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# Positive reframing/rethinking: the simple, effective strategy for tutorials

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## *Abstract*

This opinion piece discusses the importance of positive reframing as a tool for Learning Development (LD) tutors to use in one-to-one tutorials. The piece emphasises the impact of positive reframing on students' confidence with their academic skills. The piece will explore the theoretical background of positive reframing, deriving from cognitive restructuring. Connecting positive reframing to the PERMA model highlights its potential in enhancing academic focus. It will then introduce two approaches for using positive reframing in tutorials, emphasising the importance of authenticity in communication. The opinion piece concludes by encouraging LD tutors to consider incorporating positive reframing into their session to benefit both students and LD tutors.

**Keywords:** academic development; learning development; confidence building; positive reframing; academic anxiety.

## *Introduction*

This opinion piece will discuss the importance of confidence building through reframing the student's language in Learning Development one-to-one tutorials. One-to-one tutorials are one of the core services offered by Learning Development teams across the sector where students book looking to improve a range of academic skills (Caldwell, Stapleford and Tinker, 2018). These one-to-one tutorials can have a significant impact on students' attainment levels (Coulson, Loddick and Rice, 2021); therefore, finding different strategies and reflecting on practice is important for Learning Development (LD) tutors to ensure these tutorials are effective. For the purposes of this piece the term academic skills will be used, which includes but is not limited to, academic literacy and study skills.

As LD tutors we are regularly faced, in our tutorials, with students who suffer from a lack of self-confidence in their academic abilities (Coulson, Loddick and Rice, 2021). In my experience, it is fairly common for a student to start a tutorial with a negative, for example, 'sorry it's not very good' or 'I am not that academic'. While their openings may vary, a significant number of students begin a session already from a negative place. This negativity or self-deprecation can also appear throughout one-to-one tutorials. This opinion piece will suggest that positive reframing is one of the simplest yet most effective tools an LD tutor can use, allowing the student to engage more effectively with the tutorial and begin the process of building confidence in their academic abilities.

While there has been research on the language and structure of one-to-one tutorials (Caldwell, Stapleford and Tinker, 2018), positive reframing as a strategy to use within tutorials has not yet been explored. Positive reframing is a key skill that LD tutors can use without much effort and very little preparation, yet the impact on the student is almost immediate. I am not suggesting that there are not LD tutors doing this, some without realising. Rather, that it is a fundamental skill that needs to be both acknowledged and developed by LD tutors, embedded throughout a tutorial, becoming a natural part of the tutorial. This opinion piece will begin by discussing the theory behind positive reframing before modelling how it can be applied in academic skills tutorials.

## *Positive reframing*

While there is limited evidence on positive reframing in higher education and none was found in the context of learning development, it is important that an LD tutor has an understanding of where it derives from. This then allows the LD tutor to become more comfortable using positive reframing in their tutorials and adapting it to suit their style. It also gives a chance for LD tutors to reflect on their own sessions and think about if they have organically adapted the pedagogy underpinning it. Positive reframing originated from the cognitive reframing psychological techniques developed by Beck in the 1960s. Cognitive restructuring aimed to get individuals to rethink perceived negative thoughts turning them into positive thoughts (Beck, 1967). Using the concept of positive restructuring, Seligman (2011) developed PERMA. PERMA is a model that is made up of five components: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. PERMA suggests that people making progress towards set goals and

doing daily tasks create a sense of accomplishment. There is evidence that working towards PERMA, having belief in any or all the components has a significant positive impact on life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and physical health as well (Kern et al., 2014).

Research in education on either PERMA or reframing has focused on the student's well-being. There is limited research on positive reframing as an educational tool; however, there is a correlation between well-being and the ability to focus on academic work (Teixeira, Brandão and Dores, 2022).  Research shows that for university students who use positive reframing, there is a positive difference, making intimidating tasks more manageable (Teixeira, Brandão and Dores, 2022). The student who can reframe their situation, for example, workload, where they reframe their workload from 'I have three assignments to do', to 'there are only three assignments left to do', are more likely to be able to complete the work (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021; Teixeira, Brandão and Dores, 2022).

Positive reframing, arguably, can be categorised alongside the 'be kind' pedagogic approach research (Denial, 2020; Gilmour, 2021). In education the 'be kind' pedagogy has the educator believing in people and seeing their students as collaborators is key (Denial, 2019). Being kind and positive reframing is about listening to the student and letting them be heard which is a key part of a LD tutorial.

However, because the role of the LD tutor is to focus on academic skills development, it is important that all tutorials stay within LD boundaries, signposting to other services where required. Therefore, this paper is not suggesting that the psychological model should be used verbatim but that it should be adapted into an effective strategy for tutorials allowing students to see the benefits and making academic work feel more manageable.

### *How to use positive reframing in tutorials*

There is no single right way to deliver positive reframing; it is dependent on how comfortable both the tutor and the student are in the tutorial with the idea of positive reframing. To explain how it can be used this paper will outline two approaches for both online and face-to-face. I have developed both approaches as a strategy in tutorials as an LD tutor.

## Approach one

The first approach is positive reframing at its simplest. This is where the tutor uses positive reframing without explanation, with the tutor turning any negative comment from the student into a positive. At first, it may feel uncomfortable or unnatural for you, the LD tutor, but is a subtle approach to building both a rapport with and confidence for the student. An example of how to do this is if a student says, 'sorry, I have only written 500 words', the tutor responds with a comment such as 'well done on getting started' or 'well done on writing 500 words'. Although there cannot be a clear script for a response as it has to come from the individual tutor, this section will give you examples but you can take a moment and reflect on what you would or have said in response to this comment or a similar one.

One of the most important things is that the tutor uses language that they are comfortable with, because the student needs to see the tutor's authentic self (Soares and Lopes, 2020). I believe that if students do not feel that a tutor sounds authentic or believes in what they are saying, this will have a negative impact on the rest of the tutorial and any future involvement the student has with LD. It is also possible if a tutor is inauthentic or appears patronising then the student will interpret this as a negative, that they have done something academically wrong. Students can feel vulnerable in tutorials and they might look for the negatives in the situation first.

Every time a student makes a negative comment about their work or a comment of self-doubt, the tutor needs to reframe it into a positive. Now, of course, just saying a positive is not always going to have an impact unless there is some kind of extension to the comment. This is something that needs to be considered by the tutor regardless of the approach used. One example of this extension is when the student says, 'I can't do it'. Reframing this into a positive 'yes, you can' does not address the fundamental issue. Therefore, the comment needs extending and unpicking for example, 'lots of people feel the same, why do you think you can't?' Then, based on their answer, working with the student to develop a plan to finish the assignment, for instance, creating an achievable plan. As with good practice, in a standard tutorial, the student then has something tangible that they can take away.

## Approach two

The second positive reframing approach is where the tutor informs the student of the technique. Again, this is done when it feels natural and is a simple explanation, using the language and expressions a tutor would normally use. The tutor would explain the technique after the first negative comment or doubt raised by the student. There are various ways a tutor can explain that they are using positive reframing. An example is if the tutor explains that positive reframing assists the student in approaching academic tasks, giving the student a positive mindset which then makes the tasks feel more achievable. The tutor sharing the importance of making a conscious effort to reframe negative comments about their abilities and work is the takeaway message that matters.

This is a more direct approach, acknowledging that this is a tool, and is carried out throughout the tutorial reinforcing not only the positive reframing but the fact that the process is being accomplished. It is more direct because the tutor is challenging the student when they have made a negative comment or expressed a doubt, raising awareness, as sometimes students do not even realise how often they put themselves down or apologise – it is second nature to them. Therefore, drawing attention to the positive reframing can help impact their thought process (Teixeira, Brandão and Dores, 2022).

No matter which approach to positive reframing is used, it is still important to bear in mind that students' lives can be complicated and that they deal with a range of issues outside of the LD remit. Therefore, these struggles should be acknowledged, and the reframing used for their academic skills only. After all, LD tutors cannot solve problems outside the LD remit. They can signpost to the right support, but clear boundaries are vital. If a student does disclose issues they are facing, as well as signposting, it is possible to still use positive reframing. For example, if a student says 'I am going through x y and z, it is hard studying', the LD tutor can acknowledge these difficulties and signpost them to more relevant support options. Then the tutor says something like 'you are still studying and that is an achievement'.

## Which students benefit from positive reframing?

I would suggest from my own experience and from anecdotal evidence that positive reframing works for most students in the context of LD tutorials, regardless of age, gender,

or ethnic background. You can see the student growing in confidence from the reframing, whichever approach used. As the session is led by the student it is also possible to adapt the strategy, moving from the first approach to the second, even changing the language used to ensure it is tailored to the student. This is where being aware of body language and tone from the student is important to be able to adapt. Students themselves have been overwhelmingly positive about their tutorials and the difference it makes to their attitude to academic work. By the LD tutor helping them to positively reframe their thought process, they can see that academic work is possible. Fellow LD tutors in my team have also commented on the benefits they see from positive reframing. Students also get the reassurance that there are teams to support them along their journey, with signposting to other teams where appropriate. Of course, there needs to be empirical research on this to truly be able to claim it makes a difference, which will be the next step.

## *Conclusion*

This opinion piece has introduced positive reframing as an LD strategy and has explored the importance of reframing in helping the student to feel more confident. By examining the use of PERMA and positive reframing it has identified the benefits of the strategy. Therefore, take some time to think about whether you already have included positive reframing in your tutorials. It may be something you do naturally already. If not then why not give it a go; the student will benefit from thinking more positively and it enhances the student's belief in themselves helping to build confidence. Also, it can have a positive effect on the LD tutor: you get to see the impact of the positivity on the students. It is also a good way of rethinking the language we use in our sessions. As shown in the two approaches, positive reframing is easy to embed in a tutorial and very soon it becomes second nature. As LD tutors we are constantly reflecting on how we deliver our tutorials, striving to improve. Positive reframing could be one way to improve tutorials.

## *Acknowledgements*

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## *Licence*