Strengths-Based Educating: A Concrete Way to Bring Out the Best in Students—and Yourself

The Confessions of an Educator Who Got It Right—Finally!

by Edward "Chip" Anderson

I was wrong!

For nearly half my professional career, I was wrong about how to help students achieve. I adopted the wrong focus, made inaccurate assumptions, used faulty logic, and came to the wrong conclusions about how to increase student achievement.

During almost thirty-six years as a college administrator and instructor, I designed programs and services, taught classes, and conducted workshops with one purpose in mind: to help students gain maximum benefits from college and continue learning and achieving long after they finished school. But looking back, I see that for the first fifteen years, despite my best intentions, I used the wrong approach. During those years I did invest myself in students, express my care and concern for them as people, and encourage them. But although a high percentage of my students persisted in and graduated from the programs in which I worked, they seldom became top achievers, and few achieved to levels of excellence.

Here is where and how I went wrong: I read the research reports. The results from almost every study showed that students who had the best academic preparation earned the highest grades and had the highest graduation rates, and students who had the weakest academic preparation earned the lowest grades and had the lowest graduation rates. Armed with that information, I began designing procedures to identify the least-prepared students so that we could build programs and services

that would help more students achieve. I assumed that students needed certain preparation levels in order to achieve; that if students met or exceeded those levels, everything would take care of itself—that is, if students were prepared and met their professors' expectations, then the normal courses of study and interactions with faculty would be sufficient to help students develop and achieve.

I began to see two problems with my assumptions: 1) many students lack the expected level of preparation and 2) the whole issue of preparation is complex because students require many types of preparation in order to achieve.

After interviewing hundreds of college students who were experiencing difficulties, dropping out, or flunking out, I came to believe that the preparation students needed included three broad areas: academic skills, background knowledge, and self-management skills. Within each area, instructors expected several specific types of skills and knowledge.

Assuming that certain skills and knowledge were essential to student success, I organized diagnostic testing and assessment procedures to determine how well each student was prepared in selected areas. Diagnostic and assessment areas included reading speed and comprehension, vocabulary level, knowledge of mathematical concepts and problem-solving, knowledge of grammar and writing skills, knowledge and problem solving in chemistry and physics, knowledge of study skills and study attitudes, and time and stress management. Using a combination of standardized tests, institutionally developed instruments, and interview procedures, I tried to get a clear picture of whether each student was prepared or not.

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In fact, I was very much influenced by what I refer to as the deficit-remediation educational model, which has been predominant in education for decades. Programs and services based on the model are dedicated to "fixing" the student by first diagnosing student needs, problems, ignorance, concerns, defects, and deficits. Those who use the deficit-remediation model must design classes, workshops, programs, and services to help students improve in areas for which they are underprepared. Based on the diagnosis, participation in remedial programs and services is often required. Students are usually prevented from pursuing other areas of study and from pursuing their interests until their deficits have been removed and their "problems" have been overcome.

Using that approach, students are usually told that they must overcome their deficiencies by a specific time. If not, students are usually dismissed or told that they aren't "college material."

Mea culpa! I designed and implemented educational programs and services based on that model for almost fifteen years, and with only the best of intentions. In retrospect, it is clear to me that I was actually interfering with students becoming top achievers.

The Conference That Changed My Life

In the winter of 1978, I attended a conference on college student retention sponsored by American College Testing (ACT), which brought together some of the best researchers and practitioners in the field. The conference coordinators were Lee Noel and Randi Levitz, who later founded Noel-Levitz, Inc., the largest consulting organization in college student recruitment and retention.

Noel and Levitz' presentations explained why nearly half the students who enter college drop out or flunk out. They presented research findings and described some of the most effective programs and services designed to help more students persist to graduation. Another presenter at the conference was Robert Cope, the co-author of *Revolving College Doors.*[1] He presented the best theory and research available about the causes of student persistence and attrition.

The combination of presentations by Noel, Levitz, and Cope forced me into a radically new conclusion about student success in college: more students leave because of disillusionment, discouragement, or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by the school administration.

That conclusion was a revelation for me. It meant that I had been wrong in my logic and wrong in the way I designed programs and services. Before the conference, I had concluded that students left college because they lacked certain skills, knowledge, and abilities. All the work I had done was based on that false premise. I was eventually forced to an even more devastating conclusion: the deficit-based remediation programming I had used actually *prevented* students from becoming top achievers.

I feel bad about what I did unwittingly: I hindered students from reaching new levels of excellence. But I wasn't alone. The deficit-based remediation approach was widely embraced by educators—and, unfortunately, it remains the prevalent approach. Although most educators claim to identify not only their students' weaknesses but also their talents and strengths, in practice most focus almost solely on the weaknesses. As a consequence, many students become demoralized and disillusioned, which severely impairs the very motivation that I now believe to be the most important factor in student learning and achievement.

Donald O. Clifton

At the same conference I met Donald O. Clifton, the man I feel honored to have known and collaborated with in writing *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*.[2] Dr. Clifton was introduced as a former professor at the University of Nebraska and recipient of the state's Most Outstanding Educator award. He had gone on to form a company called Selection Research, which helped companies select employees through studying the "best of the best" in particular roles and positions. Selection Research was extremely successful, and as a result The Gallup Organization, well-known for management consulting, training, and polling, named him as its chairman and later that of the Gallup International Research and Education Center.

I will never forget how Dr. Clifton slowly walked to the front of the stage, turned to the audience, and immediately took command. His presentation drove home a key point: to *produce* excellence, you must *study* excellence. The point hit me hard. Once again, I had been wrong! In my efforts to help students persist and achieve, I had been studying dropouts. I should have been studying the top achievers. It had seemed reasonable that in order to increase student persistence, I needed to study why students were leaving school and flunking out. Likewise, it had seemed rea-

sonable that in order to improve student achievement, I needed to study why people didn't achieve. Therefore, I had spent endless hours interviewing dropouts and students who were underachieving.

It had never occurred to me that I might be studying the wrong students to produce the best insights on how to help students achieve levels of excellence. After the conference, I began reading and trying to understand what made top achievers tick. Time and time again, I found that my assumptions about the differences between top achievers and low achievers were inaccurate. For example, I had always assumed that top achievers set high goals, and low achievers set low goals. But research indicates that top achievers tend to set goals slightly above their current level of performance, whereas low achievers often set almost daunting goals.

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The combination of reading books and articles, sitting in on classes, attending workshops, and consulting with scholars in the field reinforced Don's contention that if you want to produce excellence, you have to study excellence. His approach had produced many successes in developing business leaders, but I wanted to use it to produce success in teaching university students. I borrowed from Don's approach and "studied excellence"—specifically, what he had done himself to develop his approach. Then I approached him personally and asked him to collaborate with me in extending his approach to university teaching. The upshot of the collaboration was the systematic application of Don's assessment instrument, the Clifton StrengthsFinder, to university students, interpreted in the context of the StrengthsQuest program, which we co-authored.

StrengthsQuest is designed for the student. After explaining the theory underlying the strengths-based approach to learning, growth, and development, the text guides the student through completing and interpreting the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Armed with an understanding of the results of the StrengthsFinder, the student moves through their implications for academics, relationships, and careers. The book emphasizes understanding one's own strengths through understanding the different strengths that others bring.

Even standing alone, the StrengthsQuest book is comprehensive; understood as what it really is—a portal to a Web-based complex of information, ideas, and forums—the book takes on the aspect of a set of encyclopedias. However, like any viable theory, the theory underlying

strengths-based learning, growth, and development can be conveyed in relatively few words. I have attempted to do so here.

The Key Observation

Here is the most important insight I have gained from investigating excellence among college students: *Top achievers aren't all alike.* There are major variations in how they approach learning and studying. Some seem to learn best in isolation; others learn best in social settings. Some learn best through group discussions; others learn best from self-testing and repetition. There isn't any one-size-fits-all set of learning and study techniques. Top achievers capitalize on personal uniqueness as they learn.

Essentially, top achievers build their academic and personal lives, and later their careers, on their talents. They develop talents into strengths and apply those strengths, and they manage their weaknesses. It is the approach that Don Clifton always advocated, and its effectiveness is supported by decades of research by The Gallup Organization.

Talent: The Beginning of Strength

What is a strength? That's a good question, but a strength begins with a talent, so let's start there. A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Many talents exist naturally within you, each of them quite specific. They are among the most real and authentic aspects of your personhood. Your specific set of talents is a major part of what makes you a unique person, and that uniqueness holds great value for you and those around you. Your talents work in various combinations each time you do something very well, in your own unique way.

There is a direct connection between your talents and your achievements. Your talents empower you. They enable you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential. That is why it is so important for you to know, understand, and value your talents. A talent represents a capacity to *do* something. In fact, when you are able to do something very well, you can be sure that at least one of your talents is involved. Just think about all the things you do very well. You'll realize that you have many talents!

Not only do talents help you do something well once; they help you do it well over and over. Because talents are naturally recurring patterns, they are autonomic, like breathing, so they repeatedly help you achieve. And that's not all. Each of your many talents can enable you to do more than one thing very well. I'm not saying that each of your talents enables you to do *everything* well: just that each of your talents can be applied to multiple areas of achievement.

The great value in your talents is not merely that they help you achieve, but that they help you achieve *at levels of excellence.* Your greatest talents are inextricably linked to your top achievements and to what you do best. Your talents make you exceptional. Therefore, coming to know, understand, and value your talents is directly linked to achieving in classes, in careers, and throughout life.

Talent versus Other Concepts of Ability

The concept of talent is specific in terms of the quality it describes and the actions that various types of talent help a person to perform very well. Traditional concepts and measures of ability (for example, IQ and aptitude testing) are more global and are not designed to explain what a person can specifically do. The concept of talent also goes beyond the limits of traditional concepts of academic abilities (for example, in the areas of reading, math, and composition) to address the qualities that help a person achieve in all aspects of life.

Themes of Talent

What is a theme? Essentially, a theme is a group of similar talents. The thirty-four most widespread talent themes are measured by the Clifton StrengthsFinder, and it is upon the identification and development of a participant's five dominant themes—the Signature Themes—that StrengthsQuest is based.

What Is a Strength?

A strength is *the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.* As a result of studying top achievers for more than three decades, The Gallup Organization has identified more than 400 different strengths.

Talents are like "diamonds in the rough"; strengths are like diamonds that show brilliance after careful cutting and polishing. Just as finished diamonds start as diamonds in the rough, strengths start as talents. And just as rough diamonds are naturally found in the earth, talents are naturally found within you. But whereas diamonds are refined with blades and polishing wheels, strengths are produced when talents are refined with knowledge and skill.

Unlike talent, which must naturally exist within you, skills and knowledge can be acquired. Skills are the abilities to perform the specific steps of an activity. Knowledge consists of facts and lessons learned. Many of the skills and much of the knowledge used to refine a talent into a strength come through experience—sometimes a great deal of it. Many of the most technical skills and knowledge are developed by

"book learning"—the academic areas of high school, college, technical school, and training classes.

When you have refined a talent to the point at which you can provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity, you have a strength. And in applying and even further developing your strengths, you move closer and closer to fulfilling your potential as an individual. Each person has a unique and profound set of talents and strengths that are developed and used to different degrees. That combination of talents and strengths makes each person like no other.

Each person defines success for himself, but achieving success—in a word, "excellence"—always results from fully developing and applying strengths. Some roles require several strengths, all working together, to produce excellence. You probably have already developed some strengths, and you certainly will have plenty of opportunity to develop more strengths throughout your lifetime.

What Do Strengths Produce?

Achievements will naturally follow your development and use of strengths. But there is also a great sense of personal satisfaction that results from knowing that you are becoming more and more the person you have the potential to be. In a sense, the development and application of strengths generate a feeling that you are fulfilling your personal destiny. That can produce enormous satisfaction and enhance the quality of your life.

Although the experiences of individual people differ tremendously, most report that it is a rewarding experience to be living fully in tune with their natural talents, building and using their strengths. Almost everyone reports increased confidence and optimism in discovering, affirming, and celebrating personal talents. Many report "coming alive" or even feeling joy as they develop and apply strengths. Descriptions of the exact inner experiences may differ, but nearly everyone who develops and uses strengths reports a sense of positive and pleasant psychological reward.

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One Thing in Common

Through more than 2 million in-depth interviews with people from all walks of life, The Gallup Organization has made a finding that is simple but profound: top achievers in virtually every profession, career, and field all build their lives upon their talents. That forms the heart of the

strengths-based approach to leadership, teaching, and learning. Here is what Gallup has learned about top achievers:

1. *Top achievers fully recognize their talents and develop them into strengths.* In contrast, underachievers, the merely average, and even above-average achievers often fail to recognize their talents and develop them into strengths. But the best achievers are certain to do so.
2. *Top achievers apply their strengths in roles that best suit them.* Clearly, to achieve one must apply his abilities, and many do so to some level of success. But the best apply their strengths and do so in roles that are best suited to those strengths. The ability to achieve with excellence in one area is not proof of the ability to perform equally well in another area. A proper fit between an individual's strengths and the task at hand is essential.
3. *Top achievers invent ways to apply their strengths to their achievement tasks.* Every role, position, and career entails a group of tasks that must be completed, and quite often the person who performs them must consciously seek, even invent, ways to apply his or her strengths to that end—even when one's role is well suited to his strengths.

In other words, top achievers fully develop whatever talents they happen to possess and apply the resulting strengths in a way that positively impacts their role or the task at hand.

Strengths-Based Teaching, Learning, and Leadership: K–12

As described earlier, the seeds of potential greatness—a person's talents—already exist in the person. Therefore, a strengths quest—a quest to achieve excellence and become all one can be through individual natural talents—is really a quest to discover, develop, and apply what one truly is.

If you apply that thinking to the challenge facing educators, you will see a simple but profound opportunity in shifting from deficit-reduction teaching to strengths-based teaching. Strengths-based teaching harnesses student energy in a way that deficit-reduction teaching cannot, and common sense says that a student who is working with the teacher will accomplish more than a student who is not.

The strengths quest—or quest for strengths—begins as students look within themselves to recognize their own natural talents. The quest continues as they develop their talents into strengths—abilities to provide consistent, near-perfect performances in specific activities. As they

do so, their self-identities and personal values should become clearer, and as a result, they will likely become more confident, optimistic, and focused. As they achieve through their strengths, they will likely aspire to—and achieve—higher goals.

The Gallup Organization's research on excellence goes back three decades; the Hodges and Harter piece in this issue provides an overview. Applying strengths-based thinking to education, however, goes back only a few years, and so far the focus has been on higher education. Extension to K–12 education is just now beginning. The companion essays in this issue report the earliest results of that extension. Those results are, of necessity, anecdotal; it will be awhile before the objective effects of strength-based teaching can be measured.

You have read my description of the philosophy of strengths-based teaching, and I hope you found it exciting. If you did, you will find the companion essays, all written by practicing educators, even more exciting, for they describe how strengths-based teaching is being applied in the K–12 classroom and the remarkable results that are being achieved.

Although just a few years old, StrengthsQuest is a complete turnkey tool for implementing strengths-based education. However, applying StrengthsQuest to K–12 education certainly will become more textured and sophisticated as our experience grows. I hope that after reading the companion essays, you will be inspired to be part of that growth.

Notes

1. Cope, Robert, and William Hannah, *Revolving College Doors* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975).
2. Clifton, Donald O., and Edward "Chip" Anderson, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: The Gallup Organization, 2002).

Edward "Chip" Anderson is the co-author of StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond. *A professor of educational leadership at Azusa Pacific University, he is scholar-in-residence at the university's Center for Strengths-Based Education.*

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