

RESEARCH-INSPIRED LEARNING

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Resilience may be a 21st century buzzword; but unlike some, it's one with purpose. At UTS, resilience is all about a student's ability to survive and thrive in higher education. Thanks to the Crick Learning for Resilient Agency (CLARA) profile, it's now something students can measure and improve for themselves.

How do you measure curiosity, creativity, belonging and optimism? Just ask CLARA.

CLARA was developed 15 years ago at the University of Bristol, England, by (now) UTS Professor of Learning Analytics and Educational Leadership Dr Ruth Crick. The program was trialled for the first time at UTS this year by the Faculty of Science's Director of Undergraduate Programs Dr Alison Beavis.

The program, which allows students to rate and reflect on the way they approach learning, requires first-year science students undertaking the Principles of Scientific Practice subject to complete a questionnaire that assesses 'individual learning power'.

Essentially, CLARA measures those aspects of learning that are traditionally difficult to quantify – mindful agency, hope and optimism, sense-making, creativity, curiosity, collaboration, belonging, and orientation to learning.

"We wanted to expose students to an activity that would strengthen their learning disposition, attitudes and values," explains Beavis.

"We believe that building learning power will ensure students are equipped to embrace complexities and evolve as resilient, self-aware and assured learners."

Students agree. "It's about those core learning aspects that you don't tend to get from a book, like being conscious of our decisions, teamwork and how we tackle problems," explains third-year environmental biology student Rosemary Hulak. "These are skills we need to be able to succeed in life, and CLARA works to highlight where our strengths lie, and where there might be room for self-improvement."

To do this, coaching is key. Hulak and aspiring biology teacher and second-year environmental biology student Steven Oddy are both peer mentors. Their job is to guide first-year students through the creation, interpretation and use of their profiles.

The mentors meet with their mentees every second week in the subject's one-hour tutorials. Here students are divided into small groups of six or seven where they discuss ways to improve elements of their learning profile.

"It's a very visual representation," explains Hulak. "It looks like a pie chart or a spider web, so the areas for growth are closer to the centre."

"Although the first thing we naturally look for are the parts where we are lacking, we can turn that on its head by saying, 'Hey, look at all these parts that you are really strong in'; the parts that are fully filled out. Then using these identified strengths we can work on the rest."

To do this, Hulak says, "We explained CLARA to the students by the way of several fictional profiles, for example John is not very good at paying attention, Zho Wang is a Chinese international student. So we were able to brainstorm strategies, specific to UTS, which might help these fictional characters improve."

For Oddy, this process offers clear benefits to students. "CLARA is good because it involves individuals looking at themselves and reflecting on it and learning from it, rather than reflecting on other people's work."

In preparation for their mentoring roles, in March this year, Oddy, Hulak and the other CLARA mentors completed a series of training workshops where they assessed their own learning power using the model's questionnaire.

Oddy says, "My results helped me relate to the students and talk about my experiences using the CLARA program, first hand."

"Funnily enough," adds Hulak, "when I first got my CLARA profile, I had a very similar reaction to the

Hope and optimism

Collaboration



Steven Oddy

CLEAR

PRESENT LEARNING

Sense-making

Creativity

students, which was to look at the negatives – I wasn't very strong in collaboration. It wasn't until I sat down and was guided through each aspect that I began to understand what it meant for my learning."

And that's an important part of using CLARA. Crick says the profiling system was developed as a response to "the learning wilderness of the 21st century".

"We recognised such a profound design fault in our education system where the intense focus on 'passing the test' actually has a negative impact on students' motivation for learning."

CLARA aims to give students the life skills they need to stick with their studies and overcome challenges.

"Effective learners like a challenge and are willing to 'give it a go' even when the outcome and the way to proceed are uncertain. They accept that learning is sometimes hard for everyone and are not frightened of finding things difficult. They have a high level of 'stickability' and can readily overcome feelings of frustration and impatience. They are able to 'hang in' with learning even though they may, for a while, feel confused or even anxious. They don't mind making mistakes every so often and can learn from them."

Crick says scores of educational and business organisations in America, the UK, New Zealand, China, Europe and the Middle East already use the learning power model.

And its future at UTS looks promising too.

Says Beavis, "We believe, from our preliminary results and feedback from students, that the activity was well received. We hope students are now engaged with developing their unique sense of identity as a learner."

Hulak adds, "What I got out of it was a bit more self-awareness about the stage of life that I was in and being proud of the strengths that I have."

"Not everyone is at the same stage in life, and not everyone is fully developed in every aspect. It might take weeks, or years, for us to understand why these aspects are important. First-year can be a very tumultuous time, with huge amounts of changes. To be able to have a scientifically researched tool spell out where my strengths lie is a massive help, especially during those times where you're not sure you're cut out for the mammoth task of uni."

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Science students in the new UTS Super Lab

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