



Heroic
Imagination
project

The Heroic Imagination Project

*An Introduction and Overview of Our
Educational Programs*

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Overview of HIP's Educational Programs

For a detailed description of our model and methods, as well as complete references, see "Constructing Interventions to Transform Education" (Dickerson, Wilkins, & Zimbardo, in peer-review).

In education, a well---constructed intervention utilizes limited time and resources to create lasting positive change in a psychological process critical to the academic or social success of students. Although a number of promising interventions in educational settings have been extensively researched, few of these findings have been systemically integrated by schools into their curricula, or even translated into a form teachers can use in the classroom and from which students can benefit in their everyday lives.

HIP's mission is to correct that oversight by developing engaging interventions that are built upon the tried-and-true principles of good educational psychology – relying on what research consistently finds to be effective to guide not only our content, but the way we present it. Toward those goals, we have developed six interventions, and tested them with students across a broad range of ages and diverse educational backgrounds. In developing our educational lessons, we utilized key methodological and conceptual elements from existing interventions demonstrated to produce lasting positive outcomes. Each educational lesson, or intervention, is constructed around a series of engaging activities that can be used by teachers, youth and community workers, and in training sessions across a diverse range of backgrounds and experience.

It is important to state that we do not in any way operate from a deficit model of students or educators, and thus our techniques are not designed to somehow resolve something lacking in a student or teacher. Rather, they are designed to teach important skills and awarenesses that typically are not formally presented in school or popular culture -- yet which help students more successfully navigate their world, both in and out of the classroom. In this sense, an intervention can be thought of as an intrinsically motivating experience that creates a lasting positive change in students. Our interventions were initially designed to increase students' chances of achieving positive outcomes and to be deliverable by any well---intentioned teacher in a regular learning environment. Currently, we are broadening the scope of our interventions, so they can work effectively with non-student populations: for example, in community settings, corporations, or in life coaching. We are also constructing additional modules to add to our current offerings.

Our programs seek to create positive outcomes for participants in two key areas:

- 1) **Academic success**, broadly defined in terms of students':
 - a) enjoyment of the classroom environment;
 - b) motivation to succeed and challenge themselves;
 - c) rates of attendance;
 - d) grade---point average (GPA) scores;
 - e) rates of college acceptance and completion; and most importantly,
 - f) self---efficacy beliefs in their own potential to improve and achieve explicit goals over time with effort, social support, and planned approaches (a growth mindset for their intellectual ability).
- 2) **Social success**, as defined by students':
 - a) ability to resist negative or unwanted social influence forces (e.g. negative conformity, stereotype threat);
 - b) ability to effect positive change in interpersonal relationships and group interactions, especially in challenging situations (in which social influence forces are present); and
 - c) beliefs that they can create meaningful and lasting change in the world around them.

Our Eight Activity Lesson Framework

Part One: Uncovering the Hidden Power of Social Situations

1. What would you do?

The presenter describes a situation involving the topic of the lesson (e.g. conformity, the bystander effect, situation blindness). Participants are encouraged to explore how they think they and others would typically act if they were in that situation.

2. Explore the psychology of situations.

Participants are presented with examples (videos and oral stories) which illustrate and explain the psychological process the lesson is attempting to change, including:

1. A description of the psychological model involved in the process and the research upon which it is based.
2. The reason why this process is a normal part of human psychology.
3. An explanation of how it tends to automatically affect people in a universal (or culturally bound) way.
4. Examples of specific situations in which reacting automatically and engaging in the process can be problematic or dangerous.

Part Two: Learning to Make a Change

3. Think of a time...

Participants explore their natural range of automatic tendencies when responding to certain situations, centered around the topic of the lesson, by thinking of 2 times in their lives: one in which they did act in a way they felt good about, and one in which they did not.

4. Decide for yourself.

Participants are given the opportunity to decide for themselves if the lesson topic matters to them, and if they have a desire make a change in their skills and awareness of that process.

5. Develop effective change---making strategies.

Participants explore common psychological obstacles to taking effective action, connect them to the stories from the previous activities, and reflect on research---based solutions to them.

6. Plan for the next challenge.

Armed with change---making strategies from the previous activity, participants start visualizing a more productive way to deal with a specific upcoming situation that matters to them and involves the process the lesson is attempting to change. They do so by developing a concrete plan, setting personal goals, and incorporating research---based strategies for overcoming likely obstacles.

Part Three: Getting Started

7. Reflect on your personal take---aways.

Participants reflect on their personal 'take away' from the lesson; the ideas they found the most interesting, useful, or surprising.

8. Spread the word.

Once participants develop effective change---making strategies, they are now prepared to share them with others. This is a crucial element in helping them become not only more effective in their own lives, but in becoming an agent of change for others – in other words, an everyday hero.

Description of our 6 Lessons/Interventions

Lesson: Situation Blindness and the Automatic Self

Human beings are social creatures. We are all deeply influenced by the situations we find ourselves in and by the people around us. Normally, this is not a problem; the ways that groups influence individuals are often healthy and adaptive. In some cases, however, our natural tendency to be influenced by groups and situations can lead people, especially young adults, to make poor decisions. One reason this tendency is so powerful is that we are often unaware of these social influences – they are essentially invisible to us, until and unless we learn to recognize them. In psychology, this concept is known as *situation blindness*. Our reliance on automatic processes and reactions – essentially running on “auto-pilot” -- is referred to as *the automatic self*. With practice, individuals can become less susceptible to the negative consequences of relying on these processes, with specific attention focused on dealing effectively with complex or challenging situations (in which social influence forces inhibit their chances of achieving healthy outcomes).

Groups and individuals influence each other in powerful yet subtle ways. Our automatic reactions to certain social situations can be quite different than how we would mindfully choose deal with the same circumstances. As a result, we sometimes react to situations in ways that are problematic or even dangerous. Additionally, we often make hasty and incorrect assumptions about others, unless we pause to look more deeply at the situations in which their behavior occurred.

This lesson provides an introduction to social influences in general, as well as to the specific tools and strategies people can use to become more aware of their automatic tendencies and replace them with more mindful, deliberate actions. Over time, our participants become less reliant on automatic, non-conscious reactions in social situations, resulting in greater ability to understand individual and group behavior and a decreased tendency to make hasty, personality-based judgments for the behavior of others.

Lesson: The Growth Mindset

Mindset is the fundamental belief that people have about their ability to meaningfully grow and improve with effort. When someone believes that a certain aspect of themselves (such as their intelligence) is more or less unchangeable, it is known as the fixed mindset. In this mindset, there are ultimately only two kinds of people in the world: the naturally smart or talented, and the naturally untalented or stupid. On the other hand, if a person thinks of that aspect of themselves as simply a series of skills that can significantly improve over time with effort, it is called a growth mindset. Such individuals thrive on challenge, and are free from the fear of being dumb or “stuck” with a certain level of ability.

Mindset affects the meaning of effort, the use of effective learning goals and strategies, and the

attributions (explanations of why things happen) people make in response to challenge or setback. With a growth mindset, effort is seen as a prerequisite for success. People with this mindset tend to set goals aimed at mastery of material and use effective learning strategies to achieve those goals. They attribute setbacks to the amount of effort they devoted to the goal, and their motivation remains high, even when challenged, as they achieve long-term success.

A fixed mindset carries a completely different set of beliefs, interpretations, and learning strategies. When an individual perceives themselves to have a predetermined amount of intellect or ability that is unchangeable, effort becomes useless—after all, if they can't change, then why try? What's more, showing effort could reveal to others their lack of natural ability, and risk negative judgment. Thus, individuals with a fixed mindset tend to avoid making efforts, and instead focus on doing whatever they can to appear competent.

Regardless of ability, research finds that people tend to be fairly evenly divided in their beliefs in the fixed and growth mindset. Furthermore, mindset tends to be stable. Without intervention, many people with fixed mindset will remain so throughout their lives, limiting their development and ultimately their achievement. However, mindset interventions and programs have been demonstrated to be effective in shifting people towards a growth mindset. What this means is that well-constructed mindset lessons can create lasting positive change in students, enhancing their motivation and chances for success.

With the emphasis on standardized testing, IQ, and high performance, our schools are frequently unwittingly pushing students towards a fixed mindset. However, this lesson shows teachers and youth workers how to reverse this process and instill in their students a more flexible and optimistic perception of what they can accomplish.

In addition to simply making the neuroplasticity argument (that the brain can physically grow and make new connections) utilized in many mindset lessons, we directly teach students about mindset and how to change it. We demonstrate great achievers throughout history who have had to work hard to earn their skills and we encourage participants to examine their own lives to identify instances in which hard work led to success. We also teach ways to evaluate and change their fixed mindsets, especially when challenged or setback. Finally, we show participants how the expectations they have for others, and the ways in which they offer critical feedback, can positively influence their mindsets. This enables them to create positive change not only in their lives, but in the lives of others. Ultimately, this enables our participants to adopt a growth mindset which lasts, enhancing their motivation and successes.

Lesson: Social Conformity

We all share the basic tendency to change our behavior when we are around other people. This tendency occurs because of the basic human need to be liked and included by others. We also rely on the individuals and groups around us to quickly gather important information about what is happening and how we should act in a given situation. We call the tendency to change our behavior to match the real or perceived expectations of others *social conformity*.

Many times, conformity plays a positive role in our lives. It helps us get along with each other better, influencing us to shift our feelings and behaviors in small ways to match the group, which promotes harmony. However, this automatic tendency to go with the group can also lead us to make decisions we later regret, or that may cause harm to ourselves or others. In these times, it is helpful to understand why people tend to conform, and what we can do to resist this form of social influence. Even a single voice of dissent drastically reduces group conformity when the group consensus is headed toward making poor decisions.

Participants in this workshop gain an increased awareness of their automatic tendencies to conform in certain situations. This results in a decreased tendency for them to conform to group norms and expectations when the consequences of doing so might be harmful or unpleasant. Students also gain an increased ability to support others who are the subject of unwanted conformity. Over time, our students gain the ability to mindfully identify and replace their specific unwanted conforming tendencies with healthy behaviors using strategies supported by psychological research.

Lesson: The Bystander Effect

Human beings are, by nature, a compassionate, care---giving species. We possess an instinctive desire to help others in need, which provides a foundation for healthy families and communities. However, some psychological and social forces can prevent us from helping or responding wisely during unusual or unexpected circumstances, such as emergencies, instead causing us to become distracted, confused, or insecure during critical moments of decision making. At these times, our social environment can influence us to watch and wait, becoming bystanders, potentially ignoring imminent danger or someone who may be in need of our help.

Fortunately, psychological research offers a great deal of insight into the science of helping and bystanding. Everyone, including young adults, possesses the ability to go out of their way to help others in a wise and effective manner, and most of our students have done so at many times throughout their lives. With practice, participants can learn to strengthen their natural instinct to help others and to overcome the tendency to simply be a bystander in unclear or emergency situations.

There are a number of common obstacles to the helping process (such as assuming that someone else will help and misreading the group), and for each obstacle there are psychological solutions to overcoming them. With practice, students learn to overcome their tendency to engage in the bystander effect ----- to watch, wait, and do nothing ----- and instead begin to respond more wisely and effectively to emergencies or other situations where someone may be in need of their help.

Participants in this workshop exhibit a decreased tendency to engage in the bystander effect, along with an increased ability to ask for help more effectively when it is needed. In addition, students gain the skills needed to respond wisely and effectively in unclear or emergency situations and to help others in need in wise, appropriate, and safe ways.

Lesson: Prejudice and Group Perception

Discrimination, intolerance, and uncritical judgments of others are some of the most serious issues we face as a world today. We all make meaning from the world by making categories for things, the inanimate as well as the animate, as well as for ourselves and the people around us. This process is unconscious and can be automatically triggered by very small cues in the environment. Sometimes people, especially young adults, may come to view certain individuals and groups solely through the lens of given categories and not see their unique qualities and genuine attributes.

We all have the innate capacity to view and treat others with prejudice or preference, and we do so at times without ever being realizing it. Teaching people to become more aware of this tendency, both within themselves and others, as well as how to change it, can serve at as a starting point in breaking down stereotypes and group conflicts. We have a natural tendency to make positive assumptions about people we feel connected to – but the counterpart to that tendency is that we make negative assumptions about people who seem different. As a result, we engage in negative prejudice without even realizing it.

It is possible to become more aware of and overcome this tendency to at least some extent, while also learning to be less reliant on categories and stereotypes in our evaluation and treatment of others. Psychology also offers us a number of suggestions for reducing such barriers to group harmony and cooperation, and students are capable of using this knowledge to create positive change in their peer---groups and communities. The focus of this lesson is to teach participants to be aware of their own automatic tendencies to categorize others, to increase awareness of the behaviors that tend to emerge from the automatic categorization, and how to overcome these patterns.

Participants in this workshop gain an increased awareness of their tendency to automatically make assumptions about other people and groups, which can be positive or negative. This results in a decreased tendency for them to rely on stereotypes when evaluating others. This gives them an increased ability to resist automatic social grouping, instead promoting interactions with others based on their individual traits and characters rather than their group identity. It also helps increase their own resilience when they experience prejudice and discrimination from others, since they have a deeper understanding of the process.

Lesson: Adaptive Attributions and Stereotype Threat

Attributions are the explanations we make for the outcomes experienced by ourselves and others. They have the power to drastically change the way we feel about people and events, and can change our outlook to either positive or negative. Psychologists have identified three components in explanatory style: *Internal vs. external*: This is the extent to which you feel something was your fault. Example: "I'm just no good at math" (internal) as opposed to "That was a really hard test and I needed

to study more" (external). *Stable vs. unstable*: This is the extent to which you feel something is temporary or lasting about yourself. Example: "I'm not very good at this yet (unstable)" as opposed to "I will never be able to do this (stable)." *Controllable vs. Uncontrollable*: This is the extent to which you feel the outcome of events are something you can control or change. e.g., "I need to work harder on my quadratic equations (controllable)" as opposed to "I am dumb (uncontrollable)".

Some people naturally tend to blame themselves for negative events, believe that such events indicate they are lacking in a critical ability, and that they will always be that way. Conversely, other people naturally tend to take into account the role a situation played in negative events, believe that the reasons they happened can be changed, and that poor performance indicates only that they need to work harder to develop a specific skill or ability.

Healthy attributions are important for two reasons. First, worries about ability (and belonging) are normal, and shared to some extent by everyone. They also have a critical impact on our motivation, resiliency, and self-concept. By making participants more aware of their automatic attributional tendencies, they can learn to enjoy challenges and give the benefit of the doubt to both themselves and others.

Second, our perceptions regarding the negative stereotypes others hold about us can cause us to attribute the normal anxiety of a learning environment in ways which diminish our performance, learning, and enjoyment of school. This is known as stereotype threat. In certain environments, we naturally worry if other people are judging us negatively because of the groups to which we appear to belong—by gender, race, age, ethnicity, etc. In testing situations, anxiety caused by such worry can decrease students' performance and lower their scores. There is also evidence that this process can directly undermine learning itself.

By understanding that anxiety is a natural part of the assessment process, and that there are healthy ways to interpret that anxiety, participants can reduce or eliminate the performance and learning loss caused by unhealthy attributions and stereotype threat.

Key Intervention Elements

General Principles

1. Engage participants by participating directly with them, rather than making a passive generic appeal.
2. Target recursive, cyclical processes involved in academic and social success, which result in long-term positive outcomes.
3. Normalize the behavior or process (avert possible stigma while building empathy).
4. Tell participants they (and others) have the ability to grow and improve and then show them how.
5. Help participants develop healthy attributions for self-doubt, challenge, and setback.

Types of Evidence Presented

1. Direct evidence and psychological models from research.
2. Evidence from the lives of other individuals.
3. Evidence from participants' own lives.

Student Resources

1. Leave participants with tangible connections to the knowledge and information we present to them (videos and texts).
2. Encourage our participants to share what they have learned with others.
3. Offer suggestions for short-term projects participants can do on their own or in a group to get started implementing positive change.