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**Focus Enhancement Intervention:  
A University Classroom Experience**

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Focus Enhancement Intervention:  
A University Classroom Experience

by

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M.A., University of Ottawa

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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### Abstract

Focus plays an integral role in learning, performance and living across a variety of applied settings (Abernethy, 2001; Orlick, 2008; Werthner, 2002). The purpose of this intervention study was to evaluate the impact of a focus enhancement intervention project delivered in a university classroom context. Interpretive phenomenological analysis of 10 participants' journal from an applied sport and performance psychology course drew out participants' experiences with focus enhancement (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Essential elements of improved focus included exclusive thoughts, present moment focus and sense of connection. The enhanced focus experience emerged as a learning cycle of preparation, action, reflection and lessons learned utilizing goal setting, relaxation techniques, cue words, shifting to a positive focus and creating an optimal focus environment and. These findings have broad potential implications in many life areas.

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## CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

At home, in school, and in sport, most individuals have been asked to “Pay attention!”. Regardless of talent, desire, or necessity, little is accomplished without focusing on the task at hand. Parents, educators, coaches and business leaders know this, yet while paying attention or “focusing” is extremely important, individuals are rarely given guidance on how to improve their focus. It is likely that many individuals attempting to pay attention have only a vague understanding of what this means or how to focus optimally.

*Importance of Focus in Sport*

The ability to focus is known to be a critical element of successful sport performance (Abernethy, 2001; Abernethy, Summers, & Ford, 1998; Cox, 2007; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Kabush, 2001; Orlick, 2000, 2008; Ravizza, 1982; Shaw, Gorely & Corban, 2005; Werthner, 2002). Some researchers go so far as to suggest that of all areas in sport psychology, concentration is the most critical to overall successful performance (Wilson, Peper & Schmid, 2006). For instance, Wilson and colleagues suggested that “Lapses in concentration invite fear and self-doubt, and the resulting worry and anxiety lead to further increases in lack of concentration, thus creating a vicious cycle that ultimately leads to failure,” (p. 411). Based on interviews with 291 Canadian Olympic athletes, Orlick and Partington (1988) found that both successful and disappointing performance outcomes were determined in large part by the athlete’s ability to direct and control his/her own focus. Orlick has devoted most of his academic and consulting career to understanding and improving focus. He stated, “Excellence begins to blossom when you find ways to focus that connect you completely and absolutely with each step in the moment-by-moment process of your performance pursuit” (p. 11). In order to perform to

their capacity in a high stress context athletes must be very skilled in directing and maintaining a relevant focus in the moment.

### *Applied Focus*

Effective focus is a determining factor for achievement in high performance that extends beyond athletics into many other domains. For instance, several researchers have found that focus is essential with top classical musicians, surgeons, artists, and writers (Talbot-Honeck & Orlick, 1998; Wilson et al., 2006). The ability to connect and avoid needlessly reacting to distractions in a negative way is also very important in daily living. Anyone living in a relationship (husband, wife, parent, teacher or student) has probably experienced the importance of focus and has a story connecting in way that focus solidified the relationship or sparked learning. Orlick stated, "Focused connection is the most important skill in life because it affects everything - all learning, all performance, all relationships, all joy in life" (2008, p.189).

Enhanced focus can have great benefits for individuals who are struggling both in athletic performance and daily living (Boutcher & Crews, 1987; Roemer, 2003). A recent study that centred on teaching relaxation and focus enhancement strategies demonstrated how children suffering from Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder benefited from an intervention targeting those skills (Hester & Orlick, 2006). A similar classroom intervention improved schoolchildren's ability to cope with stress, fall asleep at night, deal with others, and perform in school (Taylor & Orlick, 2004). Focus enhancement has also been used in clinical settings to aid recovery of anxiety and stress disorder patients (Roemer, 2003). Further focus on the positives during difficult situations has allowed victims of war and suffering to endure and emerge from such hardships (Frankl, 1984). The vast array of contexts in which focus determines success

emphasizes the importance of focus and the potential benefit from enhanced focus in sport, medicine, fine arts, and quality of living.

### *Achieving Focus*

There is very little literature that addresses the issue of how to engage and sustain a connected focus. Since the ability to focus is a skill, like any other skill, it can be developed and improved through practice (Orlick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2006); however, the development of effective focusing strategies and skills is most often left to chance. Trial and error is used to develop an effective focus as an athlete gains experience in a specific sport (Williams & Grant, 1999). Yet, “This “previous experience” strategy for developing concentration has obvious limitations and false assumptions” (Wilson et al., p.409). One limitation of this trial and error strategy is that when an athlete is improving focus without systematic or progressive practice the strategies that they are applying, or the lack of any strategy, may not be effective. This situation also occurs in other contexts. University students struggling for success may seek and access guidance but find the advice is too vague to be useful. The University of Ottawa’s website provides tips such as: “In class: Take good notes. Ask questions and actively participate in discussions. At home: Create a working environment that is comfortable and adapted to your needs” (www.uottawa.ca, n.d.). Those hoping to enhance focus are not likely to understand how to progress using such vague guidelines. However, they may benefit from a more specific intervention designed to improve the quality and consistency of focus that adds meaningful structure towards focusing improvement.

## CHAPTER 2

## Review of Literature

In an attempt to explain the term “focus” through a review of literature, no single agreed upon definition was found (Shaw, Gorely, & Corban, 2005). Relevant terms in the sport psychology literature include concentration and attention. According to Wilson and colleagues (2006), “Concentration means focusing, not forcing, one’s attention on a task. At times this may be perceived as shielding ourselves from stimuli that might penetrate and disturb our focus of attention” (p.405). That description classifies focus and attention as subgroups of concentration. Weinberg and Gould (2003) included focus as a defining feature of concentration:

a useful definition of concentration in sport and exercise settings typically contains four parts: (a) focusing on the relevant cues in the environment (selective attention), (b) maintaining that attentional focus over time, (c) having awareness of the situation, and (d) shifting attentional focus when necessary. (p. 353)

Focus, more specifically, refers to paying “attention” or “the mental process that allows us to focus on some features of our environment, at the same time excluding, at least partially, several others” (Cashmore, 2002, p. 70). To this definition, Orlick (1998) added both timeframe and qualifiers by specifying that:

*Focus* is connecting with the step immediately in front of you...Your focus is what you are connected to at the moment. The best focus is one of total absorption, absolute connection, or intense concentration on what will help most at any given moment. (p. 123)

The multiple definitions and overlapping terms used by different authors and researchers inhibit finding clarity surrounding the concepts of focus, attention or concentration.

It appears that “concentration” is most often related to the general need for having appropriate responses to stimuli (Wilson et al, 2006; Weinberg & Gould, 2003). “Focus” appears to refer more specifically to the present-moment connection and direction of attention (Kabat-

Zinn, 1994; Orlick, 1998, 2008; Weinberg & Gould; Wilson et al). According to Orlick (2008), who appears to have written more on focus than any other author, the term focus refers to connecting fully and positively in the present moment, to the exclusion of anything negative or non-task related. However, it is important to note the variety in interpretation of meaning and functional connotation of the term focus. At this point, for the purpose of my study, I conclude that focus is the ability to direct and control attention in the present moment to assist in best achieving that moment's specific task.

### *Theories of Focus and Attention*

Theoretical interest in attention and concentration, which relate to focus, had early beginnings in the area of experimental psychology (Abernethy, 2001). Attention theory began as philosophical musings among psychologists of the 1800s and early 1900s and later expanded into experimental work examining reaction time and complicating these motor tasks with additional mental demands that would often slow down the intended reaction (Abernethy). Currently, there are three major areas of interest in the experimental field of attention. The first centered on attention as maintaining alertness. This approach makes arousal, both cognitive and physiological, the key component to responsiveness (Abernethy). The second area of interest uses divided attention to understand attention as a limited resource (Abernethy). The final approach understands attention as a flexible resource to be managed according to priority of incoming information (Abernethy). Each of these approaches to attention management appears to be relevant to the applied study of focus enhancement.

Focusing on relevant cues in the environment is an important aspect of concentrating and staying connected in the moment (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). The ability to choose the incoming information that an individual attends to is defined as selectivity (Abernethy, Summers, & Ford,

1998). Selectivity is a significant concept because it targets the ability to focus on specific aspects of being in the moment. Focusing requires the continuous and preferential processing of certain types of incoming information, despite competition from other information and distractions. Selectivity requires a filtering process to bypass subordinate information while attending to what is relevant (Abernathy, 2001). This elusive process has produced a variety of theories and these selective attention models vary according to the scientific paradigm from which they emerge. Models theorize the cognitive processes based upon method of filtering, role of memory or neuropsychological processes so that the desired information is preferentially processed (Abernathy). These theories aim to respond to the question of how an individual is able to select what incoming information to focus on.

The early filter models of selective attention have selection of incoming information based on physical characteristics of sensory information (Abernathy, 2001). Treisman's Attenuation Model and the Pertinence Based Model (Abernathy; Norman, 1968) use pre-attentive analysis by relying on short term memory to explain attention. In this case, past experience and contextual knowledge allow for selection, which is both data-driven and conceptually driven. Improved performance could be explained by both improved data driven selection or by "changes in the assignment of pertinence arising as a consequence of the learner's expanding experiential base" (Abernathy, p.73). It is this experiential base that provides the grounds for an intervention to improve the ability of an individual to focus through practice. Finally, advances in technology bring neuropsychological models to studying the role different areas of the brain have on the selective ability to disengage with certain information (Abernathy, 2001). Each of these theories of selective attention brings new understanding to the cognitive

aspects of attention but do little to further the applied and behavioural needs of individuals who seek to enhance the ability to focus during their lived experiences.

Theories of attention contribute to our understanding of focus by explaining various information processing approaches. However, when an individual wants or needs to enhance his or her performance, these theories are of limited use. Drawing from the area of sport performance psychology, Orlick's (2008) Wheel of Excellence is a model for achieving excellence that places focus as a central element in this process. Derived from an evidence-based approach and refined over years of work in applied and research settings (Bonadie, 1995; Klingenberg & Orlick, 2002; Hester & Orlick, 2006; Orlick, 1998, 2000, 2005; Orlick & Partington, 1988), the Wheel is composed of seven elements including commitment, mental readiness, positive images, confidence, distraction control and ongoing learning and focus. The Wheel of Excellence grew from the lived experiences of thousands of great performers with whom Orlick either worked or interviewed, or who were interviewed by his graduate students (Bonadie, 1995; Coleman & Orlick, 2006; Hester & Orlick; Klingenberg & Orlick, 2002; Orlick, 1988, 1998, 2000, 2008; Orlick & Partington). From an applied perspective, the Wheel supports choosing the skill of focusing as the key component in an intervention for positive change in students, athletes and other performers.

Existing theories related to attention add to scientific and empirical knowledge but do little to help individuals trying to focus in applied settings. None of these theories explains the multifaceted and individual nature of applied focus or an individual's best focus or consistency of best focus. Despite a long history of research definitions and theoretical frameworks for focus enhancement cannot be explained by any existing theory. For this reason, research extending from the developing field of applied sport psychology will be discussed.

*Sport and Performance Enhancement*

Sport unfolds in a world built around wins, losses, and measurable outcomes. Sport psychology has contributed to the mental preparation of athletes in pursuit of excellence in sport and performance. I will use the term sport or performance excellence, as did Miller and Kerr (2002), to refer to “observable, measurable athletic outcomes” (p. 140). Examples include such things as race times, hockey scores, or high jumps. In contrast, the term personal excellence is one that specifically “refers to the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks across the length of one’s life and the acquisition of personal qualities that contribute to optimal health and well being” (Miller & Kerr, p. 141). The influence of sport psychology on personal development outside the world of sport is emerging as an academic area of interest.

It was during the 1960s that the applied practice of sport psychology emerged, placing emphasis on the role of psychology in the pursuit of performance excellence (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Vealey, 1994). At this point an attempt was made to use personality assessment and profiling as a means for performance enhancement. These “remedial interventions evaluate subjects and then implement and assess the effectiveness of a prescribed intervention,” (Vealey, p. 497). One advantage of using a remedial approach is ease in assessing empirically the changes before and after an intervention. This requires a certain amount of generalization in order to categorize individuals and their progress within a prescribed intervention, which may or may not be sport-specific and tailored to that individual.

During the 1980s, the term “mental and/or psychological skills” was coined to “describe the techniques and strategies designed to teach or enhance mental skills that facilitate performance and a positive approach to sport competition” (Vealey, 1994, p. 495). By the early 1990s emphasis shifted towards educational interventions to improve mental skills considered

appropriate for athletes who are mentally healthy and who can benefit through learning or improving cognitive skills to cope with the various demands of sport competition (Vealy). Such interventions plan to enhance performance through learning and skill development (Vealy). Sport psychology consultants delivering educational interventions emphasize the development of psychological skills in the individual.

The relationship between the use of mental strategies and performance was supported through descriptive research demonstrating relationships between certain mental skills or strategies and performance excellence (Orlick & Partington, 1988). Descriptive research provides sport psychology specialists with useful knowledge about target cognitions and behaviours in intervention. This approach emerged in parallel with a growing concern for the impact high performance had on other areas of life, “with numerous examples of personal excellence being compromised in the name of performance excellence” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 143). The educational, skill-based approach to performance enhancement is oriented in such a way that it lends itself easily towards transition across performance and into personal development outside of sport. For some this is a more direct and distinct advantage over remedial and sport-specific programs for performance enhancement.

The limits of mental training for performance enhancement have been questioned by researchers. When conducted in a research setting, interventions are generally successful at improving the performance of athletes in competitive situations (Vealy, 1994). Psychological intervention was effective in changing athletes’ knowledge, perceived importance and use of psychological strategies. The important question that emerges from this statement is whether or not effectiveness should be based solely upon measurable changes in sport performance; or if the development of psychological skills themselves warrants consideration in examination of

effectiveness. In elite performance, effectiveness is based primarily on outcome. Research can be oriented in such a way that examining the impact of sport psychology based intervention includes personal excellence (Miller & Kerr, 2002). For the current study, the pursuit of personal excellence within any context, sport or non-sport, will be explored.

### *Performance Enhancement Intervention Strategies*

Sport and performance psychology consultants currently draw from a growing body of literature that provides tools and guidelines, and from their own experiences for the design and delivery of interventions. Many techniques, such as imagery, goal setting, and activation control, have received a significant amount of interest in textbooks and manuals guiding their use in intervention programs (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1995; Ungerleider, 1996). However, given the importance of focus in successful performance it is still, unfortunately, unclear how we can best enhance the skill of focus itself. The following section will introduce and relate intervention techniques in existing literature with strategies for engaging focus, maintaining that focus and regaining focus after distraction.

Regular practice, regardless of the specific strategies being applied, is an important factor in performance enhancement through mental skills training. In the context of “attention control” training, the importance of practicing skills to alleviate doubts prior to entering into competition is emphasized. For instance, Nideffer and Sagal commented on practicing mental skills:

To control those doubts under pressure requires practice. Athletes seeking to improve confidence or other concentration areas must use attention control training or some other psychological training programs on a regular basis. They must practice the procedures just as they would practice anything else. (2006, p. 400)

Just as physical skills are trained and honed by repetition; performers should practice appropriate mental skills for performance enhancement.

Along with practice, the use of routines, planning and preparation prior to an event can contribute to performance enhancement. In some cases, this has involved developing a protocol

for the unique situation by planning a specific mental and/or physical routine to be followed by the individual (Salmela, 1980). In one sport-specific intervention context, expert golfers were introduced to an individualized, cue-selection-based attentional routine to be used during the well-learned skill of putting; the routine was planned and practiced often over a week using the specified number of practice strokes and glances at the hole, and a cue word was used to initiate the putt (Boutcher & Crews, 1987). The use of routines can also be combined with other strategies for focus enhancement, such as relaxation. “We should teach the athletes to use the relaxation at a particular time (e.g., at bat), and we should train them to rehearse a particular performance situation (e.g., hitting under certain conditions)” (Nideffer & Sagal, 2006, p. 388). Performance protocols may encourage individuals to focus on performance relevant information and free them to simply perform.

Simulation is a form of preparation or mimicking performance that allows individuals to prepare themselves to react to external influences that may impact performance in real situations (Wilson et al., 2006). For example, football teams practice with wet footballs to simulate rain during a game (Wilson et al.). Dress rehearsals can also contribute to preparing performers since uniforms and costumes for performance tend to be different and introduce different unconscious stimuli “Hence, practice for a performance needs to be rehearsed in the same way as it will actually be performed” (Wilson et al., p. 409). Simulation should expose performers to similar conditions and provide the opportunity to rehearse maintaining a connected focus through potential distractions. In the area of focus enhancement, according to Nideffer and Sagal (2006), rehearsal is more than just exposure to external simulations; it provides the opportunity to rehearse the focus enhancement strategies individuals intend to use. They maintain that strategies should not only be practiced statically and separately from the performance situation, but as

frequently as possible in the performance situation. This concept alludes to the mental aspect of rehearsal that can teach constructive ways to focus and improve performance.

#### *University Classroom Intervention*

Current interest in life skill development along with sport performance enhancement has emerged in some university contexts. Over the past five to ten years, life skill programs in institutions involved in high level sport have fostered links between experts in counselling, athletics and academic units with developing athletes (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The value of offering interventions within a classroom setting has previously been demonstrated in the United States. Curry and Maniar (2003, 2004) examined student athletes participating in a course offered in the United States in a Division One university setting. The interventions targeted student-athletes and addressed a variety of mental training techniques to enhance athletic performance through class contact and homework. These researchers commented, "As an overall approach, using an academic classroom to help college students and student-athletes learn, adapt, and use peak performance strategies in sport and life can be effective and may be worthy of consideration on other university campuses" (Curry & Maniar, 2004, p. 312). Although certain applied interventions have been a part of university sport psychology courses in Canada for many years, no similar studies have been conducted in a Canadian university course setting. Both academic and athletic departments could benefit from further examination of interventions taking place in the university classroom environment.

#### *Learning Focus Through Application*

One aspect linking preparation, performance, and focus enhancement involves self-awareness. Exercises intended to expose and familiarize individuals with examining and being present with his or her thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a given moment, can be an important part of intervention (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Orlick stated "The pursuit of excellence

begins to flourish when you take the time to get to know and understand your focusing patterns. This process is simply one of becoming more aware of your focusing capabilities, strengths, and areas that need improvement” (2008, p.61). In some cases these exercises are termed mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn) or selective awareness (Wilson et al., 2006), and have properties similar to meditative practices in some forms of yoga (Gannon & Life, 2002). Specific strategies include labelling information, focusing on breathing, narrowing and directing focus to specific sensory information, doing time-limited sustained focus drills, and completing cognitive tasks while resisting internal distractions. Finally, the use of technology for added feedback during exercises building self-awareness has been used in contexts with individual interventions (Wilson et al.). This modality has been effective; the one drawback is that it is not currently feasible in larger groups. Strategies such as labelling, breathing, and practicing for general self-awareness are sometimes used with groups or individuals, to prepare and promote enhanced individual awareness of his or her current focusing skills (Orlick,). This can complement focus specific performance strategies and create the foundation for future focus enhancement.

Once an individual is aware of the quality and direction of his or her focus the need arises to identify how to enhance the quality or consistency of that focus (Orlick, 2008). According to Nideffer and Sagal (2006), “the most appropriate type of focus, or attentional style, depends on the sport skill, the demands of the specific situation, and the skill level of the athlete... knowing what to focus on is as critical as knowing how” (p. 388). Active drills in a team sport context include a coach calling “FREEZE” and asking for players, with their eyes closed, to identify where other teammates are situated at that moment (Wilson et al., 2006). This drill emphasizes an experiential approach, rather than a directive approach, to learning how to assess and enhance focus. Once an awareness of the ability to focus is increased, a variety of experiential, practice-

oriented strategies may be applied to encourage the directing of focus in the most performance enhancing ways.

*Engaging Focus Through Selective Attention*

Literature indicates that cues and goal setting are used to encourage selective attention and engage in a consistent, task-oriented focus (Boutcher & Crews, 1987; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006). Cues can be used to induce selective attention, particularly when those cues are specific, positive and individual. Boutcher and Crews (1987) noted that “One way to prevent your thoughts from interfering [during performance] is to learn to focus your attention on a series of specific cues” (p. 32). Wilson and colleagues (2006) added that “such cues must be individualized” (p. 413). Improvement in focus has been established with the use of specific task relevant cues, both verbal (words) as well as kinesthetic (feelings) to direct focus (Nideffer, 1986, 2006). In a general sense, Wilson and colleagues note:

It is best to find cues that focus on positives rather than negatives, the present (current or upcoming moment) rather than the past or future, and the process (proper form or execution) rather than the score or external movement effect. (p. 413)

Authors indicate that both content and frequency of cue utilization will vary by individual degree of effectiveness. There is no set rule for what or how many cues to identify; this is a personal preference revealed through application, assessment, and practice.

Cue utilization can also be valuable in identifying internal thoughts, focus and ability, which may be an important precursor for performance enhancement (Wilson et al., 2006). One such exercise, aimed at increasing attentional awareness, involves directing participants towards becoming aware of incoming auditory stimuli through labelling, an example being naming “car horn” heard from the street (Wilson et al.). Participants then observed stimuli passively, without labelling, which can at times be difficult. If labelling did occur participants were instructed to

pair that conscious awareness with the intention to “let go” of their thought using verbal cues such as “Let them be. Let them go,” (Wilson et al., pp.405-6). In this case, sensory proprioceptive information and eventually experiential thoughts and emotions can be observed and released through a calm and controlled reaction.

Goal setting is a useful focus enhancement strategy to direct efforts towards performance enhancement in both the short and long term. Individuals are likely to begin with some type of dream goal or outcome that they would like to reach (Orlick, 2008). This outcome orientation, however, needs to be driven by other levels of goal setting to attain performance enhancement or performance excellence. Many practitioners and researchers advocate the use of process goals as a method of retaining focus during performance (Bull, Albinson & Shambrook, 1996; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick). Process goals can be measurable, like using a split time to break up a race into smaller sections, or dynamic, like targeting a specific aspect of a runner’s stride. Incorporating such cues, called process cues, may be a useful tool to guide process goals and help performers direct their focus to certain aspects of in the moment performance. Examples include a technical aspect of a sport skill or the feeling of the body during motion or lack thereof (Nideffer & Sagal). Overall, goals can either facilitate or hinder progress depending on how they are used and adjusted during their use. A goal that is not appropriately challenging, either too hard or too easy, is not likely to motivate an individual, but rather create frustration or boredom. An outcome goal can drive improved performance but a process goal guides performers to positive outcome especially during stressful events or experiences. Goals are valuable in directing performance interventions and for focus enhancement, but must be used appropriately.

*Sustaining Focus Through Distraction Control*

To attain optimal performance an individual must also be able to sustain focus over time. The term distraction control is often used in applied sport and performance psychology and seems directly related to the concept of selectivity (Abernathy, 2001). Distraction control relies upon the ability to detach and dissociate from surplus or irrelevant information (Schmid & Peper, 1982), and attend to certain types of information while disregarding others. For distraction control, Schmid and Peper trained rhythmic gymnasts for five days by pairing gymnasts to distract each other, without touching, during mental rehearsal of their routine. A self-report measure was used subsequently to rate concentration on a scale. Results showed that with practice gymnasts could detach and dissociate from the distracting external information and hence improve focus during performance. Internal information, such as cognitive or physiological arousal, can generate distraction from within the individual. This too can be improved through practice, often aimed at increasing awareness and use of skills like relaxation, to learn personal strategies to attain optimal arousal for performance (Wilson et al., 2006).

*Regaining Focus After Distraction*

Relaxation techniques are a component of many intervention programs. Nideffer and Sagal (2006) suggested the use of breathing techniques to improve focus. Controlled breathing may be used based on a trigger from an anticipated cue. For example, a baseball player may intend to time his breath as close to the pitcher's windup as possible to achieve the optimal physical and mental states for his performance. In this example, the use of cue words was combined with breathing techniques to promote ideal behaviours, sensations and focus. Other forms of breathing techniques include abdominal breathing techniques to direct attention to breathing deeply and exerting conscious control to slow breathing rate (Bull et al., 1996; Gauron,

1984; Orlick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2006) or to take a single deep breath to relax and refocus (Orlick). Breathing may be used initially to help engage in a connected focus or later to refocus after distraction.

The ability to shift focus in a very short period of time is an important component of maintaining concentration and focus. Wilson and colleagues (2006) suggested that individuals can “develop protocols or rituals to trigger concentration when [they] “lose it”” (p. 419). For example, a baseball player may step out of the batter’s box and tighten his/her gloves before they step back in to bat again. Another more general approach is to “park” those unwanted thoughts using a cue word to regain a positive focus or change the way and individual is thinking (Bull et al., 1996; Gauron, 1984; Orlick, 1998). Since the brain is capable of responding in milliseconds to incoming information, practicing switching attention allows for improvement in complex skill execution through focusing effectively on exactly what needs to be done in order to achieve optimal performance (Wilson et al.).

For an individual working on focus enhancement, receiving some type of support from a coach or team mate to help reinforce focused behaviour such as keeping focus on team mates when fans create distractions. For instance, Nideffer and Sagal (2006) comment:

We cannot overemphasize the importance of using other athletes or coaches to serve as external reminders to the individual to use centering and to refocus concentration. No matter how highly motivated an athlete is, until centering skills are highly developed, high-pressure situations will interfere with the ability to remember to use them. (p.396)

An individual struggling or training to refocus may benefit from external reminders of strategies s/he forgot to use in the heat of the moment.

Directing attention in a positive way can enhance the quality of performance. Wilson and colleagues (2006) suggested that individuals should “learn to practice with a positive attitude and specified intention...Focus on the positive behaviours or outcomes” (p. 419). This concept of

maintaining focus on the positives is a cornerstone of Orlick's (2008) work in performance enhancement and focus enhancement through mental skills training. His work emphasizes embracing a positive approach, including having a vision, a specific plan, focusing on executing that plan, evaluating the action, and acting on the lessons learned. His experience with students and performers has led him to believe that this process can enhance quality of focus, quality of learning, quality of performance, quality of communication, confidence and quality of life. A cue or general term can be used to trigger a switch in attention from non-productive to productive self-assessments, thoughts, feelings and actions. One example of such a technique is labelling "TIC", to denote unwanted or irrelevant information for recognition and subsequent switch to a "TOC", which is a positive focus (tick-tock) (Wilson et al., p.412). In these ways, negative and distracting thoughts are minimized to allow for more positive focus to lead performance.

#### *Purpose*

No comprehensive focus intervention study targeting the specific goal of focus enhancement in a university classroom setting has been found within the literature. The only studies describing group interventions in a university setting cited the specific goal of athletic performance enhancement through a variety mental training techniques presented to student-athletes. However, the vast array of applied contexts where focus enhancement is important and desirable justifies the need to deliver and assess relevant focus intervention programs aimed at improving life skills and performance skills.

To help address this overall need for improved focus Professor Terry Orlick initiated a focus enhancement intervention in a university classroom context. The current study is situated within a larger research project aimed at exploring university students' experiences with classroom based quality of life interventions delivered from Orlick's (2008) sport psychology

and quality-living based approach. The primary purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of university students in a classroom-based focus enhancement project (FEP) and to explore the perceived impact of that experience. The secondary purpose was to identify a participant-defined, experientially-based description of focus. The study was guided by three general research questions:

1. What are the essential elements of the phenomenon of focus as described by participants?
2. What did students experience or do to enhance their focus during the intervention?
  - a. How did students implement those efforts?
  - b. What approaches worked well? What approaches did not work well?
3. What impact, if any, did the focus enhancement project (FEP) experience have on participants?

## CHAPTER 3

## Methodology

The methodology section will outline the research paradigm, design, and context of the current study. The researcher, data collection, and analysis procedures will be introduced. Finally, a rationale for trustworthiness will be presented. Due to this research project's focus on ontological questions of being and reality, relativism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) was the inquiry paradigm chosen for the current research project. Relativism constitutes a belief in "local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities" (Guba & Lincoln, p. 193) and this diversity in each individual's reality extends to a diversity of individual meanings and ways of knowing. It is understood that the individual realities and meanings constructed by participants will be represented in the current study only after having gone through researcher interpretation and analysis; hence, becoming co-constructed by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln).

Epistemologically, a constructivist approach was used based on the position that each individual will structure his or her own reality (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Constructivism's focus is upon "the meaning-making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty, 2003, p. 58); an individual understanding of meaning is more useful in this current research project than the search for "the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" (Crotty, p. 58) made by constructionism. Constructionism was not adopted in the current project because my interest was in gathering perspectives and personal experiences throughout a focus enhancement intervention without attempting to generalize across a collective. The goal of inquiry within a constructivist paradigm is to examine the situational creation of the "complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). In order to respect participant views and subjective experiences, it was a priority to let the words of research participants speak for

themselves to the degree possible (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As a researcher, my goals targeted the exploration of students' experiences during a focus enhancement intervention.

### *Research Design*

Given the exploratory nature of this study a descriptive, qualitative research design was used. Phenomenology was chosen for the exploration of the perspectives and personal experiences of university students through a 12 week focus intervention process. An assumption made in phenomenological research is that the individual's lived experience makes sense to that individual and the experience can be consciously expressed (Creswell, 2007).

A phenomenological approach was selected because phenomenology aims at elucidating structural features of a phenomenon that may be experienced by many people. Phenomenology was useful because this approach can be used to search for essential elements that are crucial to identifying an experience. As Van Manen (1984) noted, "Phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (pp.36-37). Hence, results were able to reflect the essential themes that characterize the meaning of focus according to participants as well as exploring the themes related to an experience of focus enhancement over time. The end result of the interpretive phenomenological analysis describes the essence of an experience of being focused, as lived by multiple participants, "in such a way that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way" (VanManen, p.43).

The method best suited to the current study was to use secondary texts to collect data related to the experience of focus and the experience of a focus enhancement intervention. This unobtrusive approach made use of written work produced during the experience in question and

strengthened the likelihood that the data would express the range of experiences and consequences of involvement in the intervention during that time period.

### *Current Research Context*

Providing a description of the context of the classroom and related assignment is significant to the current research because it has a bearing on the data collected (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). The professor's influence on the course and the students, from a constructivist point of view, is part of the overall experience that influences individual construction of meaning and reality (Crotty, 1998). A fourth-year undergraduate level university course (APA 4116: Applied Sport and Performance Psychology) was delivered by Professor Terry Orlick at the University of Ottawa, Canada, in the Faculty of Human Kinetics. Through his presence and guidance as professor, Orlick likely influenced what and how the students approached and proceeded through the course. Generally, Orlick conveys an ultimate goal of holistic excellence – becoming what you are capable of becoming as a human being, as a learner and as a performer; he suggested that without embracing simple joys, health and happiness, people or performers are not truly successful (Orlick, 1998). Through the course experiences and coursework it was Orlick's intent and goal to guide students to enhance their own lives by enhancing their own focus.

One hundred and twenty-three undergraduate men and women were registered during this winter session course, which was held from January to April, 2007, and sixty-three students consented to participate in this study. The purpose of the course, as expressed by Orlick (2007), was that “through the course materials, activities and a major focusing project, you will increase your understanding and ability to apply relevant focusing skills in the sport context, as well as in other performance domains” (p. 1). The course content included the professor presenting his

views on what focus is, the value of focus, the importance of deciding to focus, and how a connected focus and positive focus can enhance everyday life, learning and performance in all contexts. Course readings included selected chapters related to focus from Orlick (1998, 2008) and self-selected articles related to focusing and positive living skills from the online *Journal of Excellence*. In-class activities were intended to expose students to focus enhancement strategies they could be applied in their own daily living. Some videos were shown in class containing interviews with performers talking about focus, children and youth talking about applying focusing strategies, as well as a film related to focusing through adversity. Guided focusing exercises were conducted during most classes.

Class activities led by the professor were structured to initiate sharing of personal stories and discussion among students. Activities also included focused listening where students made particular efforts to listen for specific things in conversation or when listening to silence in a quiet room. Guided relaxation exercises were experienced through audio tracks for body relaxation, including imagining their toes were like warm cooked spaghetti and relaxing to the sounds and images of a flowing stream (Orlick, 2005). Questions were often posed to participants in class to encourage critical reflection and positive action for future focus enhancement.

*Class Activities*

Class	Class Activities Overview
1	Introduction to the course, focus in high performance, personal capacity to control focus, storytelling and open questions.
2	Focus in extreme sport and student-defined extreme situations were discussed, Video viewed (i.e. The secret)
3	Discussion on the ability and strategies for shifting focus, achieving and maintaining positive focus, focusing exercises, video viewed (i.e. Touching the void)
4	Discussion on achieving the impossible, exercises on setting small goals, Student-selected articles from the Online Journal of Excellence openly discussed
5	Discussion related to positive thinking and non-thinking, focus strategies and journaling, Interview regarding high performance focus enhancement with astronaut Chris Hadfield.
6	Relaxation techniques presented (Orlick, 2005), Refocus strategies (e.g. cue words) were introduced, and individuals planned and in small groups gave peer-feedback.
7	Wheel of excellence introduced (Orlick, 2008), planning sheets, athlete panel video, project status group discussion
8	Positive living skills for children introduced (Orlick, 2001), discussed relevance to focus enhancement and status discussion.
9	Individual Reflection questions, discussion. (E.g. What have you learned about sustaining your positive focus? What do you want to change about your ability to focus?)
10	Relaxation techniques using audio CDs (Orlick, 2005), Student-selected articles from the Online Journal of Excellence discussed in small groups.
11	Project status discussion, Positive living skills for children video viewed, open discussion related to focus enhancement with children.
12	Final Reflection questions regarding maintaining ongoing learning, long-term goal setting, Open discussion with Orlick, students shared overall experiences and impact.

Small group discussions were often used to encourage shared wisdom and collaborative learning. According to the professor's guidelines for the course, "Collaborative learning includes

sharing experiences, lessons learned and perspectives gained from your experiences, performances and assignments” (Orlick, 2007, p. 2). Group discussions included dynamic question and answer discussion periods in which students would share, ask questions and respond to each other and to the professor.

#### *University Course Project*

Each student was required to complete a course project on focus enhancement, the purpose of which was to attempt to enhance the quality and consistency of his or her focus in a personally relevant life context. Orlick (2007) explained that “In your Focused Excellence Project Journal you will log your personal journey aimed at improving the quality and consistency of your best focus in a performance domain that is relevant to you. You will include anything you act on to try to improve the positiveness and connectedness of your focus” (Orlick, p. 2). Considering the potentially broad applied benefits of improving focus, this project allowed students to target any life area for focus enhancement as their goal for the duration of the course intervention, for example, sport performance, academics, exercise and interpersonal relations.

As alluded to above, the majority of experiential learning generated by the students in this course was reported in a learning journal (Moon, 2006). Learning journals were intended to encourage personal reflection, personal growth and guide self-monitoring of focus enhancement strategies applied for personal improvement in whichever life area the student had selected. Any journal format was acceptable, including handwritten, electronic or the inclusion of other creative media such as poetry, drawings or photos. Students were expected to make entries in the journal on a regular basis, with a minimum of three entries per week. Entries could relate to any aspect of planning, executing, evaluating or reflecting upon the focus enhancement experience or process.

*Researcher Preparation*

Researchers can often gain knowledge by understanding the research context, particularly in qualitative research when he or she acts as the lens through which data is analyzed and presented. To prepare personally, I engaged in reflection through free writing surrounding the multiple selves and biases that I bring to the research conducted (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I identified my multiple selves relevant to this research project, which included me as a student, teaching assistant, martial artist, and graduate researcher, and further clarified potential for biases. Reflection centred upon identifying my biases from previous experiences with learning, concentration and focus enhancement. During the intervention phase of the current research, as the graduate teaching assistant, I attended all 12 classes delivered to the students over the four month period from January to April 2007. As a teaching assistant I supported the course delivery by handing out material, operating audio-visual equipment used to facilitate discussion, and contributing to the discussion when asked. I observed the dynamic interaction among students and with the professor as they worked collaboratively towards the goal of focus enhancement. I engaged in personal reflection and later reviewed what I wrote in my journal to draw out further information to ensure I was learning from my experiences and staying aware of my approach (Moon, 2006). The experience as a teaching assistant gave me a first-hand understanding of what actually occurred in each class, and exposed me to the content and context of the course. Frequent meetings and bi-weekly discussions with my thesis supervisor guided the research design and were also reflected upon in my researcher journal. A final aspect of preparation involved presenting the research at student conferences in March 2007 to gain from the feedback of other researchers in different settings and to incorporate some of those comments in the research design.

*Data Collection*

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board granted certification of ethical approval for Professor Orlick to collect data related to focus enhancement, including focus enhancement journals through his course, APA 4116 (Ethics file #H 03-07-05). Approval was granted in January 2008 for a modification to the research project to use the data for thesis research. In the final class of the course all students were invited to participate in this research project. Following a brief introduction to the research project on focus enhancement, consent forms were circulated while Professor Orlick was not present in the room in order to reinforce the voluntary nature of participation (See Appendices B & C). Participation meant that the student agreed to allow his/her focus enhancement journal to be included for anonymous analysis. It was made clear to the students that consent forms would not be, and were not, viewed or processed until after all final grades in the course were allocated in order to ensure academic grading was separate from the research. Over half (64) of the 123 registered course participants returned signed consent forms, which allowed Professor Orlick and me to view the 64 students' journals, which were collected and photocopied. Each student's identity was removed for confidentiality and participants were identified by a number and pseudo name assigned by the researcher.

*Data Analysis*

Data analysis was carried out in three stages: initially reading to apply inclusion criteria and early data analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis to analyze the experience of focus itself and a separate analysis of the students' experiences of focus enhancement over a 12-week intervention.

*Indwelling and Inclusion Criteria*

Stage one of analysis began with a process of “indwelling,” where I initially read all of the raw data from all 64 participants without structured analysis, simply noting any initial impressions (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). Van Manen (1984) stated that “any lived-experience description is an appropriate source for uncovering thematic aspects of the phenomenon it describes” (p.60); however, some descriptions will be richer than others. At this point, all 64 journals collected were read and inclusion criteria were applied to eliminate any unacceptable journals. Journals included for analysis were subject to the following inclusion criteria; they were written in experiential terms, described particular situations or events, and used specific dates and specific examples (Van Manen). A high level of description was valued in order to allow me to understand the participant’s journey and experience throughout the intervention. I remained “sensitive to the evocative “tone” of language in which the descriptions are captured” (Van Manen, p. 64) and based on these inclusion criteria eliminated 28 journals for a lack of detailed storytelling of the ones selected for analysis. From the remaining 36 acceptable journals, ten journals were randomly selected for in-depth analysis.

The journals from the ten selected participants were the raw data used for analysis. Journals ranged from 18-37 pages each, providing a total 268 pages of raw data, which included personal stories, self-evaluation exercises they had completed, artistic presentation styles, and even photos used to convey experiences. These journals were then digitized for analysis.

*Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

For stage two of analysis, journals were uploaded to the qualitative research software Nvivo to be categorically coded and reduced according to statements describing the predetermined category of the experience of focus. Guided by Creswell (2007), this interpretive

phenomenological analysis (IPA) was directed towards the first research question regarding the essential elements of the phenomenon of focus (i.e. What are the essential elements of the phenomenon of focus as described by participants?). IPA began by gaining an initial and in-depth understanding of a first participant's experience before moving on to others. Significant statements, which were any assertions reflecting a participant's specific experience of focus (according to research question one), were identified by making notes along the margins (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Using a detailed or line-by-line approach (VanManen, 1990), these statements were then labelled along the opposing margin and in so doing transformed to less context specific and more concise wording that parsimoniously captured the essence of emerging themes (Smith & Osborn). Themes were organized into a list in order to eliminate repeated themes. Themes were then grouped according to similar meaning so that non-overlapping themes were created. As suggested by Smith & Osborn, the existing list of themes was organized, prioritized and reduced to guide subsequent analysis. Themes were "not selected purely on the basis of their prevalence within the data. Other factors, including the richness of the particular passages ... and how the theme helps illuminate other aspects of the account" (Smith & Osborn, p. 75) were also considered. Certain themes were omitted if they did not fit into the emerging structure of the experience of focus or if rich evidence was lacking (Smith & Osborn). This was completed for a single participant before moving on to the next. Continuing analysis with each subsequent journal and interpreting themes involved drawing together meanings to reveal the depth of the participants' experiences. Seven themes emerged by grouping similar statements according to similarity. The next step was to eliminate themes that were not truly essential to the experiences described by participants. A process of 'free imaginative variation' as described by Giorgi (1997) was used to adopt, or imagine, different interpretations of the data for subsequent readings.

Repeatedly asking the question “would this interpretation of focus exist if the following theme were not present?” was used to see if the phenomenon of focus remained identifiable if that part changed or not. This questioning continued, regarding each theme respectively, until any themes that did not fit were eliminated from analysis and the basic meaning structure of the participants' descriptions of their focus had been stabilized. Eliminations were verified and confirmed with both supervisor and colleagues until final themes were selected which accurately reflected the essence of focus experience for these participants (Wolff, 2002).

The third stage of analysis borrowed from phenomenology to examine the experiences of multiple participants over time. This stage required student journals to be reduced to essential content, relevant to the purpose of this study, in order to analyze the experience for each of the ten participants. The relevant content of interest described specific examples of focus enhancement experiences, approaches and strategies used by participants including examples of both high and low perceived impact of the intervention, and any notable unique experiences that emerged. Through this process the raw data became co-constructed through researcher interpretation as I reduced it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; 2005). A total of 195 pages of reduced data were used for the subsequent analysis of the of multiple participants' experiences over time.

The study of focus enhancement within a constructivist paradigm is concerned with the unique lived experience and personal meaning-making of individual participants (Crotty, 2003; Schwandt, 1994). The subsequent task was to search the reduced student journals for significant themes. This phase of data analysis responded specifically to research questions two and three regarding the experience and potential impact of the intervention (What did students experience or do to enhance their focus during the intervention? And What impact, if any, did the focus enhancement project (FEP) experience have on participants?). Similar to the approach used to

identify themes related to the experience of focus, this phase of analysis identified themes related to what participants actually said and did to enhance their focus (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). After identifying different categories of what participants did, the next task was to examine “the content or defined categories of the story as manifested in separate sections of the narratives told” (Smith & Sparkes, 2005, p. 215). This was done to identify how participants had proceeded through the intervention. At this point a cyclic process began to emerge, which became the organizational structure of the results related to the focus enhancement experience. Finally, I decided to conduct an iterative verification of each individual participant’s experience against the themes and sub-themes, which confirmed that results did indeed represent the content of each journal. This process ensured that the most comprehensive responses possible were accounted for and included (Silverman, 2000).

#### *Pilot Study*

An initial exploration was conducted using a sample journal from the course. This journal conveyed a student’s experience through rich examples and confirmed the presence of focus enhancement strategies and moments of focus in the student’s description of the experience. This helped my preparation for research by providing the opportunity to rehearse the iterative process of data reduction, identifying significant statements related to focus and analyzing narratives.

#### *Trustworthiness*

The steps that were taken to increase trustworthiness in this current project include credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The first step towards trustworthiness was through assessing the credibility and the quality of journals included in the study which, in this case, is dependant upon believability.

Believability is absent when a participant is being deceitful by exaggerating or falsifying information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Applying inclusion criteria ensured that each journal analyzed had sufficient description of experiences to establish credibility and believability.

The research process was documented to increase dependability and confirmability. Dependability is related to the consistency of findings, dependant not only upon the data collected, but also in the analysis and findings carried out by the researcher (Vealy, 1994). To track research progress, I kept a researcher journal with personal reflections, experiences and changes in design. In this way changes to coding and conceptual shifts could be followed by an outsider looking to understand the process used in this project (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004). This increased trustworthiness through transparency while simultaneously supporting steps to ensure confirmability in findings that are rooted in the data..

Consistent with the relativist ontology, generalizability is not the aim of the current research project (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Transferability is, however, important for the applicability of findings. Transferability is related to the extent to which a reader can judge the potential that research has to transfer knowledge to other areas or contexts (Sparkes, 1998). This was achieved through thick description of the intervention context, of the research procedures selected and of the data presented. This description allows readers to relate to information and judge and apply it in a way that is personally relevant. Through disclosure and trustworthy analytic practices, the current research is applicable to future students and professors in the field, both personally and professionally, and can also be applied to individuals in athletic and life contexts.

## CHAPTER 4

## Results

The participants had each independently selected the context in which they wanted to enhance their focus; as a result a variety of life areas were addressed. Every participant applied focus enhancement strategies to multiple contexts and a brief summary of the contexts in which each participant took action can be found in Appendix A. Participants applied focus enhancement strategies in daily living contexts such as during conversations with strangers, friends, family and his/her significant other. Strategies were applied towards improving stress control, increasing self-esteem and confidence and managing emotions such as anger. Participants also made efforts to simply stay focused in the present moment in any context in which they found themselves in. A specific area of application was improving focus in academics by trying to enhance focus during lectures, during study, and on preparing and taking action to complete ongoing assignments. Sporting contexts were also described, including ringette, hockey, soccer, basketball, fitness classes, and weight training. A final context where focus enhancement strategies were applied was in efforts by participants to relax and control their thoughts in order to fall asleep.

In the current study, participants' focus enhancement project (FEP) journals were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). From these journals certain recurring themes emerged consistently across participants. Analysis was directed in separate stages and I will first present the definition of focus according to participant descriptions and then present the results from examining the experience of focus enhancement over the time of the intervention.

*Essential Elements of Focus*

Focus was defined by participants as involving the experiences of: exclusive thoughts, the present moment and a connection. The descriptions and examples of these three themes presented below reveal the essence of the focus enhancement experience according to participants (Creswell, 2007). A definition (or statement) was composed using the themes that emerged from the phenomenological interpretation of the lived experience of focus according to participants in the present study (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Wolff, 2002); *focus is having exclusive thoughts and a sense of connection with a subject in the present moment*. A detailed description of each of the three key elements of focus (exclusive thoughts, present moment and connection) was then composed using verbatim examples which are illustrated below (Wolff).

*Focus is Exclusive Thoughts*

During focus experiences, participants described an exclusivity of thoughts. They thought of nothing else while focused; for example, during a walk home from university, during a study session in the library or during a moment with a loved one. Any extraneous incoming or arising thoughts were put aside, while immediately relevant thoughts were attended to in order to keep thoughts exclusive. This exclusivity, at times, required deliberate effort to control distractions. For example, in order to focus during an exam, Jennifer intentionally ignored noise and movement from other people who were leaving the room, writing and talking. This state of exclusive, streamlined thinking was also experienced by another participant after several weeks of focus enhancement. After one of his many hockey games he wrote, "I would be focused only on the stuff happening in the rink. By the end of the game I found that the only thoughts I had in my head were related to hockey" (Matt). A particularly inspirational focus moment came to another participant during a wintertime outdoor expedition when she faced mental and physical

challenges, which pushed her to her limits. At one point several days into the expedition she focused only on her own inner strength to the extent that once she finished that day's hike she realized, "No one else on this expedition existed for two hours except me and that's what I needed" (Nicole). Similar examples of exclusive thoughts indicated that during a focused moment thinking was unified on one subject due to the exclusion of other thoughts and information. Without the element of exclusivity, thoughts would be scattered and the experience would not truly be focused.

Participants had a subject to which thoughts were exclusively limited during a focus experience. Thoughts converged on a person, process or thing that became the subject of that participant's focus. Figuratively, there was a target towards which focus was aimed. Setting a target meant having a specific task to focus on during a specific timeframe. One example was setting a focus target for a specific task-related timeframe for academic pursuits, such as the goal described by Matt. "The first hour of studying was not a problem. I had a goal in mind and was fully focused". This participant's focus was guided by having a defined target for his study session. Defining a target was even important in daily living as described by Adam when he was engaged in conversation with his girlfriend. "I found that by focusing on what she [was] saying, I [was] able to be more engaged, interested, and ask more questions during the conversation" (Adam). In this case there was a person whose words became the exclusive subject of focus during the focus moment.

In another sport-specific example, one participant used a focus technique presented in class to improve her performance. The focus technique described, named umbalakiki, was derived from a Papua New Guinean Aboriginal custom used to mentally disengage from negative or unwanted thought by touching a tree trunk and metaphorically hanging those

thoughts on the tree, only to be retrieved later on if the thoughts need to be revisited. Midway through the course, Jennifer had been promised by her boyfriend that he would attend her ringette game; instead, he cancelled, preferring to go out drinking with his buddies. She was angry at him but did not want that to interfere with her ringette game

I had a really good outlook for the game and then my boyfriend called and cancelled plans with me for the following night. He would rather go out drinking with his buddies than come to my game like he promised, so that made me upset. I decided that I would not let it bother me. I umbrakikied it into my stick. So my stick can be angry and score some goals while I have a clear head. Seems a little funny, but that's what I did. I did end up scoring.

She was able to focus only on her ringette game and she was able to score. It was essential for participants to have an object towards which thoughts converged, in order to experience focus in the moment. Across a variety of contexts and situations defining a target for focus, either planned explicitly or discovered implicitly, was found to be important.

#### *Focus is the Present Moment*

The experiences of eight out of ten participants indicated that focus experiences unfold in the present moment. The thoughts attended to when focused referred only to the experience of the present moment. Participants described this as being totally "there" across various contexts including a camping trip, a poker game and during conversation. In order for this focused experience to happen, previous experiences had to be set aside to allow for focus to remain in the present moment. Instances when this fully focused experience occurred were sometimes as simple as embracing daily experiences. For example, one participant wrote about his walk home from school when he realized, "I was just so focused on those things around me and what a beautiful day it was, that I got lost in the moment" (Pete). The focused individual was open to elements of the present moment experience to the exclusion of other thoughts.

Being focused in the present was described as taking things step by step or focusing on one step at a time. When participants had a task to complete, rather than attempting to consider it globally, they directed thoughts towards an immediate short-term task related to that larger objective. One participant's focus permitted her to consider only the present task and continue through adversity to complete a challenging wintertime hike. By the third day of the expedition her energy level was low; she had injured her hand, and found herself alone between two sub-groups facing a steep snow filled hill. She stopped in her tracks and pondered how much she wanted to give up.

Then I thought of [my cue word] "climb". I thought of goals and of what I needed to do, I looked at the hill in front of me and said climb. Somehow, my feet started moving and I kept my head down until I felt my feet going downhill again. I focused on one step at a time the rest of the way home; on the last stretch across the lake, I was counting my steps from one to ten and I started counting again to ten all the way across the lake. (Nicole)

Maintaining a present moment focus on each step of her journey is what allowed her to complete the journey and get back to home base. This type of approach was also described when participants prepared and pursued long-term goals, such as specific academic achievements, by focusing on present tasks that could eventually contribute to those dreams. Focusing on the immediate step in front of them and staying in the present moment were essential elements of the experience of focus for participants in this study.

#### *Focus is a Connection*

There is an element of connection that distinguishes focused moments from unfocused moments. A sense of connection was described in many cases as just "being connected" or "being connected to" something in the focus moment. Participants described multiple components as contributing to their focus experiences. There was more than just a single source of connection to the exclusive subject of their focus and, as such, that complexity needs to be

included in the definition of focus. For this reason, the term connection can refer to the multiple sources of connection described by participants during the experience of focus. Three sources of connection were represented in the experiences of focus described by participants; internal thoughts and perceptions, externally generated sensations and inter-generated sensations which is a new term that grew out of this study. Each of these sources of connection will be illustrated separately.

Internal thoughts and perceptions were generated within the mind of participants and these beliefs contributed to focus experiences. An internal source of connection was felt by Julia during an indoor cycling fitness class when she described the sensation of a rush of energy within her that comes with beginning this class. “No matter what state I am in before the class starts, as soon as I hop on the bike I experience a rush of energy and I take the sensations of every turn [of my bike pedals]” (Julia). A belief regarding her connection with energy within herself encouraged her to stay in the present moment and focus on the physical sensations of turning the bike’s pedals. Thinking was an internal source of connection described by participants who were focused. Jennifer reflected upon how she did not consciously think about changing her mood during her ringette game. She explained, “I just kind of knew that I had to if I wanted any chance of winning tonight. I started thinking positive thoughts and visualized myself scoring and closing the gap on my opponents lead” (Jennifer). Similarly, by thinking positive thoughts another participant totally changed her perception of an experience waiting in line at the grocery store.

I felt like the [positive thinking] exercise improved my focus because I was consciously aware of the situation at hand, and was trying to extract the positive aspects... today there was a really long line at the grocery store, and I am usually unhappy with this or feeling like I don't have the time to wait in line. But then I used my positive thinking and thought "hey this is great, this is time that I don't have to be doing schoolwork", so I grabbed a magazine and got to catch up on some Hollywood gossip while I waited. This also helped

improve my focus while doing schoolwork because I was able to have a nice break, free of thinking about school! (Christine)

Directing thoughts and perceptions in a certain way influenced participants to connect in the present moment.

Externally generated sensations were sensations generated by external objects making contact with the body and in many situations these external sensations became the exclusive target of focus. Adam illustrated how the physical sensations of his body's contact with his bed influenced the connection he felt. "This [breathing exercise before sleeping] makes me focus on each inch of my body and its connection, and contact to the bed sheet. I begin to feel very heavy and relaxed" (Adam). Various sources of connection were described through the bodily sensations associated with the experience of focus. These included five senses of sight, smell, taste, touch and smell. Pete described external sensations, visual and sensing temperature, during his focus experience while walking home from campus on a crisp winter day. "I saw people playing ice hockey on an outdoor rink, I heard the birds chirping around me, and I started to feel the cool breeze that touched my face... even though it was minus 8 degrees outside, it almost felt like a summer day to me" (Pete). The additional comment about his perception of feeling like it was a summer day reinforces that perceptions and thoughts influenced the sense of having a connection.

Finally, some sensations were created only when internal perceptions and external sensations interacted across time and these "in the moment" connections or influences are what participants focused on. In this case, monitoring changes in sensations added another source of connection to focus. While Adam was skating for pleasure, his skates were connecting with the ice and contributing to his focus experience. "As I began to skate I quickly got into a steady rhythm focusing on my stride" (Adam). The rhythm or changes in sensation over time he noticed

contributed to a more complete connection in the moment. Experiencing a sense of connection, mixing internal and external sources, goes beyond simple connections because of the multi-faceted sources of connection available to contribute to the experience of focus.

Focus experiences created a distinct and yet mysterious connection in the moment. This was perhaps best articulated by Pete's statement, "When I experienced moments of pure connection and focus this semester, the feeling was indescribable" (Pete). There was some obscurity about how this sense of connection arose. "I'm still not exactly sure what it is that makes me so fully connected to sport but it seems that almost every time I am in a competitive situation, playing any sport, my mind is only focused on that one thing" (Pete). The sense of connection with elements of the focused moment created a distinct experience of focus. Overall, focus is having exclusive thoughts and a sense of connection with a subject in the present moment.

### *Focus Enhancement Experience*

After carefully reading and reducing all ten participant journals an initial analysis of the data over the 12-week course began. The focus enhancement experiences described appeared to reflect a cyclical process that was occurring across time and across multiple participants. Rather than a linear, progressive improvement during the focus enhancement experience, participants repeatedly cycled through four themes of experience. The four main themes were preparation, action, reflection, and lessons learned. Within each main theme, a number of sub-themes and specific examples mentioned by the participants are presented.

#### *Preparation*

Following the guidelines of the focus enhancement project (FEP), participants had to begin by clarifying the context within which they wanted to enhance their focus. They then had

to apply strategies to take action towards this goal. Preparation to enhance focus began with students' learning about their focus, focus concepts and focus enhancement strategies in class and through Orlick's (2008) course materials. Participants reported shifts in their perceptions regarding focus as they prepared to take action. Setting goals and planning are the two sub-themes of preparation experiences.

*Setting specific goals.* Half of the ten participants in this study phrased goals very loosely, using wistful statements like, "I am going to try and incorporate positive energy into my life everyday because I believe it will guide me to a more confident me"(Elaine). This type of passive comment did relate to a long term dream goal, which was a topic of discussion during the course, however, it lacked a specific short term process or progress goal, such as "So today I figured out my 7 goals, tomorrow I will work on the plan" (Jennifer). This specific task and timeframe for goal setting represents the more specific goals that eight of the participants in this study used at some point in their FEP to guide their efforts towards focus enhancement.

While some participants used specific goals from the start, others took several weeks to attempt this strategy. During the third week of the course, Pete became aware of his own need for more precise and definite goals, which he was able to set and act upon during his focus enhancement experience.

I feel that the [course material] readings that I have done have given me a lot of valuable information that I can use to help improve my focus and overall quality of life. Nevertheless, I have not narrowed the focus of what I want to improve. Today I will set myself specific goals that I want to use this new found knowledge for, and will give myself constant reminders of what I am trying to improve.  
(Pete)

He did set specific goals, to improve focus in separate "streams" of focus in relationships and school, and focus in diet and physical activity; he. He consistently acted on specific goals within those streams, refined them and expressed improvement in each of these areas. Specific goals

were used repeatedly by several participants to break down a larger task into specific focus targets. Participants described that they could engage themselves in the present moment more easily using process goals in their attempt to enhance focus.

Instead of focusing on what little time I had, I decided to break down my time and set mini goals for myself that would minimize the stress. I decided to finish 2 of 3 parts for my project before I went to soccer. It was a goal that I knew that I could achieve if I just buckled down, stayed focused and stayed positive that I could actually accomplish the goal. It actually worked. (Hope)

Participants were using smaller, specific goals to avoid becoming overwhelmed and hence losing focus as they pursued larger goals. In most cases small goals were used to manage ambitious life goals, such as achieving physical fitness, by setting specific goals for workout days or managing medical school applications systematically. Christine was beginning to feel overwhelmed by her aspirations for academic success and avoided unnecessary distractions through specific goal setting.

Today I wrote down grades, learning objectives and other goals that I hope to achieve in terms of schoolwork and envisioned what I wanted in each of these areas for the remainder of the semester. I found that this approach gave me a sense of bearing in terms of where I want to be and where I am, as well as goals that need to be achieved. This allowed me to improve my focus [duration] during class time, as well as my connected focus because I wanted to learn the material and achieve my learning objectives. I was also able to reconnect after losing focus because I was aware of what I needed to do. A problem that I experienced was that ... I became overwhelmed with work load and felt a sense of panic because there was so much work to be done and I was already behind. Therefore my positive focus was not fully developed in this approach. Tomorrow I will use an inspirational approach in the morning to try to enhance my positive focus under a high pressure situation like getting all of my work done in time.

Overall most participants used specific goals (and some used both vague and specific goals) during their FEP to break down tasks and achieve goals.

*Planning.* For many participants planning consisted of making basic plans for how they wanted to focus. In order to improve their focus, many participants made an effort to plan ahead

to focus for a specified period of time, anticipating what to focus on and when. Christine used a unique and detailed approach to the FEP by setting a theme with related goals for each week of the course and reporting at the end of each day on those goals.

**Goals For the week.** Today I am going to widen my goal-setting skills to set a goal for the upcoming week. I have a couple big projects and midterms coming up so I will make a schedule with goals in terms of completing a certain amount of work and studying in the next week. The point of this exercise is to improve my focus on a larger scale, i.e. Over a week as opposed to a day or a class. ....**End of Day:** Today I made a schedule, a list of goals for each day over the next week, in order to pace myself for the upcoming midterms and projects. I found that this exercise relieved a great deal of stress because I was able to look at everything I need to do. I broke it down by day and it made it seem so much more manageable and bearable. Instead of feeling overwhelmed I now know what I need to do everyday to keep up with my goals and to make things bearable. Without the stress I am now able to bring a much greater focus to my work in a much more positive and connected way. I am not worried about things anymore, I can just be connected to the material and positively focus on getting it done. It also helps to refocus because if I don't get my goal done one day, the work gets piled on another day and I really want to avoid that so it helps me refocus to stay on track. (Christine)

For many participants their focus planning took the form of creating a weekly schedule to help manage the tasks they needed to focus on by knowing what, when and for how long they should focus on a certain task. Four participants (Elaine, Christine, Julia, and Jennifer) made a formal written schedule for the upcoming week. One participant created a schedule of tasks to work on daily; "To try and keep focus I plan my days and my entire week in advance. I make a list of what I would like to accomplish each day for the week and then execute it" (Elaine). She explained that, for her, planning and writing down her specific goals for upcoming days helps her focus by organizing her thoughts. Jennifer used course material to specify goals and then guide her weekly planning.

I also completed the written reminders and answers to [self-evaluation questions provided in course material] and then wrote down my daily goals in my agenda to check it off when it's complete... I am going to put my reminders in a place I will see everyday, use my agenda to set goals, and do all of the above to reduce my stress. (Jennifer)

Planning for optimal focus in specific situations, (as opposed to just scheduling), was another area where participants prepared to bring forth their ideal focus prior to entering a situation.

Julia, Pete, and Ken mentioned planning specific routines (e.g., targeting specific heavy weights at the gym and even visualizing specific focus targets) in preparation for optimal focus during workouts. Pete also made a link between planning and being focused, in this case, when preparing for an academic interview for acceptance into a graduate program at another University.

I have never really had a formal interview before and I am a little apprehensive about the whole process. I feel that by having a performance focus plan, I will be better equipped for the interview and will be less likely to be stuck for words at any given time. Here is a bit of my performance focus plan... *What do I want to do?* [emphasis added] Ultimately I want to be selected into the physical therapy program. I want to make it clear that this is something that I have been working towards for a long time, and something that I have great aspirations and enthusiasm for... I want to have specific examples of people who influenced me in this field and reasons why I would make a good candidate in this program. *What do I want to focus on before I perform to prepare myself for my best possible performance?* [emphasis added] I only want to focus on the reason why I CAN do this, and have a positive focus about myself and the interview process. I believe that if I have a positive focus, that this positive energy will radiate in the interview and will show my enthusiasm for physical therapy and rehabilitation.

Finally, planning was used to prepare for recovering from distractions. Matt prepared for enhanced focus by anticipating inevitable lapses in focus and creating a distraction control plan.

Tuesday: After class I reflected on the bus ride home about what Terry had discussed about distraction control and how we as students may benefit from making a distraction control plan. So I started to make a plan. My plan consisted of first, saying my reminder, if this was not working I would close my eyes and picture a positive performance, lastly I would tell myself "I better refocus now because I won't want to have any regrets later." These three things were incorporated because I believe that they will help me refocus on the task at hand, and also help me regain confidence and be more positive. I closed my binder knowing now that I had made a plan, but kept in mind that changes and adjustments were bound to be made. (Matt)

*Action*

The participants' second phase of the focus enhancement experience was defined by taking some type of action towards enhancing focus. These instances of action were often preceded by some type preparation, such as goal setting and planning as previously discussed. Participants then repeatedly initiated actions to apply various focus enhancement strategies based on their previous life experiences and/or lessons learned throughout the project. Strategies described across participants and throughout the FEP included, identifying distractions, deliberate practice, task breakdown, relaxation techniques, cue words and shifting focus. These strategies, both alone and in combination, were used to create an optimal focus environment and to refocus following distractions.

*Identifying distractions.* Barriers to effective focus were identified by participants in order for them to take action towards enhancing their focus. Christine wrote about action she took towards becoming consciously aware of sources of distraction by writing them down during his focus on schoolwork.

Anything that takes me away from my positive focus, my connected focus and my ability to regain my focus will be marked down as a distraction source and it will make me better able to realize these problems and correct them. This task proved to be slightly more alarming than I originally thought. Turns out that I have many more distractions than even I thought! The main distractions that I identified during class was talking to friends, dazing off into space, thinking about things I need to do and doing other school work. The distractions that I identified while doing school work were the television, the internet, the phone, friends, cleaning, cooking and reading anything but textbooks. All of these sources are problematic in terms of obtaining and maintaining my best, most connected and most positive focus.

A process of identifying relevant distractions allowed this participant to become consciously aware of his major sources of distraction which helped him to take further action to eliminate or minimize their impact. Another method of identifying distractions and improving focus was to

become more self-aware of the ability to control focus. One specific example of how participants became more self-aware was to use a specific self-evaluation questionnaire from the course content, the Focus Control Rating Scale (Orlick, 2008). Christine completed this questionnaire and reported that it helped her to bring greater self-awareness to her actions.

Today I was much more aware of my focus and my ability to focus at different tasks throughout the day. I wanted to see if I was aware of it and if it would get better. And it did. I did manage to improve my focus throughout the day because I was more consciously aware of it.

By becoming more consciously aware of distractions, participants were taking action to enhance their focus.

*Deliberate focus practice.* Simply being aware of distractions was a precursor to taking further action towards focus enhancement. Participants combined an increased awareness with deliberately practicing focus. Deliberate practice, with the goal of focus enhancement, appeared to improve some participants' focus. "I practiced using positive focus and connected focus with my schoolwork today. This made the process of schoolwork much more enjoyable and more efficiently completed" (Christine). While many examples of focus practice existed across participant FEPs, these examples often became associated with or mediated through more strategic approaches to guide deliberate practice, such as goal setting, relaxation and cue words which will be discussed below.

About half of the participants, at some point in their FEP, stated intentions and described experiences in vague terms. For example, a goal that lacked a method of deliberate practice was stated by one participant. "My goal is to be able to deal with [stressors] in a focused and relaxed manner" (Jennifer). She did not identify specific goals for how she might relax or what stressors she encountered. Those participants described that they wanted to focus better but did not write in their journals about how they would take action to improve focus in that context. This is where

deliberate practice was important to taking action towards goals. After several weeks FEPs conveyed more specific information on how participants were practicing focus. One way this was illustrated was when Jennifer and Ken were describing more specific practices, such as specific goal setting, then applying strategies and initiating action.

I had to finish writing a certain section of the paper before letting myself go eat lunch and watch some TV. This process went very well. By setting mini goals, I was able to stay fully connected for extended periods of time, and then unwind with a break. I got it all done today, and it's not even due until tomorrow night. I feel pretty good and now I can really relax. (Jennifer)

Jennifer showed a progression from stating her intentions in vague or general ways to specifically setting goals for school work and acting on them. In fact, the most common context in which participants took action to enhance focus was academics; seven of the ten participants did so at some point during their FEP.

The deliberate practice described by participants varied in the extent and development of the strategies they applied. Eight of them followed a trend of describing increasingly detailed and specific actions taken as the journal progressed. Two participants (Adam and Elaine) never became more deliberate in the action they took, making adequate but relatively routine effort from start to finish with few modifications to focus enhancement strategies. The participants who best understood that deliberate practice was an ongoing and repetitive process, such as Christine who knew that she "still needs practice," perceived significant impact of the FEP on the duration of their focus and the importance of focus to their overall success. By learning about focus-specific skills and then taking action to practice and evaluate that action, focus is most effectively enhanced.

In the end I will live a much happier and successful life as I am able to generate a positive outlook on the new and challenging tasks I approach with the ability to create and implement focus strategies that have worked for me in the past. (Julia).

*Task breakdown via goal setting.* As mentioned under the preparation theme, taking action through goal-setting was one method of enhancing focus. "By setting mini goals, I was able to stay fully connected for extended periods of time, and then unwind with a break" (Jennifer). This strategy of goal-setting was sometimes prepared ahead of time but also occurred during focused action. The breaking down of tasks enhanced the participants' ability to focus on one part of a task and move forward, building towards an overall goal.

Often I become overwhelmed with the idea of the final outcome that I have to produce, especially when it is something like an essay or project. To avoid this I have broken down the two projects into subsections which I will complete one at a time. This way I will feel less stressed as I can actually see the progress I am making and how everything is coming together as opposed to completing random parts here and there in a poorly organized manner. (Julia)

This approach of breaking tasks down into manageable parts was referred to by many participants as taking things "step-by-step". Hope wrote down all of the accomplishments that he could think of at the time that he wanted to achieve in his life and then he began setting goals to achieve them. His rationale for doing this was, "I think that by doing this, it will help me stay focused on the little steps that I need to know and have to accomplish to get to my ultimate goal." This was also applied on a smaller scale to achieve shorter-term tasks, such as school assignments.

To implement this ["one step at a time"] strategy I broke down some of my tasks today into smaller steps. I had to write a research report but I broke it down by sections (such as introduction, methodology etc) and focus on one of them at a time instead of the whole paper. (Christine)

A step by step approach was literally applied by one participant in her vivid description of using focus enhancement strategies to get through a gruelling hike. As described earlier under the heading of focus is the present moment, Nicole was able to use cue words and count to ten for each step she took to make her way through a gruelling hike. Each of these participants found a way to focus effectively in a potentially overwhelming situation by breaking the task into smaller sections and keeping their focus in the present moment.

*Relaxation techniques.* Relaxation techniques were often used to enhance focus. They were commonly applied by participants in academic settings, such as study sessions and during exam writing, as well as in other stressful contexts. Common relaxation techniques include relaxed breathing, listening to music, taking breaks or time-outs, and progressive body relaxation. Some participants used the sensations of their own breathing as a target to connect with focus in that moment. “I took slow deep breaths, listening to the sound of the air as it entered and left my body, while paying close attention to the feeling of my chest rising and falling” (Julia). One participant wrote about his experience with stress and his realization of how he could take action by using a breathing technique to manage stress and then refocus during a study session.

As I worked and worked during the day my anxiety started to build up and I thought that I might not be able to finish everything in time. I thought to myself that this might be a good situation to do some of the relaxation and focus techniques that I have been working on throughout the semester. (Pete)

He went on to explain how he applied a relaxation technique by taking a break from studying to focus on breathing before returning to the task at hand.

The first thing that I did was to take 15 minutes to just lie down on my couch and focus on my breathing. I thought about my stomach expanding and relaxing with every breath. I thought about the air coming into and out of my body, and how with each breath I took the stress began to exit out of my body. At the end of the

15 minutes I felt much more relaxed and had a more positive focus towards what I needed to get done. (Pete)

Relaxed breathing was only one technique used for relaxation and refocusing. Other examples included taking longer breaks during extended study sessions or taking time outs to spend time with a significant other. Matt described a unique technique related to the importance of rest and readiness to refocus when he was not feeling well during his hockey practice.

I went and told the coach that I wasn't feeling good and that I would need to leave the ice for a few minutes. I went to the dressing room and had a nice cold Gatorade. It was weird, as I started to drink the cold drink I immediately felt better... I think this break helped me because I just needed some time away from the hectic practice, and also because I had something to look forward to after practice. This also made it a lot easier for me to focus [when I returned to the ice].

The same participant applied a combination of relaxed breathing and positive visualization for focus enhancement when he wrote a test. He was nervous despite being well prepared. So on the day of the test he planned to arrive early and simply sat down in the room. He then put his head down on his desk and visualized how he wanted to perform during the test, taking each question step by step and recalling relevant information. He ended his pre-test mental imagery with the idea of completing the test and feeling happy with how the test went.

When I actually did finish the test I was relaxed and felt that the test did go pretty well. I was happy that I was able to control some of my nerves before the test and I think this helped me with my focus because normally I'm really nervous and worry about the final outcome. This was when I realized that my goal to improve my focus and optimism was really working because I was able to not only apply it to hockey, but also to my schoolwork and social life. (Matt)

After two months in the course Matt was continuing to refine and improve his focusing strategies. For his hockey games he was attempting and evaluating three different relaxation strategies to see which worked best for him; he tested the effect of breathing prior to the game, tried off-topic conversation during the intermission between the first and second period and then

listening to a certain type of music that he liked during the intermission between the second and third period.

During the last intermission I found that listening to some music on my iPod not only relaxed my body, but also made me feel like I am the best and you don't want to mess with me. It got my entire adrenaline going and I was set to take on anybody. Thus I was relaxed mentally so I wasn't worrying and yet my body felt good and energized and ready to go. (Matt)

This quotation illustrates the value of deliberate practice, trying a variety of relaxation techniques, and ongoing refinement for focus effective enhancement.

*Relaxation applied to sleeping.* It is interesting to note that at the outset of this FEP none of the participants expressed any initial intention to apply focus enhancement, relaxation or relaxed breathing strategies to falling asleep. Half of participants, however, gave specific examples of using relaxation and focus strategies to calm the mind and body for sleep. Christine began to notice a link between her trouble falling asleep and her “mind spinning.” Adam said the same thing: “My mind is always on the go, and many times at night I find it hard to release my day and fully relax.” Progressive body relaxation was one relaxation technique that was applied to help solve this problem. Adam would focus on each body segment for a few minutes, trying to let them feel as heavy and relaxed as possible. He found that relaxing his body physically helped calm his mind. “Just by making this small mental connection I redirect my focus and usually no longer have the capacity to think about anything else.” Julia had a similar experience:

After doing this for a few minutes I began to consciously relax every major muscle of my body. I began with my toes, legs, trunk, arms, fingers, neck, and finally head as I felt each part fall limp. This process was very relaxing as my main focus was on calming feelings with minimal movement. This was helpful in bringing my mind to a peaceful state as opposed to my normal state where I am thinking about a million things at once.

All five participants (Jennifer, Adam, Christine, Pete and Julia) who used focused relaxation strategies to fall asleep chose to apply breathing techniques. Each one focused on their breathing, at times specifically on the sounds and feel of the movement of air entering and leaving their bodies. “I took slow deep breaths, listening to the sound of the air as it entered and left my body, while paying close attention to the feeling of my chest rising and falling” (Julia). Another imagined that air’s movement. “So I did some relaxation breathing, just like we did in class. I visualized the air going in and out, feeling it go in and out, and then I eventually fell asleep” (Jennifer). A link between calming the mind and calming the body through breathing was implied as participants described their various experiences. “I focused on my breathing and used large, deep breathes to relax my mind and I guess it worked perfectly since I remember doing it and then nothing after that” (Christine). Adam even shared his success with his father, who also has difficulty falling asleep. “He was very intrigued that this small yet very effective focus task had the power to literally put me to sleep.”

*Cue words.* Seven participants used cue words to take action and help them to select and maintain a connection or a target for their focus. Each participant’s cue word(s) held personal meaning and was related directly to the target upon which s/he wanted to focus. For instance, Julia even made a list to put the strategies into action:

To keep a connected focus with my fitness goals, I came up with a written reminder to help me stay on task and push myself to my full potential. I have chosen to use the word “strength” to represent my desire to achieve my goal. The reason I feel this word is a good representation is that it signifies what I need both mentally and physically to achieve my goal, and it stands for exactly what I want to achieve in the end: strength.

1. Taped a printout of the word to my water bottle that I use daily
2. Taped a printout to my bathroom mirror
3. Changed my cellular greeting to read 'strength'
4. Wrote strength on the inside cover of both my rough journal and agenda
5. Changed my computer Screensaver to read 'strength'.

Participants were also able to take action by using cue words to encourage and remind themselves of their ability to direct their focus towards their desired targets. Cue words were used in a variety of contexts. Nicole used cue words to focus and refocus during her hike and the more she used them the better she performed.

The "Touching the Void" movie we watched about the climbers really helped me this week, I found myself getting discouraged and feeling lost and thinking that I had an impossible task ahead of me, so I used the word "climb" to refocus myself....climb for that next obstacle, push through it, stop complaining and just climb past the next barrier. I found it to be brilliantly helpful because every time I thought of climbing I thought of [the movie characters] Simon and Joe and how they worked through what actually was impossible and came through it so it made me remember that what I had to do was not so bad. I kept using the word over and over again and eventually I had to use it less frequently because I wasn't panicking as much.

The progression she noted and attributed to improved use of cue words again attests to the value of deliberate practice and ongoing refinement for focus effective enhancement. Pete was able to apply cue words in a new way when he was challenged to perform in a specific and significant situation.

Today was a new and exciting day for me. On this day I had a formal interview for the University of British Columbia (UBC) Master of Physical Therapy program...As the [essay component] papers were being handed out I gave myself two cue words that would help keep me in that moment. The two cue words were "Focus and Believe." These words would ultimately help me focus on the task at hand, and believe in my abilities to succeed in the interview process.

Cue words were applied by some participants in both specific situations as well as broad contexts, to focus and refocus on their small goals and provide motivation for participants to engage their focus in pursuing their bigger mission. "I think I have learned a lot in the last two weeks about the importance of keeping a positive attitude and the different strategies that help make that work. Now when something bad happens I tell myself to "climb"" (Nicole). She had taken a lesson learned during her gruelling hike and was now able to apply that cue word to help

her focus in other situations. Cue words are certainly a powerful focus enhancement strategy that contributed in a variety of ways to FEPs.

*Shifting to a positive focus.* Participants were taught during the course that is important to be able to control and shift focus to an intended target. They were also introduced to the idea that carrying a focus that is positive is more conducive to maintaining an effective focus than dwelling on negative thoughts or on matters outside of their control. One method Orlick (2008) suggested for shifting to a positive focus is to identify, embrace and appreciate highlights, both major and minor, that occur in daily living. Several participants put this strategy into practice throughout their FEP.

During yesterday's lecture, we learned to find a highlight in every aspect of the day. That is what I wrote as the "bottom line" lesson for the lecture. It is a marvellous point and I have started trying to apply it to many different contexts. Here are some of the highlights that I experienced today. During my morning lecture, I correctly answered a question that was posed by the professor. I am usually nervous when I speak in front of a class, but I was proud that I overcame this fear. During my weight lifting session, I got a personal best in the squat (for the particular, repetition range that I am practicing). I was very happy about this accomplishment. (Ken)

Two days later Ken again reported finding highlights, specifically in the normal parts of his day. "The highlight of this [car ride] was cresting around Dow's Lake and watching the sun's rays come down and melt the snow".

Another method of shifting focus to a more positive perspective was to consciously emphasize positive experiences or positive thoughts and specifically blocking out negative things. This participant applied this to writing an exam.

This morning, I went into the midterm having decided that I would not worry about wrong answers; I would simply concentrate on progressing through the midterm. It seemed to work pretty well. Needless to say, there were some answers that I did not know. I decided not to let it bother me and I moved on with the midterm. I think that I kept a pretty good focus during the midterm and I am sure that the results will reflect that. (Ken)

In another context, the ability to look for the positives helped Christine recover from receiving poor grades.

Today I experienced and reflected on a couple “negative” situations and tried to find positive aspects. I took the bad mark I received yesterday and decided that it was a good wake up call, and that now I knew where I stood in the class and what I needed to do to improve my mark. It will make me work harder and study more, so that is a positive. This activity improved my positive focus, my connected focus and my overall focus. As well, I found it was easier to refocus with a positive outlook than a negative one. One area that still needs work though is realizing that I am thinking negatively and consciously deciding to stop doing it. I sometimes sulk for awhile before I decide to be positive. I will work on this tomorrow to reduce the turnover time!

Some participants applied a relaxed breathing technique to facilitate a shift in focus away from negative to a more positive and constructive perspective. Relaxed breathing was introduced to participants as a way to stop reacting for a moment and then consciously shift focus. For example, in a context of daily living, one participant used relaxation to stay positive and focus while driving during a snow storm.

I practiced breathing in the car on my way to work. As I sat in traffic I took full long breaths and thought about concentrating on the road. Not only did it reduce my stress about being late, but it also relieved me a little from driving in bad weather. It helped me stay calm and focused. (Jennifer)

Shifting focus and maintaining a positive focus contributed to focus enhancement for all but one of the participants.

*Creating an optimal focus environment.* Selecting an ideal physical space to help enhance focus was identified as important by just over half of the participants; this was achieved by applying several strategies including identifying distractions, clarifying goals and acting on focus enhancement strategies. Elaine took specific action to study in the library, rather than at home where she had not worked well the day before. She decided to set a goal and then planned her day around schoolwork. “I headed to the library and spent four solid hours catching up on work

and readings. I was focused for the entire time!” She took action by finding a less distracting physical space and deciding to focus fully on her task. Similarly, Christine used the library as an ideal physical space for studying and also planned further action to reduce internal distractions. She referred to her distractions as his “wandering off problem”.

Yesterday I was successful in reducing a lot of my distractions just by changing locations and removing myself from an area of distractions (i.e. my apartment). Today while I am in the library, I will use key words, the word "Here" to make myself refocus when I find myself dazing off into space and thinking about other things. (Christine)

This action of getting the physical context working for you and not against you and using strategies to enhance focus was also expressed by Ken. After experiencing poor focus during a workout he identified the many distractions he had allowed “to enter [his] zone of focus.” He immediately transferred the lesson from that experience of poor focus at the gym to a different task.

Even as I write this short paragraph, I turned off the music and signed out of the instant messaging program [on my computer]: these two things will only prevent me from connecting with what I am doing at the moment. I think that is really the key; to empty the mind of thoughts which are irrelevant to the task at hand. Before starting this response, I had planned to work on some journals (for another class) sitting in front of my computer and probably still listening to music and having online conversations. Instead, I will bring my notebook to my kitchen table and write the journals in that calm setting. I am alone in my house, so the kitchen will surely be a distraction-free zone.

He had identified the source of his previous distractions and took action to prevent that situation from arising in his next attempt to focus.

*Refocusing following distractions.* A significant part of the participants’ focus enhancement experience was learning to manage their responses to distractions. The desired response to a distraction would be to refocus on the preferred target as quickly as possible when focus is temporarily lost. A wide variety of strategies and combinations of strategies were used

by participants in their attempts to refocus following distraction. Strategies such as problem solving for refocusing by shifting focus, focus planning, relaxation, and cue words were applied and will be presented. Finally, two refocus specific strategies taught in the program, “umbalakiki” and “changing channels” (Orlick, 2008) were applied by participants. Participants applied multiple and combined strategies to refocus; examples will be used to illustrate the contexts and nuances of how the various focus enhancement strategies combined for refocusing.

Problem solving for refocusing was expressed by six participants; two specific cases of which are presented below. One participant was attempting to improve her focus in academics but was distracted by her need to find a new apartment. Her strategy was as follows: “Tonight I told myself to do one quick search on the internet and then do school work. I was then able to focus for a few hours straight on school work. I feel relaxed right now and happy with myself” (Elaine). After identifying her problem, she planned a solution and took action; she further reflected on the outcome and drew a lesson from her success. This situation shows the control she took in managing her distraction and effectively improving her focus.

Adam, in an academic context, was chasing his dream of attending medical school when he received a notice of rejection. He was understandably upset and after a few hours of feeling negative he wanted to shift to a more positive focus but at first was unsuccessful. He then made a list of all his successes over the years leading up to this moment. This action shifted his focus to his strengths and lifted his spirits and allowed him to regain a positive focus. He began to consider other options for his future studies and started to contact professors to gather more information. Problem solving by shifting to a more positive focus was an effective way for these participants to refocus on action they could take to improve their quality of their focus and other areas of life.

Focus planning was reported by three participants during refocusing attempts. The ability to change and adjust plans emerged as an important factor in refocusing. Hope solved her problem of an unexpected class cancellation by using a brief relaxation strategy and then shifting focus to a more positive perspective and more positive plan. After waking up at 6am to be on time for her 8:30am class, the lecture was cancelled and she became angry knowing she could have had more sleep.

I started to really feel negative, and I could tell so I thought of a tool that I could use to change this. I decided to sit in the library, put my head down for 5 minutes and just relax...then I knew I had to change my focus from a negative one to a positive one. So I thought: okay, I have about 5hrs until my next class. I can either sit here and complain and have a negative attitude, or I can do something worthwhile with my time. I decided that since I was already in the library, I would do some school work. I started and before I knew it, it was almost time for my 1pm class. I felt so much better. I had such a positive attitude that I didn't waste my time.

She continued to write in her journal that normally she would have procrastinated and wasted time and remained upset even when that reaction was not helping. In this case because she was aware and had a way to shift focus she decided and was able to refocus and adjust her plan to do something that resulted in the best outcome for her.

Relaxation techniques, specifically applied in order to refocus, was a focus enhancement strategy applied by most (eight out of ten) participants in this study. It was often used in combination with shifting focus. One participant wrote about using a relaxation technique to shift her angry emotions to positive ones in a personal situation. After having an argument, she refocused on positive thoughts related to improving future interactions with her friend. This helped her to refocus and she also applied this strategy again, shortly thereafter, during an unexpected pop quiz in an academic context.

I know that every mark and everything I do counts for my future. These were the thoughts that went through my head as I found out that we had a pop quiz. I could

feel my anxiety level rising. I know myself, and I know that I can not perform or do anything at the best of my ability when I am stressed. So my professor passed out the pop quiz. As I was looking at it, I found myself just reading the question and not understanding it because I was panicking ...After I finished my relaxation exercise, I decided that I would read each question one by one and just focus on each individual question. As I broke it down, and started to just have a totally connected focus on each question, I realized that I knew all the answers. Because of my relaxation exercises I was able to focus on the test and disregard the fact that it was a pop quiz. Today just made me an even stronger believer in this whole journal writing thing and that relaxation and focusing really will help me in achieving my goal. (Hope)

By identifying that her distraction was anxiety and managing her response she was able to relax and refocus using breathing techniques and self-talk. The importance of relaxation in refocus contexts was further illustrated by Matt when he realized that he could not refocus (after sustaining a minor injury when he was tripped during a hockey game) until he calmed down: "When I got home I was yelling and cursing the whole time trying to think of a way I could get back faster. It wasn't until I calmed down that I was actually able to think properly." Relaxation was used both independently and in combination with other strategies by participants who needed to refocus.

Cue words were used by half of the participants as a focus enhancement strategy to refocus after a distraction arose. As previously mentioned, Nicole often used her cue word "climb" to refocus. Adam was able to refocus successfully after a distraction following a break during a study session. "When I returned to continue my study session, I used the key words 'focus' and 'block' (as in block distraction) at the beginning to re-focus my attention towards my work." Since he was then able to focus for an additional 45 minutes, this action taken to refocus translated directly into increased study time. One final example illustrated cue words and relaxation to refocus applied in a daily living context. Adam was able to manage a conflict with

his girlfriend by taking control of his own reactions and emotions and using breathing and cue words to act the way he wanted.

When my girlfriend and I argue I usually stick with what I feel is right, and try to argue my side to exhaustion. Yesterday I used my focus skills to calm down during the argument and to hear her side and opinion. I told myself to “stop” and “think”. The “stop” thought made me stop all of my thought process, and “think” allowed me to truly hear what she was trying to tell me. After I was calmed, I helped calm her down. We both took a few deep breaths and then were able to talk out the disagreement instead of arguing. I found by calming myself down (as well as her), instead of acting on pure emotion, we were able to resolve the conflict a lot quicker and effectively. This example demonstrated to me how I was able to override emotion, to help resolve a conflict. (Adam)

Cue words were quick and simple words that were used both out loud and mentally to refocus in the desired context.

Finally, two specific refocusing strategies were presented by Orlick (2005) during the course and applied by participants to refocus. The first was a simple and specific strategy for shifting focus entitled Umbalakiki. It calls for the individual to imagine putting aside the negative or distracting thoughts by physically placing them elsewhere, only to be picked up again if desired or necessary at some point in the future. As previously mentioned, in the results section (presenting focus as exclusive thoughts) Jennifer was able to refocus during her ringette game by using Umbalakiki. She metaphorically placed her anger into her ringette stick and later scored. She used this refocusing strategy instead of allowing her frustration to limit her performance and had a successful game.

Changing channels was the other refocus strategy introduced to the class during a lecture on positive living skills for children. This strategy aims to teach young people to take control of their focus channels, as you would with a remote control for your television, and simply push a button to change the channel from something undesirable to something positive. Two participants applied this strategy along with their own strategies to control their thoughts and

direct their focus towards what was the most beneficial at the time. Interestingly, this approach was helpful in both participants' respective relationships. To illustrate this strategy's use, an example is presented from when Adam changed channels to avoid getting angry; his girlfriend was not ready to leave the house on time.

As I started to feel very impatient, I took a deep breath, knew that she was on her way, and just tried to relax. I realized that it was not the end of the world if we were a few minutes late for class, and decided to change channels.

In this case it was more beneficial to shift focus than to continue getting angry. Participants learned to respond to distractions and refocus on a preferred target by applying a combination of strategies: incorporating relaxation, cue words, Orlick's (2005) refocus strategies, problem solving and planning.

In closing, to illustrate the manner in which action was taken using a variety of strategies in tandem in a single context to enhance focus, a specific example is presented. In this case, as with many of the participants, a combination of awareness and deliberate practice with goal-setting and finally self-evaluation allowed Julia to increase the quality of his focus.

Recognizing when I have shifted into a negative mood and making the transition into a positive one, is one [focus enhancement area] that I have gotten better at but could still use some improvement. Often I become overwhelmed with the idea of the final outcome that I am to produce, especially when it is something like an essay or project. To avoid this I have broken down the two projects into subsections which I will complete one at a time. This way I will feel less stressed as I can actually see the progress I am making and how everything is coming together as opposed to completing random parts here and there in a poorly organized manner. Also, I have allotted time slots in my day for breaks to give myself a chance to relax and regenerate while I am writing. This way I am aware of the mental state I am in, and can re-evaluate and shift towards a more positive one before I reach a highly negative mind frame. Using these strategies I believe I am creating a more positive and beneficial work environment for myself where I can reach my potential without stressful and damaging distractions.

*Reflection*

Since participants were instructed to keep journals to report their ongoing experiences related to focus enhancement, their FEP entries inherently contained numerous personal reflections. All ten participants shared many reflections on their journeys, primarily through story-telling and critical reflection after specific successes and failure experiences with focus enhancement. Reflection occurred when a participant took the time to think back to a previous experience that was related to an effective or ineffective focus. For example, one participant reflected on the how he had taken focused action and improved his focus.

This proved to help me stay focused on what was to be done and when, much unlike before when I was unmotivated and lacked direction. Because I was on a strict schedule, I had less time to distract myself and made it to the gym without hesitation. It felt really good to know that I had planned on going to the gym and then actually made it there. This allowed me to see that the direction I take and decisions I make are governed by my own control and that only I can make what I want to happen actually happen. (Julia)

*Through story telling.* At times simply writing the story of an experience provided instances for participants to reflect in meaningful ways about their focus and who controls their focus. After having a bad night and feeling discouraged academically, Elaine woke the next day with a clear mind and applied her focus enhancement strategies at the gym and prepared for her school day. She was then sitting on the steps outside the Montpetit Hall (university building) enjoying gorgeous weather and was inspired to write about her turnaround.

This beautiful day has lifted my spirits and motivated me to get down to business and finish my paper. I feel fantastic today and I just had to share that with someone. Nothing can beat this feeling at this moment and I have Terry [Orlick]'s tactics [class content] and encouraging words to thank for it. It's amazing what sunshine can do for a person! Start fresh tomorrow. (Elaine)

Stories also emerged from specific unpredictable challenges that occurred during the timeframe of the course. Participants who wrote about these instances in their FEPs often made references

to ways in which focus enhancement concepts influenced them. Near the end of the course, Elaine told a story about how she was able to cope with the potential death of a loved one by applying some of skills she had learned.

This weekend, we were out grocery shopping on Saturday when I received a phone call from my father telling me that my 91-year-old grandmother was in the hospital with several problems and they weren't sure if she was going to make it. I was devastated of course, but my boyfriend and his family comforted me and helped me recover quickly. I continued with the task of grocery shopping and maintained a calm, cool and collected mental state. I focused on the positives [like how fortunate I was to have had her in my life all these years] and told myself that she would pull through. Before this, I was agitated and started to get stressed out about the situation. We then went home and I made some calls to locate my parents and find out the situation. I finally got a hold of my parents and I was told that she had pulled through and could possibly go home that same night! After I hung up the phone, I stayed in my room and did a short breathing exercise to relax myself. It worked! I felt a sense of calm pass over me and I just kept thinking how thankful I was that I had been introduced to Terry's [applied course content for focus and life enhancement] I had a relaxing, positive weekend during which I maintained a connected focus. (Elaine)

Story-telling appeared to be a natural way in which participants conveyed their experiences and interjected comments on how their focus was evolving.

*Critical reflection.* Certain instances of reflection were more analytical, explicitly searching the experience for factors contributing to the process or outcome. This at times required participants to think critically and make decisions about how they wanted to change or maintain their current actions. This more introspective reflection was a process building towards drawing lessons from the experience. In some cases this appeared as a specific self-evaluation process.

Julia's reflections led her to the central reason she was not moving forward with her stated goals:

I am really glad I took it upon myself to maintain a positive attitude regarding my negligence in working out over the past week. I believe this strategy allowed me to effectively assess the situation and build up enough hope and courage to continue with my training program. I realized that the main reason I did not make it to the gym was because I was not making it a priority.

*Following successful experiences.* One type of critical reflection occurred when a rewarding focus experience was reflected upon. For example, when a small or large goal was reached, it was very helpful for participants to write about this in their FEP journal. The positive experience became a topic worthy of thought and reflection through composing a journal entry to convey the positive experience.

After leaving the class lecture tonight, I felt happy, and at ease. I never once lost focus during the lecture, something that I struggle with in school. I don't know whether it was because of the amazing movie we watched (Touching the Void) or whether I was focusing on being connected, but I managed to not become distracted throughout the lecture. So you can imagine the relief I felt [considering my struggle with my learning disability] when I realized after the lecture that I had maintained focus throughout the three hours. (Elaine)

This participant briefly told the story of her success achieving a focus goal. Her experience of being able to sustain a focused connection sparked a newfound belief in her personal capacity to achieve her goals. This type of reflection after a successful experience was useful to identify, after the fact, what perspective or focus strategies they had taken to achieve success. This allowed participants to clarify their success elements. Pete was having trouble focusing and he paused to do a relaxation exercise and felt that taking that action improved his studying.

While I was reading my mind kept wondering and thinking about the game later that night... After clearing my head for those few minutes, I was able to keep my focus on my reading for a greater period of time. Although I would still start to think about the game from time to time, I got a lot more out of my studying than I believe I would have if I did not do this relaxation technique.

In another instance several days later, the same participant was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the work he needed to do. Again, he took action by doing a relaxation exercise and reflected upon how that influenced him. "I really believe that by taking a bit of time for myself to relax, helped put me in a more focused and positive state of mind which translated into me being able

to perform better in my school work” (Pete). He was repeatedly reflecting upon his action to identify that when he relaxed he experienced enhanced focus.

Some participants’ reflections on successful experiences occurred after the planned application of a specific technique they had selected to enhance their focus. Christine, for example, was using “changing channels” and “emergency break” to stop her negative thoughts and shift focus. He reflected on how effective the strategy was and that he still needs to refine his approach.

Today the use of the “emergency break” was highly beneficial. When I found myself whining or being negative I just said "woah- pull the break." I realized that it was not productive at all to be thinking like that and turned my perspective around to a positive one. This process will still need practice, to optimize its effects but I found that it worked really well, and I will use it in the future. It did reduce the time that I was negative greatly, which in turn reduced my time of distraction and improved my ability to refocus to a positive and connected focus.

Another example of a specific strategy that was reflected upon was achieving small goals. This form of preparation and action was applied by participants and set up small successes which motivated participants to continue pursuing their focus enhancement. An example of reflection upon success through goals setting was when Hope had set mini-goals for an assignment to help her to finish a certain portion before her soccer game.

Because of this [small goal setting], I was able to stay positive while playing in my game because I was happy with myself for accomplishing my goals. When I got home I not only finished my third part to my project, but I also had time to write this journal. I guess it's not a coincidence. Positive thinking really does alter your own future. It's funny because it is such a simple concept, but when it is applied, it actually works.

*Following failure experiences.* Although successful experiences provided inspiration and instances for participants to reflect on what was working to enhance focus, failures were a strong incentive for participants to reflect upon experience. Failure stimulated reflection regarding failure generally, ways in which participants could act differently, sources of distraction and

instances of partial success. Examples of reflection on experiencing a failure in general were described by participants during university classes.

This is my graduating year and I find myself drifting in and out of class and work and home but not really connecting to anything in particular. On the few occasions where I do come to and realize how far behind I'm getting I start to panic and stress myself and this only makes things worse. I really do want to try and regain some ground but every time I try and do some work or catch up I just fade out or get distracted. (Nicole)

While Nicole struggled with her schoolwork throughout the semester, she did apply cue words and focused on positive perspectives. She stated near the end of the semester that her focus really did improve over those weeks since she began to enhance her focus through this course.

Participants were able to find points to improve upon following setbacks or failures.

A general sense of failure to focus, across various life contexts, was expressed by some participants. Pete reflected on his general inability to focus at the start of the course. He realized that while there were many areas of his life in which he could make improvements, he had not decided on specific things to do to improve his focus.

I do not feel that my focus is at the level I want it to be. My mind is constantly racing with anything and everything that I can think about. Anything from school work, practice times, and what am I going to eat for dinner, all of these areas of my life seem to be consuming my thoughts during the day. I am unable to focus all of my energy and potential to one specific task at a time. Although I am having trouble with this part of my mental training (living in the moment), I believe that I may have a reason for why I am having such difficulty. I do not feel that I have completed the first element of the wheel of excellence: commitment...I need to make my goals more specific, so that I will be able to achieve them.

Pete was realizing that if he wanted to change his focus then he would have to commit to act on making those changes. Failure at focusing certainly presented opportunities for participants to reflect on ways in which they could act differently to avoid those focus failures.

Yesterday I didn't really plan out my day and found that I wasted a good portion of time when I could have been working out or doing some homework.

Nevertheless, I decided to take yesterday as a learning experience on how I do not want the rest of my days to go.

Failure presented a specific opportunity for reflection where participants could reflect on what went wrong and identify steps to correct the mistakes. Cases of failing to focus such as those presented above could be related to a lack of direction, commitment, concern or a clear target to focus on or the fact that no one has ever taught them how to focus or why focus is so important.

One participant reflected on the importance of focus when he made a link between his distractions and a failure to score in hockey.

Our game went into a shootout and I was chosen to be one of the shooters. The goalie I was facing was the best goalie in the league. I realized it was going to be hard to score. I started to worry about what others were going to say if I missed. The ref instructed me to go and I missed by a mile. This showed me that worrying about the outcome caused me to have a horrible shootout. From that point on I knew thinking about the final outcome was not something that would help me boost my confidence in important times. And that next time something like this occurs I will use my refocus plan and a previous confidence boosting moment to try and score. (Matt)

The above participant felt that his distracting thoughts and concern with the outcome of his performance kept him from doing what he wanted to do, but it also gave him a good reason to focus on preparing himself to do what he wants to do. Another kind of distraction kept Hope from reaching her goals for studying.

I told myself that I would only take an hour break. Well it seems that I got a little distracted because as I looked back at the time after eating and watching some TV and chatting with friends, I found that it was close to a 4 hour break instead of an hour break. I was very discouraged to go back and do work but it had me thinking. In order for me to see if this exercise will actually benefit me, I needed to refocus on what my goal of this week was... [Professor Orlick] said that you control of your own focus, and it's your choice to take certain actions to achieve these goals. So even though I did not want to study anymore, I knew I had to because only through actions will I achieve my goals.

Another source of failure to focus was due to distractions. Distractions creating a problem during the preparation for action phase were discussed by the following participant. In trying to

accomplish both schoolwork and study a soccer playbook in a short period of time before the game, Hope in fact limited her performance and she reflected on how she felt this happened.

I have done this play for 6 years of my life and I have never done it wrong until today. I think this is due to me trying to multitask. I didn't put my full focus into either my school work or playbook. I learned that even though something seems simple, if you don't put your full focus into it, you do not get the best results. I think that if I just focused on each thing separately, that I would have never messed up the play.

Since part of focus enhancement involves applying strategies to refocus, many participants were taking action to try to manage distractions as they arose. Of the various strategies applied, several instances of failure in these efforts were conveyed. Nicole often had to work long days combining school work, lectures, part-time employment and sport. To help manage her load, she began using the cue word "relax" between activities. While this at times provided a boost of positive energy for her, she was not consistently able to refocus.

I kept myself positive and avoided thinking about how long my day was going to be. Every time I found myself getting down about how much longer I had to go in the class or my day, I tried to switch gears immediately and think about something else within the moment that I was in. Sometimes it worked and others it didn't but I got a chance to sit quietly and relax at lunch and then again after school so I was able to recharge my batteries a bit. (Nicole)

Partial successes were also reported through reflection. In this type of situation there were some success and some failure in the experience. Near the end of the FEP, after several months of practice, one participant was refining his use of cue words to focus in the library.

The use of key words was successful in some aspects but unsuccessful in others. It was successful in the fact that as soon as I said the key word, I was instantly able to refocus and be in the present. This did reduce the time of distraction, as well as improve the quality, connectedness and positivity of my focus. However, a problem that I found was that by the time I realized I needed to say the key word to myself; I was already on my way back to focusing. I think I need to practice this approach to improve on it because I think it can be developed further and work for me. (Christine)

By reflecting on the reasons for partial success or failure, Christine was improving her ability to apply strategies to enhance the duration and consistency of her focus. This process of reflecting upon failures or partial successes was repeated as he reflected upon the sources and factors contributing to his failures. Several weeks later, Christine further clarified that “[her] focus was distracted and [she] was often unable to refocus after a negative thing happened... it is in times of challenge and setbacks that you need your positive thinking skills to overcome the challenge.” Through reflection after a failure she clarified that her positive thinking when facing adversity would have to improve; she made this his next goal. One final example of reflection on partial success was when Hope thought about her problem of giving in to distractions.

Today I got home from class had a bite to eat and watched some TV. I have a little assignment to do that is due on Thursday for one of my classes. I have to stay I got a little distracted today. I didn't end up finishing my assignment that is due on Thursday. I know that I will finish it and it will be good but I set it as my goal to finish it today but I didn't achieve my goal. I got too distracted with the things around me and my environment and I didn't get refocused on what I had set as my goal for today. I did not have distraction control today because I gave into my distractions. When I started to write this journal entry, I felt negative. This is the first time that I haven't finished the goal that I set out for myself. But I know that I can not stay negative and I know this from writing these journals. I decided that I will take a few deep breaths and tell myself that I will get it done tomorrow. I learned that I have to control my distractions better. I think the reason I didn't today was because I was on a break from school last week so I was in the mind set of not doing work. Another good reason that I think these journals work is that if I didn't reflect after my day, I wouldn't have realized I didn't achieve my goal. My goal tomorrow is to focus on my assignment and actually get it done which I am sure that I will do. (Hope)

This participant attributed a portion of learning from experience to writing her reflections in her journal. The reflection she engaged in through the process of journal writing required reviewing and revisiting actions, focus experiences, successes and failures. Overall, reflections regarding experiences of success, failure and partial success provided an opportunity for participants to revisit experiences and potentially draw lessons for future actions.

*Lessons Learned*

Lessons learned were drawn by participants and conveyed in statements that were generally found within or immediately following reflection. These lessons were often brief statements expressing the essence of what they learned from and experienced. Participants expressed lessons learned regarding focus related to self-awareness, clarifying habits, losing and gaining focus, and specific strategies for focus improvement.

*General lessons.* From the course material and the participant experiences related to focus enhancement they drew a variety of lessons. An example of one such lesson is when Ken commented about what he learned from one of Professor Orlick's messages. "One lesson that has really stuck with me is that of being fully connected to each experience... I believe it is a tremendous waste to be mentally absent during a great experience... I think that is really the key; to empty the mind of thoughts which are irrelevant to the task at hand". Being mentally present when physically present was a lesson learned by other participants as well. Jennifer learned from her own experience that with a quality focus work passes by quickly. "I stayed focused on getting my work done, and found that the time went by a lot faster. I think that is the key. When you want the time to go by fast, focus fully on the task at hand and before you know it, you're done and it's time to go home" (Jennifer). This focusing lesson related to the value of being connected in all contexts was specifically mentioned and supported by the majority of the participants in the study.

*Self-awareness.* Lessons learned by the participants in the present study were related to enhancing self-awareness about their ability to direct and control their own focus. Eight of the ten participants made specific statements to this effect. Statements were made, more often towards the beginning of the journal, about the need for gaining self-awareness of their existing

ability to focus and to identify a target for focus. For example Christine wrote, “I need to be aware of my focus before I can do further activities to improve it”. The importance of self-awareness became evident when participants began identifying fluctuations in focus. “My focus seems to be going up and down, but I know that it is normal at the start” (Elaine). After several weeks of trying to apply relevant strategies to enhance focus, participants reported additional lessons regarding self-awareness. “Even though I did not shift my focus this day to something more positive, it is something that I am aware of and will look to work towards” (Pete). Also, when participants became self-aware of a negative shift in their focus this permitted them to create an opportunity to do something to correct their focus. They were better able to identify and consequently act in more positive ways once they were able to draw lessons about their focus and their subsequent behaviour.

By being able to see the effects that my negative focus has on others and on myself, this makes me realize that if I am able to 'change channels' and shift to a more positive focus then I will impact those around me in a more positive way.  
(Pete)

In various ways, participants drew concrete lessons that conveyed the importance of self-awareness to the FEPs.

*Clarifying habits.* Participants drew concrete lessons by clarifying past and present habits related to best and less than best focus and performance. This was achieved by participants having reflected upon long-standing habits in an effort to enhance their present focus. “When I was young, I had some preconceived notions of what I would be capable of at some point. I can honestly say that, looking back, I am now capable of far more than I thought possible at one time” (Ken). This participant clarified how she never thought of herself as capable of improving her focus.

In some cases clarifying current focusing habits was achieved through a simple self-evaluation after a focus enhancement attempt. "I found that my focus was often not a positive focus or a fully connected focus. I am easily distracted by any and all sources during classes and schoolwork" (Christine). In other cases a heightened commitment to reflect on habits came after failure. During the second week of the course Matt was identifying distractions to improve his focus in hockey. "I realized that the audience was probably one of my greatest distractions. I was always checking to see if any scouts were watching or any hot girls. This was clearly not what I should have been concentrating on." He identified his habit of distraction by looking at the audience and took action to keep his eyes and focus inside the rink on executing his desired role in the game. Almost two months later Matt played one of his worst hockey games of the year in the presence of a scout before he really committed to identifying his focus habits and change them.

That night I was determined to reflect upon what had happened to see if there was any different ways I could have approached the situation that would have led to a better outcome. I realized that the whole time I was thinking too far ahead of myself and my future, instead of focusing on the present game.

Thinking too much about the past or the future limited the ability of participants to focus on the present moment. Partway through the course a class discussion centered on the impact of having a negative self-focus, self-criticism, anxiety and worry about doing poorly or achieving poor grades, and the value of a positive focus.. Following this lecture Elaine was able to identify her habit of having self-deprecating thoughts and she decided to try to change that negative habit into something more positive. By focusing on the positives instead of the negatives she was able to stop this negativity and was better able to focus on her strengths and complete her tasks.

*Losing focus.* Participant reflections led to lessons learned about the quality of their focus and the frequency of losing their focus. As they progressed through their individual focus

enhancement experiences, students become more familiar with how they personally could focus more effectively and how to sustain their focus; they could readily identify instances in which they desired a better quality focus. In fact, before this FEP many had not realized how poor their ability to focus really was. The lesson learned in this case was the clear need to improve focus by applying effective focusing strategies.

Tonight I reflected on my focusing abilities of today. I realized that I have horrible focus. I was unable to maintain my focus for any length of time. As well, even when I managed to focus, I found that it was often not positive focus or fully connected focus. I am easily distracted by any and all sources during classes and schoolwork. My longest attempt at focusing was much less than 10 minutes. I realized that I need to improve my best focus, my positive focus and my fully connected focus in the face of distractions and unpleasant school work and classes. I will look into different methods of improving my focus to attempt in days to come. (Christine)

For some participants the loss, or absence, of connected or sustained focus was habitual. Ken identified his habit of lacking focus in classroom lectures. He clearly stated that recognizing his lack of focus stimulated his work on gaining a better focus. He made the following entry in his journal a month after being introduced to the FEP when he was attempting to maintain his focus for a full 90 minute lecture.

I suppose I had a pretty good connection during this lecture but I have yet to sit through an entire lecture without spacing out for a period of time. However, I find I am generally becoming more focused as time goes by. I think that realizing I am unfocused was a tremendous first step. (Ken)

Simply becoming aware of a lack of focus and recognizing the added value of a positive and connected focus was a lesson learned by this participant and many others. Lessons learned about losing focus or not being able to sustain their best focus for a longer duration were valuable incentives as students pursued focus enhancement.

*Specific strategies for focus enhancement.* In the preparation phase, detailed focus planning was discussed including the value of incorporating relaxation, regeneration or personal breaks into one's day to encourage the focus enhancement process.

I have allotted time slots in my day for breaks to give myself a chance to relax and regenerate while I am writing. This way I am aware of the mental state I am in, and can re-evaluate and shift towards a more positive mental state before I reach a highly negative mind frame. (Julia)

Planning helped many participants and they reflected and drew clear lessons about the value of preparation. "This planning [for visualization and positive thinking] was done because I had learnt previously that if you have a plan you will accomplish a lot more" (Matt). Many lessons were evidently learned from strategies applied during the action phase. In the context of academia, during classroom lectures, Ken took action to apply a personalized strategy for monitoring his focus in the moment.

I try to continually check with myself to see if I am alert and focused. I think I did a good job of this today. One way I have noticed that I can check if I am connected is if I can recall what the professor was just talking about. If I am not focused, my thoughts wander and I will often lose track of what is being said. I have been using this simple test to make sure that I remain mentally present during the lectures.

The lessons learned by participants, drawn from reflections on their actions, conveyed the valuable lessons of applying positive focus and connected focus in real life situations. "Positive thinking really does alter your own future. It's funny because it is such a simple concept, but when it is applied, it actually works" (Hope).

### *Impact of the Experience*

The impact the FEP had on participants was related to their ability to improve their focus for learning, performing and to their perceptions on the quality of their daily living. All participants reported some improvement in the quality and duration of their focus. These focus

improvements were conveyed by participants as increased focus duration, increased perceived control, fewer distractions, fewer overwhelming thoughts, more positive focus and less negative thinking. All participants reported experiencing some improvement in the quality of their daily living including improved stress control and increased confidence.

*Increased focus quality and duration.* The FEP participants' experiences through a cyclic process of learning (including preparation, action, reflection and lessons learned) allowed all participants to reach a higher quality focus within the 12-week intervention period. Based on her journal entries, Julia described becoming more positive and connected in her focus as she pursued her personal goals. She did not comment specifically on the duration of her focus in her journal. Without being asked, nine of the ten participants commented on an improved quality and increased duration for their focus. Pete, for example, attested to increased focus duration during study sessions. "I could see how much more focused I was on the work and how I was able to sustain that focus for long periods of time." Another participant enhanced focus duration using progress goals. "By setting mini goals, I was able to stay fully connected for extended periods of time, and then unwind with a break" (Jennifer). Deciding to improve their focus and learning practical strategies to do so, including totally connecting with the task or experience, relaxation and goal setting, were used by participants to enhance and sustain focus.

*Increased perceived control of focus.* Most of the participants perceived an improvement in their ability to control focus over the course of this intervention. This appeared to be a fairly simple process for some participants once they decided to try to control focus. One participant reported that he surprised himself at his own ability to focus on the positive aspects of a situation that would normally have bothered him. "I had been able to accomplish such a mental shift so simply" (Adam). Other participants were slower to begin to control focus but gradually increased

their awareness of their ability. After a bad ringette game Jennifer stated, "I can easily switch from negative to positive (well not entirely easy), it is just recognizing when I need to change focus."

The perceived ability to improve or control focus was expressed by all participants in different ways throughout their FEPs. Half of the participants indicated a fairly high degree of perceived control over their ability to focus right from the start. Statements such as "at the beginning of this course, I took a step back and began to look at what I could control, and what I could not" (Adam) indicated a high degree of perceived control. Nonetheless, those participants still increased their perceived control over focus to an even higher level or to a more consistently positive focus throughout the FEP. For others it took many weeks for them to express a sense of control over their action towards focus enhancement. Elaine expressed her enthusiasm yet low perceived control over focus at the beginning of the course. "I am hoping that Terry's words will teach me to focus on the effective positive aspects that will help me to become a stronger, more positively focused person." Four weeks into the course, the wording in her journal reflected increased perceived control. Her goal setting and focused action progressed until, even when faced with setbacks, she was able to concentrate on improving her focus and well-being. At different rates all participants improved their perceived control over focus.

*Fewer distractions.* Participants in this study found ways to either remove themselves from distractions or not pay attention to potential distractions as they progressed through the FEP. In many cases, this required creating an external or internal environment less likely to contain distractions or finding ways to focus through distractions; one participant described the library as such a place. "I studied for a good amount of time, while being fully connected. I did this in the library where it is quiet and there is no MSN [online messaging program] and no

distractions” (Jennifer). In other cases, like with Matt in a sporting context, the individual made a decision to focus on the present task. He “eliminated all the external distractions” by keeping his focus inside the rink on what he was doing rather than looking into the crowd or thinking about anything else. Elaine was less clear about how distractions were controlled. “I don't know whether it was because I was focusing on being connected, but [for the first time ever] I managed to not become distracted throughout the lecture” (Elaine). Through focus planning or cognitive or environmental adjustments, participants expressed experiencing fewer distractions as they moved through their FEP. This is yet another important benefit of teaching people how to enhance their ability to focus. Fewer distractions appeared to be a significant, positive consequence of the participants’ efforts to move towards improved focus.

*Fewer overwhelming thoughts.* After completing a relaxation exercise one participant commented, “This was helpful in bringing my mind to a peaceful state as opposed to my normal state where I am thinking about a million things at once” (Julia). Another participant shared that when she is able to focus on hockey there are few thoughts on her mind. “For those one to two hours, there is nothing racing around my head” (Elaine). Focus enhancement appeared to occur in parallel with participants’ descriptions of decreased distractions or fewer thoughts. In some cases participants made a deliberate choice with respect to how they wanted to approach the tasks upon which they wanted to focus. “I made a conscious choice to not let myself get overwhelmed with my workload” (Nicole). This participant chose her perspective to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Christine took a break to rejuvenate her focus for studying. “I felt that my focus was more positive and connected [after taking a little break] because I wasn't as frazzled or overwhelmed.” By learning to make good choices regarding what to focus on and how to achieve that focus, participants were better able to “control” their focus or positively impact their

capacity to cope with distractions or stress, and therefore were able to feel more in control and less overwhelmed.

*Less negative thinking.* Participants described a decrease in negative thoughts as they moved through their FEP. One participant reported on his most successful sport performance (during this project) where he was successful at blocking out all negative thinking. “Not once did I find myself worried or doubting myself as I made my way down the ice” (Matt). In another case in order to focus successfully a participant described completely releasing all negative thoughts. “I just kind of let go of all my negativities” (Jennifer). Others participants changed the direction of their thoughts. “After I turned my negative attitude into a positive one, I directed it towards my school work” (Hope). “I found it was easier to refocus with a positive outlook than a negative one” (Christine). One of the strongest impacts of the FEP, appears to have been an improved capacity to regulate one’s negative thinking and, in turn, focus on more of the positives or beneficial aspects of one’s experience. Elaine’s comment summarized this point. “I am a more positive person and my life is less stressful now than before I met Terry [through this course].” A journal entry from Adam described the impact that this focus enhancement course had on participants in their daily living.

I have noticed since I have been taking this class, that my anxiety attack episodes have decreased substantially. I have been able to stop them when I feel as though one is approaching. I have also noted that I have been less anxious over all, and that aspects of my life which were suffering (relationships & my health), are beginning to get back on track. (Adam)

The impact moved beyond enhancement of focus in learning and performance contexts, to improved stress control enhanced confidence and quality of living.

*Stress control in daily living.* During the experience of focus enhancement, stress was alleviated or perceived to be gone altogether. Towards the end of his journal Adam reflected

upon the progress he had made in his attitude towards stress and time management and how he achieved this change.

From the class lectures and the readings I have learned to 'let go' of the things in which I cannot control. I have been using self talk occasionally, but the majority of my efforts have been simply due to dropping these issues [that I cannot control] mentally. I simply do not attend to them, and rather focus on what I can control. I will tell myself that I cannot do anything about this particular issue, and therefore there is no sense in thinking about it. (Adam)

The course content reinforced this participant's existing sense of control and he was able to increase his ability to manage stress successfully. Another participant who made a plan to complete his schoolwork and focused on specific tasks commented: "Instantly I felt some of the stress go away because I was now not so confused to as what I was going to do" (Matt). Another participant wrote about the impact that her improved stress control had when she focused on school work. "The reduced stress level allows me to focus more positively and in a more connected manner throughout classes and schoolwork" (Christine). Many other participants wrote about taking action to manage stress by deciding not to be stressed and shifting focus to other aspects of an experience. In an early journal entry, Adam wrote about moving through a very crowded hallway when he was pressed for time. He identified that all he could do was control his thoughts, so he began to visualize and do a relaxation technique and decided not to feel stressed.

I started thinking about how late I was (or was going to be) and the amount of slow moving people. I found that the more I thought about this, the more anxious and late I felt and there seemed to be the more people in the hallway blocking me. I then began to visualize that I was not going to be late. I acknowledged that the crowdedness was out of my control, and that I could only move as fast as the person in front of me. I decided instead of being stressed out at something I could not control, I would just let the situation be, and understand that there was not much I could do. I took a deep breath, and felt a sense of calm, and relaxation. I just simply decided that I was not going to be anxious or stressed. This was the first time that I was able to put into practice a lesson from Terry's class.

*Confidence and life enhancement.* All but one of the participants in this study wrote in their journals about the link between positive focus and confidence. Some of these examples are presented below. Matt struggled in his FEP to improve his focus in hockey. He eventually identified a lack of confidence in his own skills as a big part of the problem and took action to use positive thinking along with his focus enhancement strategies. "I used a reminder to keep myself focused the whole way down the ice and I thought of a positive confidence boosting moment to make sure I believed in myself before I shot the puck. It seemed to work" (Matt). He reminded himself to keep his legs moving while he was on a breakaway and thought of a previous experience when he had scored and was then able to actually score again.

Another example linking confidence with focus came from a participant who commented on how she focused on getting organized to accomplish quality work and bring quality a focus to her pursuits at the beginning of her day.

This gave me more confidence in myself that I could complete what I needed to get done during the day, which provided me with a more positive focus throughout the day...It gave me a sense of "I can do this" and connected me with my focus and the material...As a result, I felt less stressed and disconnected during class today and was able to improve my quality of focus for a longer period of time. (Christine)

Choosing your best focus and acting on that choice is linked with a feeling of confidence and personal control both in facilitating a connected focus as well as finding quality in the experience of focus and life itself. In conclusion, the course had a positive impact on participants in this study; they all cited numerous specific examples of positive effects both on focus enhancement and on quality of life in general. Participants improved the duration of their focus and their perceived ability to control and direct their focus in positive ways. They reported fewer distractions and fewer distracting thoughts. Generally they improved their confidence and

reported a variety of life enhancement impact such as better learning, improved performance and stronger interpersonal relationships. Finally, less negative thinking was expressed by all participants and many of them reported improved stress control in daily living. All participants reported a positive real-world impact emerging from the FEP experience

## CHAPTER 5

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of university students in a classroom-based focus enhancement project (FEP) and to explore the perceived impact of that experience. The secondary purpose was to identify a participant-defined, experientially-based description of focus. Focus enhancement efforts were applied by participants in a wide variety of contexts, including school work, sport, relationships and healthy living. Prior to this study research had not been conducted targeting the specific goal of focus enhancement delivered through group intervention. This study demonstrated that focus enhancement strategies could be taught in a university classroom environment and applied in a variety of useful ways in real world contexts. Over the course of this 12 week course, students were able to improve their focus and experienced positive changes in their performance and their lives outside of their performance domains. Three main research questions guided this study: (1) what are the essential elements of the phenomenon of focus according to these participants? (2) what did students experience or do to enhance their focus during the intervention? (2a) how did students implement their efforts for focus enhancement? (2b) what approaches worked well and what approaches did not work well? (3) what impact, if any, did the FEP experience have on participants?

Overall, results indicated that participants' definition of focus included having exclusive thoughts and a sense of connection with a subject in the present moment. The process of focus enhancement was an ongoing cycle which included phases of preparation, focused action, reflection, and lessons learned. These phases were used to present an experience that was subjective and participants did not necessarily experience the focus enhancement cycle in that order or through every phase each time they attempted to enhance their focus. This finding is

representative of the individual nature of experience and supports the constructivist position adopted in the present research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Schwandt, 1994). Each phase involved applying focus enhancement strategies presented by Orlick (2008) to be selected, applied and adapted individually by participants with increasing efficiency through self-awareness and focused action. As previously stated, Orlick's intervention approach was not prescriptive in specifying what strategies students should apply or how they should apply them in order to enhance focus; instead, he provided examples, approaches and resources from which students could freely apply and adapt strategies. Orlick's approach required that students use self-awareness and self-evaluation and report experiences through journaling. All participants reported less negative thinking and, without directly being asked, nine participants described an increased duration of their focus in various contexts. The only participant who did not mention increased duration was Julia who was working towards fitness goals and she instead described having a much more positive perspective. Finally, almost all participants reported gains in confidence, general life enhancement and stress management skills.

#### *Essential Elements of Focus*

Shaw, Gorely and Corban (2005) noted a lack of clarity in focus-related terminology. The present study responded by identifying the essential elements of participants' focus experience, which in itself adds something of value to the literature. The elements of exclusivity, present moment and connection identified in the current study extend Weinberg and Gould's (2003) findings related to concentration by confirming and clarifying the distinctions between elements of concentration and focus. Exclusivity, the first of three essential elements of focus according to participants, relates to the concept of selectivity (targeting specific aspects of the environment) identified as an element of concentration (Abernethy, Summers, & Ford, 1998; Weinberg and

Gould, 2003). Cashmore's (2002) addition to the definition of concentration, the need to be "at the same time excluding, at least partially, several other [features of our environment]" (p.70), is consistent with the exclusivity element of focus. A selective ability to disengage from unnecessary or irrelevant information, according to Abernethy's (2001) definition of selective attention, is comparable to exclusivity; therefore, exclusivity is confirmed and remains central to these closely-related concepts. However, exclusivity alone fails to convey the meaning of focus because participants did not focus exclusively on just any target; they focused on what was happening.

According to participants, the second essential element of focus was to remain in the present moment. If you recall, it was a focus on the present that allowed Julia to keep her head down and carry herself through a gruelling winter hike. The work of Orlick (1998; 2008), Kabat-Zinn (1994), Wilson et al. (2006) has alluded to a present moment aspect of focus; yet, until the present study had not highlighted the present moment as central to defining an experience of focus.

Wilson and colleagues (2006) noted that "Concentration means focusing, not forcing, one's attention on a task perceived as shielding ourselves from stimuli that might penetrate and disturb our focus of attention" (p. 405). Concentration leaves an individual with more openness to external information while exclusive focus has been described as a total connection with the present task. Weinberg and Gould's (2003) definition of concentration as requiring a "shifting attentional focus when necessary" (p. 353) aligns with this study's three essential elements of focus; in order to concentrate effectively, the individual's exclusive, present moment and connected focus must shift to a new exclusive, present moment and connected subject when necessary.

Identifying essential elements of focus may be useful in applied intervention settings to support performance enhancement efforts by encouraging individuals to clarify personally relevant, exclusive, present moment focus targets. This may also prove useful in helping individuals to learn when to adjust their focus if it is off target. The dynamic nature of presenting a definition using only essential elements, or minimum requirements, for the experience of focus allows that definition to represent a base to which individuals can adapt their own interpretations. This would allow for varied and multiple personal definitions of focus to evolve over time and across contexts, and be regularly revisited and modified.

### *Personal Excellence*

The appeal of concentrating on personal excellence in research on performance enhancement (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Orlick, 1998) was confirmed in the current research findings, which indicates that the impact of intervention on participants was personal as well as performance-related. To reiterate, personal excellence “refers to the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks across the length of one’s life and the acquisition of personal qualities that contribute to optimal health and well-being” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 141). Participants in the present study reported health benefits that included increased self-confidence, improved management of existing medical conditions (i.e., panic attacks and abdominal cramping) and sleeping habits. The benefits of improved stress management, academic success, personal relationships and engaging in more meaningful social interactions can all contribute to a greater sense of well-being. This research was directed towards personal and performance excellence and results showed that the intervention did enhance both of these dimensions.

*Focus Enhancement Strategies*

Participants in the current study improved their skills at identifying and managing unwanted thoughts. These results reflect the findings of Wilson et al. (2006) who taught participants to observe and release performance-irrelevant information through calm and controlled reactions. Schmid and Peper (1982) wrote that by detaching and dissociating from surplus information individuals could enhance focus. In the present study, feeling stressed and overwhelmed emerged as limiting factors to the ability to focus. For example, in an academic context participants made comments such as, "I became overwhelmed with work load and felt a sense of panic because there was so much work to be done and I was already behind" (Christine). Process goals were one strategy that helped participants to alleviate stress and avoid or reduce the sense of being overwhelmed. This supports previous findings that students who are presented with focus enhancement strategies in a classroom setting report a positive impact on the ability to cope with stress and perform better (Taylor & Orlick, 2004). It also supports Roemer's (2003) findings where focus enhancement aided the recovery of anxiety and stress disorder patients in a clinical setting. Wilson et al. (2006) suggested that individuals should "learn to practice with a positive attitude and specified intention" (p. 419). All but one of participants in the current study described that they had learned to adopt a more positive and connected focus. This suggests that their thoughts and emotions related to stress and debilitating anxiety were more likely to be perceived as irrelevant information when trying to achieve the task at hand.

There are several potential explanations for participants' reportedly reduced stress and fewer thoughts of being overwhelmed when trying to meet various demands. If positive focus were linked to reduced stress, as present findings suggest, one explanation is offered by the information-processing position. Focus can theoretically be improved based upon "changes in

the assignment of pertinence arising as a consequence of the learner's expanding experiential base" (Abernethy, 2001, p. 73). Participants, under this assumption, would have learned through experience that high levels of debilitating anxiety and negative thoughts and emotions do not improve their focus or their quality of life and they would accommodate by lowering those factors' pertinence.

Improvement in reported stress control corroborates the Wilson et al.'s (2006) findings that focus can be enhanced by breaking a vicious ongoing cycle of poor focus relating to anxiety. They maintained that "lapses in concentration invite fear and self-doubt, and the resulting worry and anxiety lead to further increases in lack of concentration," (p.411). Following this assertion, participants in the current study reported both fewer worries and enhanced focus. Results indicate that the present intervention, based on setting goals to enhance focus with an emphasis on taking action, remaining positive and learning lessons for application throughout the pursuit, had a positive impact on enhanced focus and stress control of the participants.

The contribution of deliberate practice to participants' focus enhancement aligns with the position that focusing is a skill that can be developed and improved, among other strategies, through practice (Orlick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2006; Zimmerman, 2002). Practice was related to repeatedly planning focus targets, consciously acting upon strategies and reflecting upon experiences to self-evaluate. In this sense, aspects of a trial and error process were used to initiate practice of various strategies for focus enhancement. An example of when a participant was deliberately practicing was when Matt tried three different strategies for relaxation between each period of his hockey game in order to find out which worked best for him. He found that it was listening to his preferred music that got him into his best focus. This result supports, in part, a previously stated position from sport psychology that as athletes gain experience in a specific

sport they often improve focus by trial and error (Williams & Grant, 1999). However, practicing with a specified focus target, awareness, evaluating the process and progress, and acting on lessons, as did the participants in this study, accelerated progress and moved the participants beyond an informal trial and error process which can be a slow, inconsistent or unproductive path to consistent high quality focus for many athletes and performers.

Participants found value in clarifying the target they wanted to focus on prior to entering a performance, learning or self improvement situation. Some established a routine of selecting a focal point that they felt could help them stay connected to what was important to them in that context. Their pre-performance routines were less detailed than some of the pre-performance routines of high performance Olympic athletes reported in the literature (Boutcher & Crews, 1987; Orlick, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Salmela, 1980). This lower level of detail in routines is likely related to less experience with the performance focus enhancement process and lower demands for precision when compared with elite athletes. The student participants in the current study were free and encouraged by Orlick to establish their own focus enhancement strategies, which is in line with the constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). They planned their own basic focus routines and independently applied focus enhancement strategies to a variety of relevant contexts and they were successful in making personally meaningful improvements. Thus, the findings of the present study suggest that highly detailed performance protocols may not be necessary for enhancing focus in non-high performance settings, where an openness and flexibility within focus routines may be more in line with the needs of individuals.

Strategies were implemented with concern for the process of performance and remaining positive to enhance focus. The use of process goals, set both in preparation and during action, emerged as a significant contributing factor to the focus enhancement efforts of most

participants. Process goals (step-by-step approaches, mini-goals, focusing on the step in front of you) were not only effective in encouraging progress towards reaching dream goals but also in fully connecting participants with their focus in the present moment. This finding was consistent with the advice of practitioners and researchers advocating the use of process goals as a method of retaining focus during performance (Bull et al., 1996; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008). In many cases the small goals made larger focus tasks possible, creating smaller tasks to focus on, which collectively allowed participants to stay fully connected for extended periods of time.

The value of cue words for participants in the current study confirms previous research and applied work indicating the importance of using specific task relevant cues, or focus reminders, to direct focus towards productive thoughts, feelings and actions (Nideffer, 1986, 2006; Orlick, 2008; Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Cue words were reported as being very helpful to many participants, which echo the findings of Wilson et al. (2006), and cue word use transferred to enhance focus in various contexts. The content and frequency of cue utilization did vary by individual in degree of effectiveness. Nideffer and Sagal (2006) indicated that kinesthetic feelings could be a type of cue to direct focus. There were no examples of this specific strategy being applied by participants in the current study within performance settings. However, some participants did use kinesthetic cues to direct focus to specific sensations of breathing (such as rising and falling chest movements) as focus targets for relaxation and to fall asleep.

Relaxation techniques helped most participants improve their focus and contributed to their personal and performance excellence. This finding confirms that strategies aimed at attaining optimal activation levels contributed to focus enhancement (Hester & Orlick, 2006; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2006). Improved focus and relaxation skills often emerged in parallel for participants in the current study. They often used a combination of

techniques, such as breathing during a short break from studying, to relax and subsequently enhance their focus. A sense of relaxation or a relaxed, uncluttered or clear mind was a contributing factor to improved focus. In almost all attempts to refocus when a connection was lost, the application of a breathing technique or a specific refocusing technique was paired with the intention to shift focus back to the desired target. This relaxation and breathing as a paired refocusing combination worked very well for almost all participants. These results confirm previous research that has provided support for the value of relaxation to enhance focus (Bull, Albinson & Shambrook, 1996; Gauron, 1984; Nideffer and Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008; Wilson, Peper & Schmid, 2006).

Breathing techniques were one of the most common focus enhancement strategies used by participants. Since breathing techniques were used by nine out of ten participants these results confirm previous research promoting the use of relaxation to enhance focus (Bull et al., 1996; Gauron, 1984; Nideffer & Sagal, 2006; Orlick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2006). Of all the action taken by participants only three strategies (deliberate practice, identifying barriers and shifting to positive thoughts) were as commonly applied as breathing techniques.

It appears that a combination of strategies and process for learning skills created a successful journey to focus enhancement (Boutcher & Crews, 1987; Nideffer and Sagal, 2006, Orlick, 2008). The most essential skills applied in the current study appear to have been identifying an intended focus enhancement target, goal-setting, self-awareness, having a positive focus, relaxation, breathing, reflection and acting consistently on lessons learned. The specific manner in which the potential focusing enhancement strategies were applied appeared to be less significant than the fact that strategies were indeed applied. Regardless of whether or not they used a cue word focused on a process goal, participants benefited; if they reflected and drew a

concrete lesson related to how that strategy helped or did not help them enhance their focus, it was beneficial because it helped them to learn and develop their best focus.

Results of the current study confirm that an educational, skill-based approach to focus enhancement did lend itself to performance enhancement across contexts and personal development inside and outside of sport. Through classroom learning, journaling and an action (or strategy) based approach to focus enhancement this intervention enhanced participants' focus within the 12 week timeframe of the course. This study supports and extends Vealy's (1994) findings from an elite athletic context that showed that an intervention conducted in a classroom setting could, based on self-report, enhance performance and daily living in a student context.

#### *Focus Enhancement Experience*

Keeping a journal helped participants to set meaningful focus goals, monitor their planning, evaluate their focus in writing and become more aware of their process of focus enhancement. This likely contributed to enhancing self-awareness and overall focus. Considering that journal writing is not always an easy task, as a researcher, I inferred the main difficulties were related to students' hesitations in knowing what they should write, missing entries for several days or weeks and difficulty adopting a writing habit for making frequent entries. One participant commented in his journal that despite initially resenting the journaling component of the course, he found it to be incredibly valuable and rewarding and it strengthened his efforts and his resolve to continue to enhance focus. This does not mean that journal writing is a necessary component for focus enhancement for all people in all contexts, but it was helpful with university students in this classroom for the applied focus enhancement component of the course.

One less than positive result of the FEP product was that during the preparation phase some participants put effort into planning certain ambitious schedules or establishing reward

systems (e.g., breaks from study) for achieving optimal focus; yet, when it came time to act the participant was not always able to stick to that plan s/he had invested so much time in creating. This imbalance of over-preparing in minute detail or trying to accomplish too much appeared to lead to a lack of action, which did not contribute to initial focus enhancement. Also, when a participant set goals that were either too vague, or unrealistic, or without a time frame for action, then a goal of setting clear and simple focus goals and committing to act on them was effective for focus enhancement progress. Reflecting on experiences without drawing lessons for focused action was not effective for focus enhancement. For example when participants wrote at length about their problems without identifying action to correct them they did not improve their situation. This finding is consistent with the work of Moon (2006), which showed that purely descriptive types of reflection are of minimal use in learning.

The distinction between lessons learned and reflection, as described in the current study, was the presence or lack of a clear, experientially-relevant conclusion statement. Lessons learned were discovered through reflection, but reflection did not always lead to lessons learned. For example, reflection could have been critical (e.g., focusing on problems) but still not conclude with any lesson learned. Reflection may have included a precursor thought pattern, which led to lessons learned or it could also have been limited to simply describing experience. Journaling in this case may have served another important purpose to the participant, perhaps providing an outlet for the expression of thoughts and emotions without speaking to another person directly. However, to be more useful to participants' focus enhancement, process reflection needed to include or be followed up with some type of lesson or action to be taken in future focus enhancement efforts.

One final situation where participants failed to act effectively for focus enhancement progress can be addressed using the ongoing experience cycle; when participants were drawing lessons without applying those lessons in preparation for future attempts to focus then they were not able to benefit from the lesson. Wonderful learning opportunities were wasted when students failed to translate valuable hard-earned lessons into concrete future-focused actions. They were rarely aware of this lost opportunity for making improvements. The significance of identifying failed approaches lies in the potential to identify them for future interventions and perhaps warn or direct those students away from approaches that had failed them before. This may be particularly useful to accelerate the identification and application of efficient strategies and approaches for students within the timeframe of a classroom based intervention.

According to the journal of the ten participants the academic classroom context that was used in this study was effective in enhancing their focus. Based on their feedback, the opportunity those university students had to learn, refine, and apply focus enhancement strategies in sport and life had a positive impact on their lives. This study was the first to apply Orlick's focus enhancement program to a university classroom setting. Previous studies have successfully applied parts of this program with elementary students (Taylor & Orlick, 2004) and high school students (Partridge, 2007)

Curry & Maniar (2004) introduced an applied performance enhancement project within an approved academic course, open to all students, entitled "principles of optimal performance" (p. 270) in an American university. This intervention was directed specifically towards student-athletes, citing the intention of achieving performance enhancement in sport. This was done primarily through coursework and required cognitive-behavioural homework and written assignments. This proved to be successful based on self-report and enhanced coach ratings of

sport performance at the end of the semester. The current study intervention was also a full semester academic course and delivered in a Canadian university. The present study's course was not directed towards university athletes, however, similarly presented a variety of performance enhancement strategies. Homework was also applied, but written reports were not submitted in the current intervention until the end of the course and were directed specifically towards focus enhancement. The applied component of the course was entirely at the discretion of the students, which permitted a broad variety of performance and life enhancement contexts including academia, recreational sport, interpersonal relations, musical performance, work, fitness, and stress management, dealing with physical and academic challenges, job interviews, grad school and medical school interviews, loss of loved ones, sleeping, enhancing the joy in their lives, and so forth. The breadth of application contexts was vast and the objective of the research component of the study was directed towards examining reported experience rather than measuring performance outcomes. The performance enhancement strategies developed primarily for sport performance enhancement have transferred exceedingly well into other areas of the lives of students who attempted to improve their focus.

Providing students easy access to applied focus-specific learning materials, simple practical ideas and relevant feedback within the classroom context exposed students to strategies that could be readily applied. During the participants' preparation phase early in the course it was important to provide relevant strategies for positive focused action for participants to apply towards enhancing their focus. This provided them with some relevant tools and real world examples for enhancing focus and encouraged them to repeatedly make attempts to enhance their own focus. The intervention project provided an essential platform for positive action, which was reinforced through reflective journaling, coursework and meaningful class discussions. The

course work and class environment required that participants engage in some type of self-evaluation or reflection before acting, upon acting and after actions. One participant conveyed the value of this approach as follows: "I think that this journal writing helped me so much to focus that I am actually going to continue to do it...I have seen the positive effects that this journal and the tools gave me [so] I have to continue doing it in order to continue my success" Once participants are able to cycle through this ongoing learning process naturally, they are encouraged to continue along this focus enhancement path to further enhance the quality of their focus, the consistency of their focus, the duration of their focus and their ability to apply this focus to the many different contexts of their lives now and in the future.

#### *Limitations*

Several limitations of this study will be addressed. Participants would only have been involved in the present study after they chose to participate in the course, participate in the research and had their journals included for in-depth analysis if they contained sufficient detail. These factors would have systematically increased the likelihood that participants were fairly motivated, attended classes, and confident in having their views shared in research, which may make results more representative of more successful students in general. Furthermore, it is yet to be demonstrated that the reported positive impacts of the course can be maintained over time. The lack of contact with participants following the course completion eliminated the possibility to confirm accurate representation of their experiences. This concern was minimized by using as much as possible the direct words of the participants, however, misrepresentation remain a possibility. Finally, the limitation in having defined focus according to participants is that they were all Orlick's students and would hence be influenced by his perspective. The role of the professor cannot be isolated. The efforts of the students in the course would be modeled upon his

views and would likely aim to satisfy his interests in order to succeed in the course. Participants were all students who received a grade in the course and hence were inherently biased towards producing desirable results in the FEP to achieve good grades.

### *Implications*

The present study offers several ideas for use in the performance enhancement research field. Studying the experiences of students who did not perceive a change in their ability to focus would provide a valuable comparison with the experiences described in the present study. Since it was possible to simultaneously examine the impact of learning a performance enhancement skill (focus) and the impact of that skill in other areas of life, this should be considered in the study of elite performers. It would be valuable to address the increased perceived control over focus that emerged as a result of the current study as a factor in focus enhancement, possibly through pre-intervention testing, in future experimental research. The ongoing learning cycle that emerged in the present study may be useful to frame focus enhancement in other individual or group intervention settings and as a learning tool for the development of self-directed learning skills in academia (Zimmerman, 2002). Based on the success of the present intervention in a university classroom setting, it is suggested that a similar intervention study targeting focus enhancement be repeated and possibly be considered in a high school setting. Considering the positive impact in academic, personal and performance contexts future interventions may be of value to students, teachers, athletes and coaches.

The present study offers several ideas related to applied performance enhancement. In future large classroom interventions it may be beneficial to request a sample of each students' journal entries at several intervals during the course, representing each phase of preparation, action, reflection and lessons learned, in order to provide individual feedback to the learner

during the course. It may be valuable for the professor and teaching assistants to establish and guide small support groups to meet consistently during the course to complement the progress students make in the large classroom. Through regular contact ongoing and informal feedback, small discussions and guidance in journal writing and reflection, students may benefit further from the experience. Finally, the essential elements of focus and the ongoing learning cycle that emerged in the present study will be of value to any individuals who are interested in improving the quality of their lives. It has been demonstrated that individuals can target meaningful contexts, improve their success in those contexts and benefit from reflecting upon their successes and failures related to focus.

#### *Personal Lessons*

I was personally impressed that the intervention, given the uniqueness of each person making up that large group, made an impact on so many individuals in a relatively short period of time. This may be partially due to how Terry Orlick established openness in this large classroom context that allowed him to make contact with students in a meaningful way. The simplicity with which the goals and skills of the course were repeatedly conveyed appeared to facilitate the students' integration of these ideas into action to improve in their daily living. This helped them make changes, both small and large, which had significant impact on their lives. Many students were so moved by the broad and valuable applications of the skills they were learning that they shared their learning with others. In my view, when students become teachers themselves, this is indicative of meaningful learning and an enthusiasm for the material. Considering the broad contexts where focus is essential, I wholeheartedly believe in the potential application the present study's results may initiate. It is my hope that this valuable approach to focus enhancement and the strategies that worked best for participants will be shared with other

researchers and with practitioners who can have a positive impact on university students and performers in all areas of their lives.

To end on a more personal note, I will always value the traits of dedication, openness, patience and kindness displayed by the researchers who I have had the pleasure of working with over these past few years. It is the people behind the research (the participants, the researchers, and their roots) that bring life to the questions we ask. I will carry forward an appreciation for the knowledge and the incredible network of individuals that have come into my life over these years. Regarding myself as a person, I have discovered the utmost importance in creating a balance in life and respecting the passions that drive me. I know that I can fall and get back up again. I have been inspired to choose a path that will allow me to continue to learn and also to pursue supporting others, in living and in learning. I am so grateful to have found this.

Many stories, struggles and situations touched me deeply as I searched the pages of participant journals for the pieces of writing that would reveal to me the moments and experiences that reflect focus and its enhancement. Many poignant words came to life before my eyes to describe focus and to convey the total absorption and dichotomy of being both lost and found in a moment of focus. I humbly thank my participants, professors, parents and friends for sharing their worlds with me as I tried to better understand a concept that drives every moment of our lives: our focus.

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## Appendix A

*Participant FEP contexts*

<b>Participant #, pseudo name</b>		<b>Context for FEP (additional contexts of application)</b>
3	Jennifer	Academics & ringette (stress control, career preparation)
5	Ken	Academics & strength training (enhancing connection in daily living)
7	Adam	Daily living (social situations, relationship, weight training, academics)
14	Christine	Daily living (remaining in the present moment, focus to fall asleep)
16	Pete	Daily living (basketball coaching, relationship, weight training, academics)
20	Julia	Improve fitness (focus to fall asleep, focus on positive perspectives)
22	Matt	Hockey performance (confidence, focus on positive perspectives)
25	Nicole	Daily living (family frustrations, after suffering an arm injury)
53	Elaine	Academics & self-esteem (focus on positive perspectives)
54	Hope	Daily living (medical school dream, academics, positive perspectives)

Appendix B

*Recruitment text*

**Assessment of a University Classroom Intervention to**

**Improve Quality Focus**

Dear Applied Sport and Performance Psychology Student,

I will be conducting a study here at the University of Ottawa to assess a university classroom intervention to improve quality focus. The purpose of the study is to understand the role of concepts presented through class work, weekly readings, and an action driven focusing journal in improving the quality and consistency of student focus.

If you agree to be part of the study you are asked to release written coursework submitted during the APA 4116: Applied Sport and Performance Psychology class for evaluation from a research perspective. The information you share will remain strictly confidential. Anonymity will be assured by assigning a number to each journal so no names or identifying factors will appear and written comments that may be cited will be anonymous. Data collected will be accessible only to myself (anonymously) and to my teaching assistant (for coding and data analysis). If at any time you regret disclosing something about you or your learning the information will be excluded from the data analysis, destroyed and will not be reported in any form of communication.

**Benefits of this study:** The first benefit of this study is that we will learn more about the various ways students are learning and improving focus in an applied context. This information will help improve course design for future students by better understanding the learning processes of previous participants. Secondly, this study will build research in the area of large university classroom interventions settings. The results of this study will be presented to teachers and administrators in the field, educational researchers and the benefits to future professors and students are significant.

**Risks:** There is no risk of being identified by including your work in the study. The consent procedure for participating in this study is confidential and follows a format similar to what is done for University of Ottawa course evaluations. No one will be aware of who chose to participate until after final grades are allocated. Even at this point, written work will be coded by my teaching assistant and only then will I access the data. I will never be aware of who chose to participate or chose not to participate. This eliminates any risk of a conflict of interest between teaching and research.

**Participation in this study is voluntary. If you are interested in taking part in this study, please fill out and sign the attached consent form. In order to preserve confidentiality, all consent forms will be returned to the teaching assistant in the sealed envelope provided, whether the individual decides to participate or not.**

**Simple Joys,**

**Dr. Terry Orlick  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
School of Human Kinetics  
University of Ottawa  
335 -125 University St.  
Ottawa, K1N 6N5  
613-562-5800, ext. 4272  
excel@zoneofexcellence.ca**

## Appendix C

### *Consent forms*

**Title of the study:** Assessment of a university classroom intervention to improve quality focus

**Principal Researcher:** Dr. Terry Orlick, University of Ottawa  
Faculty of Health Sciences, School of Human Kinetics  
Email: excel@zoneofexcellence.ca Telephone: (613) 562-5800 ext. 4272

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Dr. Terry Orlick. The purpose of the study is to understand the role of concepts presented through class work, weekly readings, and an action driven focusing journal in improving the quality and consistency of student focus. The study will be conducted in English. My participation will consist of releasing my written coursework, completed as a requirement of the course APA 4116: Applied sport and performance psychology.

**Risks and Benefits:** My participation in this study will entail that I share the information I have prepared for course purposes. I have received assurance from the researcher that participation is entirely voluntary. No risk of a conflict of interest with grading exists since the decision to participate or not participate will never be known to the professor and will remain unknown entirely until all course evaluation is complete. This study is an opportunity to provide educators with important commentary on education practices which will be important for them to understand as part of good teaching practice. The results of this study will be presented to teachers and administrators in the field, educational researchers and the benefits to future professors and students are significant.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. In order to preserve confidentiality, all consent forms will be returned to the teaching assistant in the sealed envelope provided, whether I decide to participate or not. I understand that the contents will be used only for researching the assessment of the classroom intervention and that my confidentiality will be protected. At all times identity will remain confidential. Information which could lead to disclosure of the identity of any individual will be identified by code. If quoted in publication, participant identity will be protected.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected will be kept in a secure manner in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Dr. Terry Orlick (Montpetit Hall, 125 University, Room 355, Ottawa ON, K1N 6N5). It will be accessible only to Dr. Terry Orlick and his teaching assistant and will be kept for five years. Any inquiries about any part of the research being conducted should be addressed to Dr. Terry Orlick at (613) 562-5800 ext. 4272 or by email at excel@zoneofexcellence.ca.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, Ottawa ON, K1N 6N5, (613) 562-5841, or by email at ethics@uottawa.ca

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without suffering any negative consequence. I understand that only Dr. Terry Orlick's teaching assistant will be aware of who has agreed or disagreed to participate in the study and the identification of data by code will begin only after final marks are allocated. The professor, Dr. Terry Orlick, will never be aware of who has agreed or disagreed to participate in the study. I am aware that data collected may be

used by both Dr. Terry Orlick and his teaching assistant throughout the study. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be excluded from analysis and destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_ (*Name of participant*), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Dr. Terry Orlick of the School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant contact information (*Optional*):

Primary Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Alternate Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Titre de l'étude :** Évaluation d'une intervention dans une salle de classe universitaire pour améliorer la qualité de la concentration des étudiant(e)s

**Chercheur Principal:** Dr. Terry Orlick, University of Ottawa  
Faculté des sciences de la santé, École des sciences de l'activité physique  
Courriel: excel@zoneofexcellence.ca Tel.: (613) 562-5800 ext. 4272

Je suis invité(e) à participer à l'étude nommée ci haut qui est menée par Dr. Terry Orlick. Le but de l'étude est de mieux comprendre le rôle des concepts présentés en classe, dans les cours magistraux et dans une composition écrite durant le processus d'application des techniques présentées pour améliorer la qualité et la consistance de la concentration des étudiant(e)s. L'étude sera dirigée dans l'anglais. Ma participation consistera essentiellement à donner ma permission au chercheur principal d'examiner mes compositions écrites, complétées selon les exigences du cours APA 4116: Applied sport and performance psychology.

**Risques et Bienfaits:** Je comprends que ma participation à cette recherche implique que je partage de l'information que j'ai écrite dans le cadre du cours nommé ci-haut. Ma participation à cette étude est volontaire et n'affectera d'aucune manière mon évaluation ou ma note du cours car mon choix de participer ou non sera inconnu jusqu'à ce que toutes les évaluations soient complètes et sera entièrement inconnu au professeur durant toute la recherche. Ma participation à cette recherche aura pour effet d'avancer le savoir des éducateurs qui profiteraient de recevoir des commentaires importants sur les techniques employées en classe qui contribuent à un programme d'éducation. Les résultats de l'étude seront présentés aux professeurs, aux chercheurs et à l'administration de la communauté académique, puis les professeurs et étudiant(e)s dans la future en profiteraient.

**Confidentialité et anonymat:** J'ai l'assurance du chercheur que l'information que je partagerai avec lui restera strictement confidentielle. Afin de conserver la confiance, toutes formulaires de consentement seront retournés à l'assistante d'enseignement scellée dans l'enveloppe fournie, si l'individu décide de participer ou pas. Je m'attends à ce que le contenu de ces informations ne soit utilisé que pour étudier l'évaluation de l'intervention qui aura lieu dans la salle de classe et selon le respect de la confidentialité. L'identité des participant(e)s sera anonyme en tout temps. Je comprends que mes coordonnées personnelles seront identifiées par un code. Si cette étude est publiée, mon identité ne sera jamais dévoilée.

**Conservation des données:** Les données recueillies et mes coordonnées seront conservées de façon sécuritaire sous clé dans le bureau de Dr. Terry Orlick (Pavillon Montpetit, 125 Université, salle 355, Ottawa ON, K1N 6N5). Seul le chercheur principal et son assistante d'enseignement auront accès à ces données. Les données seront conservées pendant cinq ans et seront détruites après cette période. Pour toutes questions et clarifications à propos de cette étude, je peux joindre le chercheur principal, Dr. Terry Orlick au (613) 562-5800 ext. 4272 ou par courriel à excel@zoneofexcellence.ca.

Pour tout renseignement sur les aspects éthiques de cette recherche, je peux m'adresser au Responsable de l'éthique en recherche de l'Université d'Ottawa, Pavillon Tabaret, 550 rue Cumberland, salle 159, Ottawa ON, K1N 6N5, (613) 562-5841, ou par courriel à ethics@uottawa.ca.

**Participation volontaire:** Ma participation à la recherche est entièrement volontaire et je suis libre de me retirer en tout temps sans aucune conséquence négative. Je comprends que seulement son assistant

d'enseignement sera conscient de qui a consenti ou a été en désaccord pour participer dans l'étude et l'identification de données par le code commencera seulement après les marques finales sont alloué. Le professeur, Dr. Terry Orlick, ne sera jamais conscient de qui a consenti ou a été en désaccord pour participer dans l'étude. Mon choix de participer ou non sera inconnu jusqu'à ce que toutes les évaluations reliées au cours soient complètes, éliminant tout conflit d'intérêt potentiel. Je suis au courant que les données recueillies seront utilisé par le chercheur principal et son assistante d'enseignement durant l'étude. Si je choisi de me retirer de l'étude, les données recueillies jusqu'à ce moment seront supprimées et ne seront pas utilisées.

**Acceptation:** Je, \_\_\_\_\_ (*nom du participant(e)*), accepte de participer à cette recherche menée par Dr. Terry Orlick de l'École des sciences de l'activité physique à la Faculté des sciences de la santé de l'Université d'Ottawa.

Il y a deux copies du formulaire de consentement, dont une copie que je peux garder.

Signature du participant(e): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

L'information de contact de participant (*Optionnel*) :

Courriel primaire: \_\_\_\_\_  
Courriel secondaire: \_\_\_\_\_  
Numéro de téléphone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Adresse: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_