a scale of 1-10, with 10 meaning that you are teaching your students very well and 1 meaning you are just starting to teach them well, where would you put yourself right now?’ a lecturer replied, “Minus one-hundred-and-fifty-two”, the academic developer would simply ask, ‘What sort of score might you have given yourself when you first started teaching?’. A lecturer with limited teaching experience might reply with something like, “Minus one thousand”. The next question from the developer is then, simply, ‘How have you got yourself from minus one thousand to minus one-hundred and fifty-two?’ The numerical value of the answer is not the focus – the positive change that is assumed and expected remains at the core of the conversation.

Berg and Dolan (2001) explain the usefulness of scaling questions as encapsulated by the fact that numbers appear more neutral than words:

“Numbers are flexible and expandable. You can move up and down a numerical scale...Words are not as flexible – in most languages a word stands for only one or two concepts. Thus, we find the scaling question the most versatile and useful tool...When a client indicates a number, say 5, on the scale, we assume that he or she means somewhere in the middle, but we really don’t know what the number means to this particular person. Only the client knows what the meaning of 5 holds for him or her. The beauty of the
Scaling helps clients measure their own sense of progress. As Berg and Dolan (2001) note, the “…use of numbers seems to trigger some cognitive ability to calmly observe or assess one’s own / situation and without responding emotionally to events … [or] concepts …” (pp. 69/70).

4. The use of homework. In SFBT, setting ‘homework’ for the client is also described as setting a task to undertake after the session in which it is set is complete (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). The setting of homework or a task occurs toward the end of a session. Berg and Dolan (2001) suggest the practitioner should first summarise anything from the discussion related to “…competence, successes, positive intentions and [where appropriate] how the client overcame the odds against making it” (p. 14). Then, the practitioner should ask the client to undertake a task between sessions that is related to their goals. Early in the process, the task may even be used to help further define and/or refine goals. For example, Devlin (2003) reports giving to a lecturer the task of considering between sessions what changes in student learning behaviour he would like to see. A variation on this task might be to make this request of a lecturer, ‘Between this and the next session, notice any aspects of your students’ in-class behaviour that you would like to see continue’ or ‘Observe what happens between sessions with your students that you want to see continue to happen’. In the current author’s experience, these tasks are generally very eagerly received and undertaken by lecturers participating voluntarily in individual academic development.

A Solution Focused Approach to Individual Development

A solution focused approach to individual academic development should incorporate the tenets of SFBT and include the components outlined above. While all the components are important, it is not necessary to ensure every one listed here is employed every time a meeting between a developer and a lecturer occurs. In addition, there are other components that are used in solution focused academic development, but, due to space restrictions, are not discussed here.

Recommendations for Further Research

Does this approach to individual academic development work? On the basis of her single case study, Devlin (2003) recommends the application of a solution focused teaching development approach to larger numbers of teaching staff as well as a robust evaluation based on a number of teaching and learning outcome indicators. The author of the current paper is currently undertaking a research project to examine the impacts on the teaching of university lecturers (n=16) and on their students of solution focused individual consultation. The research employs a pretest-posttest control group intervention design where participants have been randomly assigned to either the intervention (n=9) or control (n=7) group. Intervention group participants receive detailed written feedback on their teaching, access to a solution bank and a series of solution-based consultation sessions while control group participants receive only the detailed written feedback and an invitation to access the solution bank.

The impacts of the solution-based intervention on lecturers’ ability to set and reach teaching related goals, their teaching skills and practices and their focus on students and learning as well as on student learning will be examined. Preliminary results are expected to be available in late 2006. It is hoped that this examination
will provide an evidence-based evaluation of the efficacy of a solution focused approach to academic development.

**Acknowledgements**
The author would like to thank Associate Professor Gabrielle Baldwin for her review of an earlier version of this paper and for her helpful suggestions.

**Notes on Contributors** Marcia Devlin is a psychologist, a freelance higher education and an honorary fellow of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. Her research, consultancy work and publications focus on higher education teaching, learning, evaluation and quality.

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