Using StrengthsFinder (SF) in the Classroom
The objective of a strengths-based education is to aid students in applying their talents in the learning process, thereby “enabling them to reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence,…helping students become confident, efficacious, life-long learners whose lives are instilled with a sense of purpose” (Louis, 2012, 5).

Definitions:
“Gallup defines talents as “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied”…. including an individual’s patterns or tendencies when interacting with others, processing information, or navigating an environment.” One of the underlying concepts is that because these talents are viewed as trait-like and naturally occurring, individuals often use them without conscious awareness that they are using them (Louis, 2012, 5).

“Clusters of similar talents are grouped into talent themes as defined by Gallup; [there are 35 such themes]. An individual’s five most dominant talent themes are referred to within this model as Signature Themes…..Signature Themes can be further developed through the addition of acquired knowledge and skill to form a strength, which is defined as the ability to produce “consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” “ (Louis, 2012, 5).

A strengths-based education is defined as one that “involves a process of assessing, teaching, and designing experiential learning activities to help students identify, develop, and apply their strengths and talents.” This approach is recommended to include several key components:
1. Measurement of strengths, achievement, and determinants of positive outcomes
2. Individualization, which is a personalized educational approach that considers students’ goals, needs, and interests
3. Networking with others who can encourage the use of strengths and provide useful feedback;
4. Deliberate application of strengths within and beyond the classroom
5. Intentional development of strengths

“The rules” for applying SF
1. Knowing your strengths is not enough. Completing the StrengthsFinder is just a starting point.
2. Strengths development is aimed at a personally salient goal. Strengths come to life as they help you to answer life’s “now what” questions.
3. Development takes tremendous effort. You must apply your strengths in daily life.
4. Strengths grow in the context of relationships, teams, and organizations” (Louis, 2012, 3).

Application:
Using a Strengths-Based education has been shown to improve student motivation, engagement, academic self-confidence, ability to see others according to that person’s strengths, and the ability to recognize internal strengths. These effects are seen when Strengths are taught both in EYE courses, subject-specific academic courses, and in settings outside of the classroom.

There are multiple approaches
What qualifies as a strength-based course? It can be as simple as:
(a) requiring that students access the StrengthsQuest book or code
(b) asking students to complete the Clifton StrengthsFinder,
(c) assigning a reading of some type of strengths article or a portion of the *StrengthsQuest* book, and
(d) including at least one learning experience (lecture, activity, assignment, etc.) that involves a strengths-based approach.

*Or, you can use a more targeted approach*

**Considerations for effective academic implementation**

1. Specify the goals of the strengths development program.
2. Base the program on the strengths “rules” and execute the program as designed.
3. Administer validated measures before and after the program to track student change.

(Louis, 2012, 3).

*Guiding principle:* an individual can seek to understand and manage his or her areas of weakness, while optimizing efforts, through building on his or her strengths. By helping people understand and consider their personal resources, they can more effectively mobilize and achieve favorable ends.

Using SF in the classroom is seen by many as a departure from many of the deficit-based models that prevail in education today.

**USM Exemplar #1: Dr. Judy Spross: NUR 100**

*Use SF as a means of encouraging greater self-awareness, critical thinking skills, ethical problem-solving, accountability, and collaboration.*

**Strength-Based Learning Activities**

*Learning Autobiography*

Journal responses to specific and thought-provoking prompts, covering topics around personal strengths, self-compassion, and therapeutic communication work.

*Portfolio and Toolbox includes:*

- Values clarification worksheet and reflection
- Initial and revised Strengths Action Plan *specific actions to take for each of the 5 Signature Themes*
- Initial and revised Self-Compassion Plan *specific actions to take from online self-compassion assessment*
- Self-grading assignment (this assessment contributes to the calculation of overall grade)
- Narrative self-assessment (narrative related to course objectives and personal and professional growth)
- Resume

*Coaching Sessions*

Very brief (10 min.) individual coaching session with instructor to individually tailor learning, ensure that relevant concepts are forming, and assess if student is understanding material.

Students are taught to make action plans SMART: **Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound**—both in and out of the academic/occupational environment.

**Group Work and Homework**

Including Bb posts/discussions, and team assignments around reflective practice, communication skills, and lab assignments around identification of team member strengths within the group.

USM Exemplar #2: Dr. Dan Jenkins: LOS 270
Use SF as a means of exploring oneself and others with respect to individual leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths-Based Learning Activities (from Wagner & Ostick, 2013)

Understanding Your Talents
Individual reflection through in-class short writing where students choose one of their top five talents, reread the definition of that talent, and respond to the following questions: (a) What does this talent mean to you? How would you describe this talent to someone else in your own words? (b) When was the last time you used this talent? (c) What is a goal you have for yourself? How can you use this talent to help you reach your goal? and (d) What are three ways in which you can practice using this talent in the next week? Students are then asked to pair up and discuss their reflections with one another.

Talents in Action
Instructor explains that people with the same talents in their top five can still behave differently due to the different contexts within which people are raised as well as how each of our top talents interact with the other four. Students are asked to consider the ways in which their top five talents interact and use art supplies to draw or create visual representation of their “talents in action.” Some prompting questions include: (a) How do your talents interact with one another? (b) How do these interactions show up in your day-to-day behavior? (c) Are there times when some talents show up more than others? and (d) What do your talents allow you to do? Then, students should share their work in small groups. Finally, a large group debrief should explore the similarities and differences in how talents manifest among people who have similar talents.

What About Weaknesses?
Instructor explains to students that a “weakness” can either be an area of “nontalent” or one of our talents “in overdrive.” When a talent is in overdrive, it is being used ineffectively or unhelpfully. For example, Command in overdrive can lead someone to be perceived as overly bossy. Students are asked to reflect individually on the following: (a) What does this talent look like in overdrive? (b) How can you leverage your other talents to manage this more effectively? (c) Think of a person in your life who has a different and complimentary talent. How might they be able to help you recognize when you are in overdrive? Allow students to discuss in small groups.