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Research paper



Revisiting Student Self-Improvement

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Abstract

This paper substantiates the relevance of cultivating the need for self-improvement in students at technical colleges.
The authors identify several types of self-improvement and explore their key features. The findings from the authors' psychological/pedagogical study help identify three major levels of self-development.
To determine students' self-improvement development levels, the authors employed such research methods as survey by questionnaire, testing, interview, observation, and analysis of activity outcomes.
Using the diagnostic method and on the strength of sociological data obtained as part of the study, the authors developed a program consisting of two modules aimed at the deliberate and purposeful cultivation of the need for self-improvement, development of one's volitional qualities of character, nourishing of the ability to self-regulate one's behavior, and fostering of the ability to pursue meaningful life goals.
The findings of this study may be of interest to instructors, teachers, and postgraduate students interested in the development and implementation of competency-based learning within the nation's system of higher education.

Keywords: *Self-development; Self-improvement; self-improvement program; student.*

1. Introduction

We live in a dynamic, rapidly changing world which sets tough requirements for graduates. Today's students are expected to be flexible, keen to continually learn something new, and motivated to self-educate throughout their life and self-improve.
A Dictionary of the Practical Psychologist by S.Yu. Golovin provides the following definition of self-improvement: "[it] begins in our teens when the time comes for cultivating the 'ideal Me' – our conscious personal ideal comparing ourselves with which often causes a sense of dissatisfaction with and a desire to change ourselves. In developing this ideal, we bring into correlation with it our goals and deeds, with our consciousness moving along a vertical line within the space of our personal motives. This process is accompanied by particular emotional stress regarding ourselves and our deeds, namely some remorse, dissatisfaction with ourselves, and assessments and reassessments of ourselves" [1].
Over the course of many years, different scholars have attempted to investigate one's need for self-improvement. For instance, A.H. Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' deservedly attaches the greater significance to the desire to self-improve. The scholar also proved that this desire can be fulfilled only when all of one's basic needs are met [2]. Self-improvement plays an important role both in the professional sphere and in personal life. It makes us more disciplined and goal-oriented, teaching us to respect others, behave the right way in society, and achieve new heights in self-development. All this helps us earn the sympathy of others and gain their acceptance [3].
Scholars M.I. D'yachenko and L.A. Kandybovich explore the self-improvement process in relation to the personality of students, suggesting that "a student's self-improvement of their personality is a complex type of activity aimed at building themselves as a specialist" [5].
S.L. Rubinstein treats self-improvement as a key motive for one's self-activity alongside one's self-actualization and self-fulfillment [6, 7].
L.S. Vygotskii, D.B. El'konin, and V.V. Davydov view one's self-development as one's self-activity in terms of self-change and unleashing one's personal potential [8]. L.N. Kulikova associates self-development of person with working out and reinforcing in his experience a set of personal qualities that are crucial to achieving the life objectives [9].
L.S. Sapozhnikova construes self-improvement as the process of growth in one's activity and as self-cognition and self-regulation, owing to which the learner is capable of holding their undesirable actions in check [10].
Thus, to sum up, it may be concluded that while researchers construe self-improvement differently, they appear to concur on the following – the process has a purposeful, deliberate nature and is aimed at improving one's personality.
All training areas currently implemented in Tyumen Industrial University are aligned with the requirements for curriculum mastery outcomes prescribed by the Federal State Educational Standard for Higher Learning. Graduates are expected to have command of the following general cultural competences [11, 12]:
– possess a culture of thinking and the ability to set a goal and come up with ways to achieve it;
– have the ability to independently employ various methods and means of cognition, learning, and self-control to ensure intellectual development, boosts in one's cultural level and professional competence, the conservation of one's health, and moral and physical self-improvement;

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– the ability to critically assess one's strengths and weaknesses, chart a course for the development of strengths and remediation of weaknesses, and come up with efficient ways to do so.

Mastering these competencies should provide the learner with an idea of possible ways and scenarios to ensure one's personal growth; the ability to interpret one's mental state; the basic skills of self-development and self-improvement [5].

The instructor's job is to help the learners fathom the developmental processes taking place in their mind, impel themselves toward inner spiritual/practical activity, and gain insight into the process of working out personal development objectives and ways to achieve them. The instructor is expected to only create the conditions for one's development and provide one with the support and assistance needed in the process, but by no means impose on one any particular values or preset ways to resolve difficult situations. As was noted as early as L.S. Vygotskii, we mustn't educate those around us, as they are educated on their own, the teacher's sole job being to properly organize the educational process to enable the learner to gain some personal experience and develop some new forms of behavior [8].

Self-development is continual work on oneself, which involves self-improving and developing a set of positive personal qualities. It is a process that one has to analyze one's true wishes, goals, interests, motives, and values and chart the course for one's future endeavors [13, 14]. It is central to achieving success in life. Self-development implies setting a life goal, developing a set of personal qualities through art and science, making the most of one's abilities, getting to know the world around through reading books, familiarizing oneself with the ideas and views of great philosophers and scholars, and contemplating and conceptualizing what is beheld and what happens around us [15].

This paper construes *self-improvement* as the conscious, purposeful process of continuously self-changing one's physical, intellectual, emotional, and social qualities and coming up with objectives, ways, and means of self-development, which facilitates the fostering of an individual path of development.

2. Methods

The study was conducted at Tyumen Industrial University and featured 45 students majoring in Information Systems and Technology at the Institute of Geology and Oil and Gas Production. The respondents ranged from 18 to 20 years in age.

The authors employed the following research methods: survey by questionnaire, interview, observation, and testing; comparison and generalization of the content of concepts and categories; qualitative and quantitative analysis of resulting data; statistical data processing methods.

The study was carried out in two stages.

During the first stage of their experimental study, the authors undertook to establish what 'self-improvement' meant to the students surveyed.

To explore the level of development and characteristics of self-improvement with future bachelors, the authors then conducted the second stage of their experimental study. They utilized the following methodologies:

1. The 'Need for Self-Development' questionnaire.
2. Diagnosing one's level of self-development (L.N. Berezhnova).
3. Diagnosing one's level of self-actualization (A.V. Lazukin (as adapted by N.F. Kalina).
4. Self-assessment of the fulfillment of one's life goals (N.R. Molochnikov). In the questionnaire, the authors were most interested in the following scales: 1) social state (interpersonal relationships); 2) physical state; 3) spiritual readiness (psychological state); 4) setting of personal end goals.

3. Results

The data obtained from the authors' survey by questionnaire indicated that to 18% of students self-improvement was about keeping oneself physically fit, with 48% of respondents stating that self-improvement implied the development of intellect and reading books and 36% and 24%, respectively, associating it with the ability to manage one's emotions and develop one's abilities.

The question 'Are you developing as a person?' elicited a confident positive response from 56% of bachelors, with the rest having difficulty responding, as they had not thought of that before. The next question – 'Do you have some kind of a system of techniques, ways, and methods to develop your personality?' – made many of the students pause to think about it. 'Rather yes than no' was one of the popular answers elicited, with some providing the following replies: "sometimes I do morning exercises and visit the gym", "I read books", "I prepare for practical classes", "I admit that I'm often on edge, but I don't know how to deal with my negative emotions", etc. Thus, it is evident that, with most students, self-improvement is rather a spontaneous and poorly managed process than a purposeful and deliberate one.

As part of this study, the authors identified three major levels of self-development in the experiment's second stage.

Students with a high level of self-development (29%) were found to be particularly keen on self-improvement. These individuals tend to explore themselves, study their strengths and weaknesses, analyze their feelings, read a lot, and derive pleasure from learning new things. They are engaged in scholarly activity and participate in student conferences. Their experience of public speaking fosters high expectations and cultivates confidence. All this facilitates the development of their volitional qualities, like singlemindedness, perseverance, resolution, and being disciplined. Alongside the key values of a self-actualizing person, some of which, as per A.H. Maslow, are beauty, truth, wholeness, goodness, and aliveness, these students strive to cultivate harmonious and wholesome relations with those around them. They are fit physically, as they are clearly no strangers to fitness, prefer eating healthy, and get enough sleep. They are aware of most of the factors that govern the achievement of their life goals. These students characterize their level of development as "full of promise for self-fulfillment".

48% of students posted a medium level of fulfillment of the need for self-development. These individuals lack an entrenched system of self-development. They rarely reflect on their personal qualities and do not get much satisfaction from reading literary works. Acquiring new knowledge is only associated with their professional activity and has little to do with the other major spheres of life, like health, culture, art, and science. Their proactivity is only of a fragmentary nature. They believe that one should just "let things take their course" and there is no need to give self-improvement special thought. Many tend to shift the onus onto external circumstances and do not always manage to achieve their goals. Their physical shape requires improvement but many lack will power to start working out. They exhibit such personal qualities as resolution, perseverance, commitment, and exactingness on a medium level. These individuals characterize their level of development as "appropriate and sufficient for self-fulfillment".

The remaining 23% of students exhibited a low level of self-development. These students do not strive to explore themselves, let obstacles impede their activity, and have low will power, which is reflected in their inability to keep their temper under control, overcome difficulties in pursuing a goal, and adequately perform tasks that are essential to learning activity. The factors impeding their self-development include the state of one's health, one's inability to allocate time properly (too much time wasted on playing computer games and hanging around on social networks), and lack of support (including material support) on the part of one's parents. These students do not strive for creativity and do not participate in conferences and student contests. Their choice of professional activity was governed not by their inner motivation but

was determined by external factors, like the passing score or the cost of tuition. They tend to believe that self-analysis may do them more harm than good and, therefore, never reflect on their positive and negative traits of character. People around are often annoying to them and it is hard for them to develop a relationship of trust, which, however, is not an incentive for them to change themselves and their behavior. Low scores on the 'auto-sympathy' scale are testimony to these individuals being neurotic, uneasy, and insecure. They do not set themselves any goals for development and are not interested in spiritual and intellectual growth, their motivation to go to college mostly governed by the urge to get a diploma or unwillingness to serve in the army.

4. Discussion

Based on the results from their survey by questionnaire, the authors went on to identify the following types of self-improvement: physical, intellectual, emotional, and social.

Physical self-improvement implies the use of a set of techniques and special types of activity aimed at strengthening one's physical health (doing sports, eating healthy, and leading a healthy lifestyle) and cultivating one's volitional qualities.

Intellectual self-improvement incorporates the development of intellect, critical thinking skills, the ability to reason, give an adequate assessment of reality, plan things, analyze things, broaden one's ken, and develop one's erudition.

Cultivating the ability to regulate one's emotions and adequately express and reflexively trace them with respect to oneself and to others can be subsumed under emotional self-improvement.

Developing a socially proactive personal attitude, cultivating socially proactive ideals, pursuing a socially proactive lifestyle, and building a constructive relationship with those around us implies social self-improvement.

The findings from the authors' analysis of the stated types of self-improvement are provided in a diagram below (Figure 1).

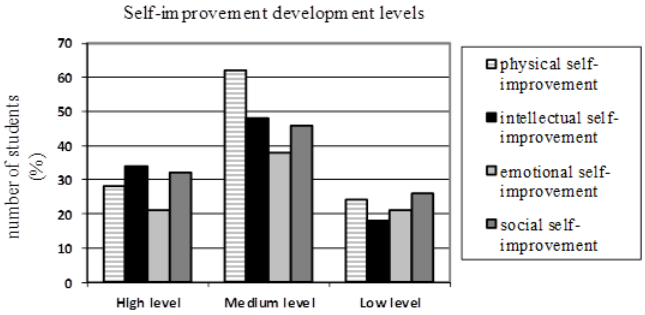


Fig. 1: Students' aspiration for self-improvement

It may be concluded from the above that, for the most part, the student self-improvement process has a chaotic and impermanent nature. To help make it more purposeful and meaningful, the authors have developed a special self-improvement program, which they brought into action in psychology class.

Despite the fact that the key form of physical self-improvement in the institution is physical education class, while social self-improvement is predicated on one's interaction with a specific social environment and participation in various activities, the actual awareness of the need for these types of improvement is gained in Humanities-related classes. It is psychology-related disciplines that are intended to help foster in one the above general cultural competencies, provide one with the moral and social guideposts needed to cultivate a worldview and achieve personal and professional success, and arm one with relevant methods and skills of self-cognition, self-fulfillment, and charting a course for one's future life endeavors.

The authors' self-improvement program comprises two modules.

Module 1, Cognitive, deals with students self-understanding and self-realizing their personal qualities and life goals, as well as employing a set of external and internal resources that will facilitate the achievement of those goals. In the authors' view, one must find it quite useful and exciting to explore one's temperament, character, abilities, wishes, interests, values, volitional potential, and cognitive processes (thinking, memory, attention, imagination, and speech). Objectively evaluating themselves and their actions will provide students with a new impetus for self-improvement.

During this stage, some of the exercises that may help a student gain a better insight into who they are include 'Who am I', 'Pluses and Minuses in My Character', 'My Temperament', and 'What is My Purpose?'. Among the possible psychological tests are 'Levels of Development of Memory and Attention', 'Types of Thinking', 'Amthauer's Intelligence Structure Test', etc. Of great benefit to students is the 'I Concept' exercise, which helps them analyze themselves. The students get to describe their 'Real Me' – the way they see themselves at present. The object of self-perception and self-assessment here is one's body (the physical Me), intellect (the mental Me), feelings (the emotional Me), and relationships (the social Me). Then, the students describe their 'Ideal Me' – their notion of themselves as an ideal person, someone they would like to be as a result of the actualization of their potential. At his stage, the learners analyze what they need to do and work on to draw closer to their ideal image. The class's final stage involves reflection. Each student learns that many of the traits of their character have changed for the better, they can now do their work faster and more efficiently than yesterday, and there is no longer that much worry and tension at the thought of something demanding coming up, with the student no longer scared of difficulties but viewing them as obstacles which require some effort to overcome – all this only boosts one's aspiration for self-development and provides a new impetus for self-improvement.

Module 2, Praxical, implies developing in students the basic skills of public speaking, engaging them in scholarly work, encouraging their participation in student conferences, cultivating in them the basic skills of preparing research papers and delivering presentations in front of student audiences, and fostering in them the ability to correlate their potential with social needs. Building and implementing promising areas for students' physical, intellectual, emotional, and social self-development and self-improvement helps them make an informed choice of their future educational route and make relevant adjustments in life. With the aid of their instructor, they identify and characterize issues in their development and formulate the objectives for their professional and personal growth and the conditions for their self-fulfillment based on trends in the development of the individual/personal characteristics of the use of their creative potential.

Exercises like 'Shipwreck', 'Air Balloon Flight', 'Active Listening', and 'Public Speaking' are aimed at developing in students a set of professionally significant personal qualities, like single-mindedness, perseverance, and self-confidence, fostering the ability to properly set their life goals, and helping them cultivate a proactive approach to life. The students are taught a set of techniques for overcoming adverse emotional states and are taught to constructively interact within a group and employ effective coping strategies for behaving properly in conflict situations.

The key forms of implementing the program are training classes, modeling educational and life situations, analyzing situational problems, business simulation games, practical in-class assignments, and out-of-class independent student work.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the fact that there are a great number of students with low and medium levels of self-development signals the need to develop a special educational program for fostering self-improvement. A program of this kind could consist of two modules – a cognitive module and a praxical one. The program could help gain insight into one's potential, foster in one an adequate sense of self-worth and a proper level of aspiration, and unleash one's inner potential,

helping one realize the significance of personal self-improvement and, thus, chart a meaningful path for one's future endeavors.

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