Counterclockwise for unlimited potential

If we could turn back to a time when everything was possible, then maybe everything would be possible…

I recently read social psychologist Dr Ellen J Langer's thought-provoking and inspiring book, Counterclockwise, in which she puts aside conventional wisdom to test the limits of human possibility.

In 1979, Professor Langer conducted a week-long experiment to find out how much the power of our thoughts could influence our physical health. She introduced a group of men in their seventies to a retreat that had been transformed into an accurate recreation of the 1950s.

The décor, the papers and the TV were all presented as if it was twenty years earlier. The men were treated as if they were twenty years younger, and behaved accordingly. They were not shown any current photos or allowed to use mirrors that could shatter the time-turning illusion.

The results of this breakthrough experiment were more significant that anyone predicted. By the end of the week the men show marked improvements in all general observable health measures such as blood pressure and general fitness.

More remarkably, they showed improvements on several health measures not normally linked to lifestyle. For example, some of the men had significantly improved eyesight. In addition to the officially recorded measures of health improvement, anecdotes supported the incredible impact of the study.

One such anecdote describes how the men broke into a spontaneous game of football when waiting for the return bus to pick them up, despite many of them having limited mobility a week earlier.

The findings of the counterclockwise experiment significantly support the notion that our belief systems can influence our health and wellbeing. If we believe that we have specific health limitations, we are more likely to have those limitations. This seems particularly true when our beliefs are supported by environmental information, for example, cultural messages about age-related expectations.

In one of her many other experiments, Professor Langer demonstrated that we can trick our bodies into producing antibodies for the common cold. She found that subjects produced an immune response if they believed they had been subjected to the common cold virus, even though no such exposure has taken place.

The potential for Professor Langer's experiments to transform our approach to the social and psychological support we provide in health care is enormous. Experiments such as these also suggest our thoughts may significantly impact our overall behaviour.

For example, if it is possible to change our physical health through belief alone, perhaps we could also change out personality, or at least the expression of our personality.

Some people believe they will behave in a set way according to the type of alcohol they drink (e.g. giggling after champagne or arguing after rum and Coke). In reality, alcohol from different drinks does not differ in its effect on our bodies; differences in our alcohol-induced behaviour are a result of our belief systems.

So how do a bunch of youthful seventy-year-olds and a happy group of drinkers help us in the classroom? Simply put, these experiments, and others like them, remind us how important our expectations of students are in creating specific outcomes.

For example, if we award an athletic student with the carnival cup, they will be more likely to win the carnival cup the following year. Similarly, if we exonerate the creative talents of our year six class, they are more likely to demonstrate creative talent in the future. Our predictions in themselves influence outcomes. Simply put, when it comes to school performance and behavior, if you predict it, it is more likely to be true.

Other research, such as that conducted by Harvard Professor Robert Rosenthal, has found students are more likely to demonstrate honesty when trusted, more likely to be respectful when respected, and more likely to achieve high grades

when told they are high-performing students. This is true whether or not past evidence supports our current predictions.

These findings may suggest we should be handing out more carnival cups, high grades and praise to hopeful students. However, it is vital we appreciate that for every prize recipient, there are far more ‘losers’ who have just had their potential diminished.

Giving everyone the trophy does not work either. In fact, using blanket praise to raise positive performance fools no one. Rather, it simply lowers the standards by which we judge ourselves. It is far better to encourage students to acknowledge their strengths for themselves and far more powerful to encourage students to find their passion and believe in their potential. Encouraging positive self-reflection not only supports greater intrinsic motivation, it reduces the reliance on others’ judgments for performance. Strength-based self-reflection helps students perform well, with passion.

In addition to ensuring we help students believe in their potential, Professor Langer’s counterclockwise studies raise many questions about the importance of the environment. Just as Professor Langer’s replication of the 1950s encouraged more youthful health and behaviour, the classroom environment is arguably a powerful influence on students’ school performance.

When you look around a classroom, ask yourself if the items on display, the messages highlighted and the events recorded help or hinder desired behaviour and outcomes. Do the students see a behavioural management chart in their primary class (suggesting bad behaviour is expected) or do they see images of friendship and happy students?

Is student potential measured by graded essays on the wall or is student passion celebrated in a montage of unjudged work? Rather than tell our students they can do something well, or not so well, perhaps we could embrace a time where anything is possible. If it is okay to believe we can be an astronaut or a ballet dancer at age four, maybe it is still okay to believe in these goals at age fourteen, no matter what the ‘evidence’ may say?

Dr Helen Street is an applied social psychologist with a passion for education. She presents her work in books, articles and in seminars and workshops for schools. Helen is also passionately involved in the ongoing development of The Positive Schools conferences, www.positiveschools.com.au. Registrations are now open for 2015.

Authorised by Mary Franklyn, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.