

CASE STUDIES

A Solution-Focused Ultra-Brief Feedback Session Guided by the Bruges Model: A Case Study in a Higher Education Setting

Wouter Decock, MSc¹

¹ Nursing, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen

Keywords: Solution-Focused Practice (SFP), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), Ultra-Brief Feedback Session (UBFS), Bruges Model, Higher Education, Nursing Education, Student Agency, Co-construction, Metacognition, Relational Dynamics, Levels of Engagement, Alliance

<https://doi.org/10.59874/001c.147079>

Journal of Solution Focused Practices

Vol. 9, Issue 2, 2025

This case study explores how a Solution-Focused Ultra-Brief Feedback Session (SF-UBFS) can transform a post-assessment moment of failure into an empowering learning experience. Set within a nursing bachelor program, the composite case describes a voluntary feedback session with a student who had failed a written exam. Inspired by the principles of Solution-Focused Practice (SFP) and guided by the Bruges Model, the conversation focused on the student's goals, strengths, and self-identified strategies. Rather than revisiting errors in a corrective or directive manner, the dialogue invited ownership, metacognition, and emotional safety. The educator adapted core solution-focused (SF) principles – such as exploring pre-session change, resource activation, coping questions and scaling – within the limitations of academic evaluation, without applying a fixed script. Relational dynamics evolved from a searching to a consulting relationship, as the student moved from uncertainty to active planning. The session illustrates how feedback, when approached with curiosity and respect, can foster agency, clarity, and hope, even after failure. This case offers a situated example of dialogic feedback as a co-constructive process, with implications for both student learning and educator resilience. No causal claims are made; instead, the case opens inquiry into how feedback can become a shared narrative of growth.

This case study explores how a Solution-Focused Ultra-Brief Feedback Session (SF-UBFS) can offer students agency after receiving a failing exam grade. Set in a nursing bachelor program, the conversation was inspired by Solution-Focused Practice (SFP) and guided by the Bruges Model.

While formative feedback is gaining ground in higher education, few process tools actively support student ownership, especially in the wake of failure. Isebaert & Lefevere (2022) describe *ultra-brief sessions* as a suitable framework, where time-limited conversations focus on goals, desired futures, and resources. Their effectiveness lies not in brevity itself, but in the co-constructive, solution-focused (SF) approach.

^a Wouter Decock is a lecturer and internship supervisor in the School of Nursing and School of Education at Howest, specializing in mental health care and mentorship, with a strong focus on applying a solution-focused approach to guidance and learning that bridges education and nursing practice. Email Wouter.DECKO@howest.be.

This descriptive case illustrates how SF-principles can turn post-assessment dialogue into a co-constructed learning moment. The emphasis is on relational dynamics and student agency. This resonates with the philosophical ethos of SFP (Iveson & McKergow, 2016), which values pragmatic usefulness. The aim is to contribute to the expanding application of SFP in education, where feedback often evokes vulnerability for both students and educators.

Theoretical background: feedback as a solution-focused conversation

In higher education, summative feedback is often experienced as a moment of closure rather than an opportunity for growth. Yet recent perspectives emphasise the value of feedback that is not only corrective or directive, but also activating (Carless, 2020; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kirschner et al., 2018; Panadero & Lipnevich, 2022). This case study builds on the assumption that post-assessment conversations can be reframed as reflective and future-oriented when grounded in SFP.

Feedback as thinking support

Effective feedback helps students not only to correct mistakes, but also to bridge the gap between their current understanding and their desired learning goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback becomes most activating when it fosters metacognition, ownership, and reflection on individual learning strategies. Murphy (2022) similarly emphasises positioning students as experts on their own learning strategies and progress. His structured yet relational approach – combining direction-setting with reflective questioning – mirrors the educational value of *epistemic feedback*.

In this context, epistemic feedback presents a valuable alternative to traditional corrective or directive feedback. Rather than providing the correct answer or suggesting a solution, epistemic feedback activates the student by focusing on their reasoning processes. The educator encourages the student to reflect on how they approached the task or question, what was effective, and what could be improved (Guasch et al., 2013; Kirschner et al., 2018; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). For example: “*What steps did you take? Where do you think it went wrong? What might you try next time?*”

Guasch et al. (2013) point out, however, that although epistemic feedback is effective, it can also be time-consuming in practice, which may make educators hesitant to apply it in feedback conversations where time is limited due to heavy caseloads. Therefore, in the following section, we explore how principles from the solution focused approach (SFA) – and specifically Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) – can support the implementation of epistemic feedback in an efficient and meaningful way.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

The SFA first emerged in the early 1970s, as it appeared to bring about changes in clients’ lives more quickly than traditional therapeutic modalities (Moon, 2022). Building on this foundation, SFBT was developed in the 1980s both in the United States by de Shazer and Berg (De Shazer, 1985;

de Shazer, 1988; De Shazer et al., 1986) and, during the same period, at the Korzybski Institutes in Bruges, Paris, and Amsterdam (Isebaert & Lefevere, 2022).

Today, SFBT is considered as an evidence-based approach in psychotherapy (Kim et al., 2019).

An important note is that going fast is not the goal of SFBT; rather, by going slow (Fiske, 2008) and leading from behind (De Jong & Berg, 2012), meaningful and often rapid change can emerge. As Steve de Shazer famously stated, one can “go fast by going slow” (Geuens et al., 2020), emphasizing that sustainable progress arises from patience and attunement. “Going slow” may seem paradoxical, yet it means taking time to listen carefully, follow the client’s language, and avoid rushing to interpretation.

This reflective pace increases clarity and focus, so that change occurs more efficiently. The process is brief not because it is hurried, but because every moment counts.

A core assumption in SFBT, drawing on the work of Milton Erickson, is that clients possess inner strengths and the capacity to cope with the difficulties they encounter (Bannink, 2007; Le Fevere de Ten Hove, 2018; Le Fevere de Ten Hove et al., 2008), as well as elements of potential solutions within their own repertoire (Visser, 2013). This approach is considered distinctive because it diverges from more conventional therapies by not primarily focusing on problem analysis or exploring underlying causes (Iveson, 2002).

To support this orientation, practitioners of SFBT commonly employ conversational tools such as goal-setting questions, variation- and exception-seeking, scaling, and resource-activating questions. Such interventions activate clients’ competencies, focus on the preferred future, promote goal-directed change, and foster hope by focusing on what works rather than analysing problems (Bannink, 2007).

Towards solution-focused practices in education

SFBT has been applied in educational contexts since the early 1990s, notably in the United States (Franklin et al., 2020) and, illustrating its growing presence in Europe, in the Netherlands, where its development was influenced by the Korzybski Institute of Bruges (van Dijk, 2013).

It has been used by school psychologists (Ajmal & Rees, 2004) and later expanding to teachers and classrooms (Simmonds, 2019). According to Brasher (2009), many adolescents face academic and personal challenges while growing up, and SFBT can support their development by strengthening self-esteem and confidence in their problem-solving abilities. Metcalf (2021) similarly notes that a focus on problems often leads to frustration when familiar remedies fail.

Murphy (2022) identifies three recurring tasks in SF-based student guidance – setting direction, building on exceptions and resources, and exploring progress – supported by three complementary techniques: asking,

listening, and amplifying. These principles resonate with the pragmatic stance of the SFA, where educators likewise aim to elicit students' self-defined goals and existing competencies.

Expanding this perspective, Stark & Metcalf (2025) describe how school leaders and teachers can co-construct SF school cultures grounded in hope, collaboration, and competence. In their work, the SFA evolves from a counselling technique into a whole-school framework aligned with contemporary movements toward inclusive and relational educational leadership. Within such a culture, adopting a not-knowing and appreciative stance fosters shared responsibility and strengthens trust among all members of the educational community.

This relational stance reflects a broader paradigm shift from a traditional “expert” model – focused on identifying deficits – to a co-constructive approach, where meaning is generated through dialogue (Moon, 2022) and the client's own language plays a central role (Cabié & Isebaert, 1997).

The practitioner adopts a position of genuine curiosity, exploring strengths, resourceful experiences, and preferred futures, and acts as a facilitator of positive change. In educational practice, this reframes the teacher's role: rather than merely transmitting knowledge and evaluating performance, the educator becomes an active partner in learning. As Stark & Metcalf (2025) illustrate, scaling, goal-setting and preferred-future questions can effectively enhance students' agency and self-reflection in daily interactions.

Because of its pragmatic focus on progress and multiple pathways toward goal achievement, the SFA is particularly suitable in contexts constrained by time (Seko & Lau, 2021). It has proven valuable in working with vulnerable student populations (Kim & Franklin, 2009), reducing stress levels (Sitindaon & Widyana, 2020), and improving academic outcomes such as course credit attainment (Franklin et al., 2007). Furthermore, when educators concentrate on what works and seek constructive next steps, their own sense of efficacy is strengthened. A motivated educator working collaboratively with an engaged student creates a powerful partnership that fosters hope for educational success (Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2021).

Finally, the increasing diversity within higher education reinforces the importance of communication practices that genuinely centre on the student (Seko & Lau, 2021). SF conversations deliberately use the student's own words and avoid imposing external interpretations. They inherently require cultural sensitivity (Murphy, 2022), acknowledging that language reflects the student's lived reality (Tadros & Jordan, 2024). Stark & Metcalf (2025) offer practical strategies for adapting SF techniques to diverse school populations, ensuring that conversations remain respectful, equitable, and context-sensitive. In educational settings, this entails honouring students' ethnic and cultural values as well as their personal experiences.

The book *Survival Kit for Teachers* (Le Fevere de Ten Hove et al., 2008) – translated in English in 2020 – transfers SF principles into concrete tools for respectful, activating conversations in education, grounded in the Bruges Model.

The Bruges Model

The Bruges Model builds on SFBT and was developed in the psychiatric department of Sint-Jan Hospital in Bruges in the early 1980s (De Shazer & Isebaert, 2004; Isebaert, 2016; Isebaert et al., 2015). It retains core SF elements – such as joining, goal-setting, scaling and identifying variations and exceptions – while making it transferable in various settings, including education.

Typical questions in solution-focused practice include the scaling question (“On a scale from 0 to 10, where are you now?”), the coping question (“How have you managed so far?”), the exception question (“When was the problem less present?”), and the miracle question (“Suppose a miracle happened overnight... what will be different?”). These techniques were originally developed by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer and described in their foundational works on SFBT (Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1988, 1994; de Shazer et al., 2007).

Isebaert (2016) presents the model as a meta-model that links SF techniques to the so-called common factors in therapeutic effectiveness, a concept supported by numerous authors (e.g., Duncan et al., 2010; Frank & Frank, 1961; Lambert, 1986; Rosenzweig, 1936; Wampold, 2001), such as the client’s own contribution, the client’s contextual factors, therapist characteristics, the professional relationship and the therapeutic alliance.

This relational foundation resonates strongly with Telio et al.’s (2015) concept of the *educational alliance*, which emphasizes a bidirectional, trust-based partnership between learner and educator. Mirroring the therapeutic alliance in psychotherapy, it supports the creation of a shared understanding of goals, performance, and standards, and the co-construction of an agreed-upon plan for action. For readability, the overarching term *working alliance* will be used throughout this article.

Problems versus limitations

The Bruges Model distinguishes between problems – difficulties that can be solved – and limitations – unchangeable conditions that require adaptation (Isebaert, 2007, 2016). In educational feedback, this distinction helps clarify where constructive action is possible. For instance, failing an exam that can be retaken represents a problem that invites change, whereas an unstable home environment constitutes a limitation that requires coping strategies and external support. Although limitations cannot be removed, they often contain elements that are still manageable. A student with a significant caregiving burden at home may not be able to change the situation itself, but can explore strategies such as carving out protected study time or seeking support from peers and staff. In such cases, feedback focuses on what

is realistically within reach. Structural factors, such as established assessment methods or institutional regulations, also function as limitations. However, they can generate new problems, for example, the challenge of preparing more effectively for the next assessment. As Marzano (2006) emphasizes, within such educational limitations the professional relationship between students and educators becomes a key factor in fostering progress.

Recognising the difference between problems and limitations enables both students and educators to focus on agency and practical solutions, while also validating the reality of challenges that cannot be altered.

Levels of engagement

The Bruges Model outlines four relational levels between educator and client – here applied to the student: uncommitted, searching, consulting, and expert (Isebaert, 2007, 2016). These levels of engagement can help educators attune their feedback approach to the shared relationship dynamic. The typology is conceptually related to Steve de Shazer’s description of “visitor,” “complainant,” and “customer” relationships in SF therapy (de Shazer, 1988; De Shazer & Berg, 1997), which similarly reflect varying degrees of readiness and ownership for change. By translating these interactional patterns into educational contexts, the Bruges Model highlights how the educator’s stance can evolve in response to the student’s engagement.

In the *uncommitted relationship*, the student shows no explicit request for help, may be present only because someone else required it, and often remains passive or even defensive, without recognizing a need for change. The educator’s role is to build safety without expecting immediate reflection. In the *searching relationship*, students typically present vague or incoherent requests for help, feel powerless to influence change themselves, or place responsibility for change on others. Educators can help them organise their thoughts and gently encourage a sense of ownership. In the *consulting relationship*, the student formulates a concrete and workable request for help and is ready to take action, but is not yet aware of the resources and strengths needed to carry it out. This implies that the teacher ideally balances between providing input – mandated to do so – and maintaining the student’s ownership. In the *expert relationship*, students have a clear request for help, are aware of their resources, take initiative, reflect deeply, and co-construct solutions. The educator shifts to a facilitative role – leading from behind – that reinforces autonomy.

These levels represent momentary constellations of the educator-student relationship rather than sequential stages of progress, reflecting a dynamic and continuously co-evolving process in which engagement may shift fluidly over time. By recognising the current level of engagement and tailoring interventions accordingly, educators can offer feedback that is personalised, respectful, and growth-oriented.

Context and method

This is a composite case, constructed from a mix of diverse cases and fully anonymized to ensure confidentiality. All identifying details were removed, and gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/their) are used to protect anonymity and support inclusivity. No audio recordings were made, and no sensitive data were collected. The setting is a Bachelor of Nursing program at Howest University of Applied Sciences. The case complies with the institutional privacy statement. It is intended as a reflective example. It solely aims to illustrate the use of SFBT principles in an educational context. The student, referred to by the pseudonym *Alexis*, had failed a written exam and voluntarily attended an individual feedback session with their educator trained in SFP. In practice, such feedback sessions typically last around 15–20 minutes. The conversation was structured using principles from SFBT, as operationalized within the Bruges Model.

Case narrative: Alexis' feedback conversation

A student in nursing, here referred to as *Alexis* (a pseudonym), had received a failing score on a written exam. The student voluntarily signed up for an individual feedback session.

Educator: “Hello, welcome. I’m glad you came. I saw you pass by my colleagues earlier. How did you come to decide to sign up for this feedback? You could also have chosen not to do it?”

The educator illustrated *joining* (Berg, 1994; Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) by openly acknowledging the student’s initiative, shifting the emphasis from shortcomings to active participation. Minuchin first described joining as the creation of an alliance that fosters a constructive working relationship.

In this example, the educator’s subtle recognition affirmed the student’s willingness to seek feedback. This was achieved through an *indirect compliment*, expressed in interrogative form (in this case: “How did you come to...?”). Such indirect compliments – as described by Berg (1994) – may take different forms and often build on the individual’s self-knowledge (Thomas, 2016). They should convey genuine appreciation rather than superficial praise (Hawkes et al., 1998) and be applied with cultural sensitivity, considering context and values (Thomas, 2016).

Educator: “I’d like to start with a question for you... In the short period between registering for this session – after receiving your results – and now, have you already noticed that you’ve come to certain insights that you would like to apply in the future, even if only a little bit?”

By asking this question, the educator was drawing on the SF concept of *pre-session change* (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000; Weiner-Davis et al., 1987). This idea suggests that change often begins once someone decides to seek

support. Highlighting even small shifts can boost confidence, reinforce agency, and create early momentum. It helped the student see themselves not just as struggling, but as already moving forward.

Student: “Actually... yes. When I saw my score, I was disappointed, but I still went back to my course materials right away... That’s when I realized I had forgotten some key terminology. I know the answers now... but of course, it’s too late.”

Educator: “That’s a great start... So you’ve already taken some steps in your mind, even before we met today. What has that change brought you so far, even if it’s just a small shift?”

Student: “I think it helps me notice where I’m still confused. Before, I’d just move on, but now I stop and look things up more.”

This brief exchange provided a valuable opportunity to frame the student not as someone in deficit, but as someone already on the move. By noticing and naming small changes that had occurred since receiving their results, they began the feedback session from a position of competence – however modest – rather than failure. As Bannink (2007) notes, exploring pre-session change can strengthen hope, build momentum, and reinforce the idea that change is already underway.

The following excerpt captures a key moment during the conversation. Rather than focusing immediately on the exam content, the educator adopts a SF stance, inviting reflection and co-construction. The dialogue begins with a gentle question about the student’s expectations regarding their exam score.

Educator: “Did you expect your overall score?”

Student: “Not really... I thought I had done better. Maybe around 11 or 12.”

The educator noted this discrepancy not as a flaw, but as a useful insight: it revealed a gap between self-perception and outcome, which could be explored together.

Educator: “Would it be okay if we looked together at where that difference between what you expected and what you scored might come from?”

Student: “Yeah, that’s okay... I’ve actually been wondering about that myself.”

Before moving further, the educator wanted to co-construct the agenda with the student, rather than steering the session.

Educator: “Before we dive into the content of your exam, could I ask... What else needs to happen in this feedback moment for it to be useful for you?”

This *goal setting* question reflects a core principle of SFBT, as described by Bannink (2007). Rather than focusing on the low exam score (the *problem-focus*), the question invites a forward-looking conversation centered on the student's hopes and goals. It positions the student as an active contributor to the dialogue.

Student: [hesitates]: “I want to explore in which areas I can improve so I can do well in the resit. So... Maybe just go over everything together?”

There was no clear help request yet, but the student seemed present and willing to engage, reflecting a *searching relationship* according to the Bruges Model. The student was not disengaged, but still lacked clarity and direction.

Educator: “Okay... Have you already thought about what you'd like to focus on specifically when we go over this exam?”

Student: “Hm... I remember that I struggled with specific terminology, but also with application questions... So I'd like to take a closer look at those together.”

This marked a transition to a *consulting relationship* according to the Bruges Model: the student's help request was becoming more concrete.

Educator: “Okay... What also interests me, though, is not just where things went wrong, but also where you did well – where you're already performing strongly and how we might build on that... What do you think about that?”

Student: “That's okay for me...”

They reviewed one particular exam question. The student admitted they had doubted their answer and found the question hard to interpret. This opened a moment for mutual reflection: the educator acknowledged that the question structure may have been too complex.

Educator: “Other students had similar experiences with that question, which also leads me to consider whether I should rethink the way I formulate my questions. I actually asked two questions in one, which may have caused some confusion...”

In this way, the educator sought to normalise (“Other students had similar experiences...”) while also showing vulnerability and introspection, thereby creating an atmosphere in which they could learn together. It is an expression of authenticity, self-disclosure, and role modelling.

Student: “I mainly see that my answers lacked depth, relied too much on literal recall, and didn't always connect key concepts.”

Then the educator used an *epistemic feedback* question.

Educator: “Nice insight... If you read your answer again, what would you try to formulate differently this time?”

Student: [hesitates] “Maybe use more subject-specific terminology...? Try to connect the separate parts of my answer more clearly...?”

Educator: “Okay, nice... What else?”

Student: [thinks] “Read the question more carefully...? Because I notice with this one that I didn’t answer all parts of it...”

Educator: “That’s great, truly... Shall we go through the rest of the questions together?”

They continued like that. One question in particular stood out. The student had perceived it as easy, yet scored poorly.

Educator: “What do you think explains the difference between your actual score and the score you expected on that question?”

The student realised they underestimated the complexity of that question, a metacognitive breakthrough they recognised themselves.

As they progressed, the student became more confident in articulating their needs. They said they often studied “too literally” and wanted to find strategies for deeper understanding. The student proposed searching for practice cases online and engaging more actively in the group discussion forum on the electronic learning platform. These were not the educator’s suggestions; they came from the student. The educator validated these ideas.

Then the conversation took an emotional turn. On one question, the student had performed far worse than expected.

Student: “Sometimes I know the answer, but I can’t get it out on paper.”

After a moment of silence, the student shared that personal challenges outside of study added to the pressure they felt to succeed.

The educator tried not to fill the silence. This aligns with the SFA, which incorporates short, intentional pauses to support clarity and direction. It allows reflection on the student’s narrative and helps determine the most constructive next step. This space enables the educator to return with renewed focus, offering feedback and forward-looking questions that align with the student’s emerging strengths and hopes (Archer & McCarthy, 2007; Hawkes et al., 1998).

Educator: “Sounds hard... Despite this, how did you manage to get through your entire exam period, even with some passing grades on your report card?”

The educator recognised the student's troubled situation with a bridging statement (Archer & McCarthy, 2007; Hawkes et al., 1998) – “Sounds hard” – but didn't explore this further. The statement was followed by a coping question – “Despite this, how did you manage to...?” – which prompted a moment of resource activation.

Student: “I don't know... I just really want this.”

This moment marked a significant emotional shift. The student's emotional reaction revealed the weight of their personal and academic struggles. Rather than filling the silence or probing further, the educator offered space and responded with a coping question. This question acknowledges the reality of distress while gently redirecting attention to the individual's resourcefulness (Archer & McCarthy, 2007), without victimising or deepening the troubled situation.

Coping questions are particularly helpful because they help people to focus on what they have done so far to survive difficult situations. They redirect attention from failure to moments of strength and effective adaptation (Brasher, 2009).

The student's answer – “I just really want this” – revealed motivation and purpose. It reframed them not as a failed person, but as someone who had already been coping, however difficult things felt.

The educator sensed a deeper motivation worth uncovering. Rather than interpret or assume, they aimed to invite the student to articulate their own *Theory of Change* (ToC) (Duncan et al., 2004; Duncan & Miller, 2000). So the educator literally repeated the student's words to open that door:

Educator: “You just really want this...” [pauses briefly] ...“That sounds important.”

The educator used the echo technique (Isebaert & Lefevre, 2022) by repeating the student's words. By adding “That sounds important”, the educator gently invited the student to explore what “this” truly meant, without interpreting or steering.

Educator: “Can you tell me a bit more? What is it exactly that you really want?”

Student: [thinks for a moment] “When I start something, I just want to finish it... and I want to become a good nurse. I don't just want to pass... I want to understand things.”

The educator now checked their interpretations with the student – maintaining a ‘not knowing’ stance (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) – before accepting any assumptions as true.

Educator: “Wow, what a powerful vision... Can I say that you are very passionate?”

While Dweck (2007) emphasizes that positive feedback should preferably focus on actions rather than characteristics, in this case the comment was directed at a characteristic (“passionate”). Yet – as Isebaert & Lefevere (2022) point out – it is possible to frame praise of a trait in a way that allows the recipient to adapt it.

Student: “Yes, for sure...”

Then the educator brought a systemic approach to the conversation – aligning with the roots of the SFA – by asking a ‘relationship question’ (Fiske, 2008):

Educator: “How do you imagine the people around you might notice that passion...?”

Student: “My mom told me they hear the difference in how I talk... like I have a plan, not just complaints. I guess they can feel that I’m taking this seriously.”

Educator: “That says a lot... not just about your motivation, but also about the changes you’ve already made and the energy you’re giving off. You’re not just thinking about it, you are already taking steps forward.”

This felt like the right moment to pivot to envisioning future steps. The educator drew a horizontal scale of 20 cm, representing 0 to 20 points, with the student’s current score marked on it. Scaling questions are particularly helpful for people overwhelmed by emotions (Fiske, 2008), as they support recognizing progress and realizing the situation may not be as bad as initially thought (Žak, 2022).

Educator: “Could you mark on the same horizontal line... where you would like to see yourself on this scale after the re-exam?”

Without hesitating, the student pointed towards a score of 14–15 to 20. Importantly, the educator did not pass judgment but acknowledged the preferred future. Then came the follow-up:

Educator: “What will be your next small step towards that goal...?”

Student: “Hm... I don’t know.”

This signalled a searching relationship again. The educator returned to resource activation (Gassmann & Grawe, 2006):

Educator: “What helpful strategies did you use successfully in the past?”

Student: “Writing things down...”

Educator: “Okay... Great. And how did that help you?”

Student: “It sticks better that way...”

Educator: “Okay... What else?”

After more exploration, the student named strategies such as taking breaks, switching topics, and practicing application questions. They also recognised a concrete need: better ways to memorise terminology.

This marked a clear moment in the consulting relationship. The educator, mandated to provide advice, responded with limited, tailored suggestions, while maintaining alignment with student agency: using flashcards, linking terms to real-life cases, and practicing active recall. The student integrated this into their own learning plan.

Educator: “Looking at everything we’ve discussed... the challenges, the insights, the steps you’ve already taken... what are you taking with you from this session?”

Student: “That I’m actually already doing a lot of things well... And that I can still make progress if I adjust my approach a bit... Use more subject-specific terms... Read the questions more carefully... Plan better... But also, that I shouldn’t doubt my commitment.”

Educator: “That’s a powerful summary. What I notice is how much clarity and ownership you’ve shown today. You came in with questions about what went wrong... and you’re leaving with a deeper understanding of what you’re already doing right, and where you want to go next.”

The session ended with concrete next steps: focusing on terminology, practicing application questions, engaging in group discussions, and reviewing their study schedule.

Reflection and discussion

This case shows how post-assessment feedback can evolve into a constructive and activating dialogue when grounded in SF principles and relational attunement. Rather than reviewing errors, the educator helped the student reframe failure as forward movement, through a process marked by curiosity, respect, and co-construction.

The educator responded flexibly to changes in levels of engagement, guided by the Bruges Model. They moved together from a searching to a consulting relationship as the student became more engaged. These shifts were not scripted but emerged naturally.

According to Žak (2022), within psychotherapy, the Bruges Model’s levels of engagement tend to correspond to what clients perceive as helpful: those at lower levels, such as *uncommitted* or *searching*, tend to value the generic aspects of being understood and having the opportunity to talk things out, whereas clients at higher levels, such as *consulting*, place greater importance on the co-construction of goals, actions, and progress.

This study demonstrates that these findings are also relevant in educational settings, particularly during feedback conversations between students and educators.

SFP was embodied through responsiveness, contextual sensitivity, and a belief in the student's competence. Advice was provided by the educator only when explicitly mandated. Specific SF techniques – such as goal-setting, coping questions and scaling – were used sparingly and with care. Their effectiveness depended not on technique alone, but on building a safe environment, timing, relational fit, and student readiness. Ultimately, it was the working alliance, the student's internal resources, and the educator's hopeful presence that shaped the conversation.

This aligns with Black's reflections in the *Simply Focus Podcast* (Episode 98, 2020), who notes that genuine interest and connection are often the foundation for progress: "If you show interest in someone, they are more likely to come along with you on that kind of journey." His emphasis on curiosity and presence reinforces the view that relational attunement precedes technique (Black, 2020).

This reflects broader research showing that – rather generic – relationship factors – such as respect, acceptance, empathy, authenticity, and curiosity – often outweigh specific techniques in fostering meaningful change (Isebaert, 2007, 2016; Isebaert & Lefevere, 2022). In this SF-UBFS, thoughtful pacing and deep listening created space for emotion, reflection, and student-led strategies.

When the student became emotional, the educator neither avoided the moment nor pushed for disclosure. A simple coping question activated resilience and shifted the tone of the session. From that point, the student articulated behavioural changes that were acknowledged and built upon. As Black (2020) observes, effective questioning depends on phrasing that "makes more sense". This illustrates that in SF conversations, the usefulness of any question lies not in its formula but in its fit with the other person's frame of reference.

Awareness of the distinction between problems and limitations, as outlined in the Bruges Model, proved valuable, serving not as a fixed script but as a guiding compass. The failed exam was treated as a problem – something actionable – while contextual challenges were seen as limitations: not to be solved, but to be recognised and worked around.

During the SF-UBFS, the educator did not experience any alliance ruptures. However, despite efforts to build a working alliance, the occurrence of alliance ruptures during and/or after such conversations is not uncommon (Eubanks et al., 2018). Black (2020) underlines that connection must be established early. This highlights the preventive power of relational attunement in avoiding ruptures and sustaining trust. In higher education, the quality of the working alliance between student and educator is linked to student engagement and learning outcomes (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). As educator, it's important to stay attuned to signs of alliance ruptures, address

them – preferably directly and empathically – while taking responsibility for their part, and work collaboratively toward repair to restore trust and constructive collaboration. In an educational context – in this case during a SF-UBFS – misjudging the student’s level of engagement within the Bruges Model can lead to interventions that feel either overly demanding or insufficiently challenging, risking a loss of alignment. Such a mismatch may contribute to alliance ruptures, as the student may feel misunderstood or undervalued, which can weaken trust and reduce their willingness to engage constructively.

Yet, a critical tension remains. In competency-based education, educators carry a dual responsibility: fostering reflective dialogue and ensuring adherence to minimum professional standards. This dialectic is inherently difficult to manage. While the SF stance privileges curiosity, autonomy, and co-construction, professional educational programs also require educators to safeguard quality and safety through clear assessment criteria. Too much focus on reflective exploration might dilute accountability, whereas strict enforcement of standards can risk undermining relational openness and student agency. Acknowledging this tension explicitly allows educators to hold both aims in view: to remain compassionate witnesses of students’ learning processes while upholding the rigour that defines the profession.

The SF-UBFS therefore does not replace evaluative criteria but situates them within a dialogical frame that recognises both competence thresholds and the learner’s evolving professional identity. The challenge for educators lies in sustaining this balance: creating reflective space without losing normative clarity, and maintaining minimum standards without closing opportunities for co-constructed insight.

This case study offers a glimpse into how feedback can become a co-authored story of growth when approached with humility and SF intent.

In a learning culture often shaped by summative judgments, SFP offers an alternative: one where failure becomes a starting point, and feedback becomes a shared conversation. As Stark & Metcalf (2025) point out, adopting a SF stance at leadership level can transform institutional feedback cultures, fostering psychological safety and empowering both staff and students to engage in joint problem-solving.

This case raises a number of relevant questions for practitioners and researchers interested in further exploring the potential of SF-UBFS. Examples include:

- How does tailoring educational interventions to the level of student engagement (as described in the Bruges Model) influence the perceived effectiveness and appreciation of feedback in (higher) education?
- How can a SF-UBFS be adapted for externally motivated or disengaged students, or paradoxically, for students who achieve a high grade yet still seek feedback?

- How can educators prevent alliance ruptures during or after a SF-UBFS that put the working alliance to the test, and – if they occur – effectively repair them?
- How can educators in competency-based programs balance the need to uphold minimum professional standards with the relational and reflective stance that characterizes SF feedback conversations?

These are merely a few examples of potentially relevant questions, illustrating the broader possibilities for reflection and inquiry within this approach.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how a routine feedback session can become a meaningful and activating dialogue when grounded in SF principles. Rather than reinforcing failure, the conversation supported clarity, agency, and hope.

The SF-UBFS offers a situated example of feedback as a co-authored story in progress, one that students themselves can shape.

.....

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Christophe Casteleyn for critically reviewing the manuscript and for providing valuable nuances that strengthened the final version.

Submitted: September 08, 2025 BST. Accepted: November 06, 2025 BST. Published: November 17, 2025 BST.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

References

- Ajmal, Y., & Rees, I. (Eds.). (2004). *Solutions in schools* (2nd ed.). BT Press.
- Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H. (1992). The client is the expert: A not-knowing approach to therapy. In S. McNamee & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Therapy as social construction* (pp. 25–39). Sage.
- Archer, J., & McCarthy, C. J. (2007). *Theories of counselling & psychotherapy: Contemporary applications*. Pearson Education.
- Bannink, F. (2007). Solution-focused brief therapy. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 37(2), 87–94. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-006-9040-y>
- Berg, I. K. (1994). *Family-based services: A solution-focused approach*. Norton.
- Black, R. (2020, May 19). Solution Focus in Practice: Connecting with Rob Black [Broadcast]. In E. J. Czerny & D. Godat, *Simply Focus Podcast*. SF on Tour. https://www.sfontour.com/project/sfp-98-solution-focus-in-practice-connecting-with-rob-black/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Brasher, K. L. (2009). Solution-focused brief therapy: Overview and implications for school counselors. *The Alabama Counseling Association Journal*, 34(2), 21–30.
- Cabié, M.-C., & Isebaert, L. (1997). *Pour une thérapie brève: Le libre choix du patient comme éthique en psychothérapie*. Érès.
- Carless, D. (2020). From teacher transmission of information to student feedback literacy: Activating the learner role in feedback processes. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 23(2), 143–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787420945845>
- De Jong, P., & Berg, I. K. (2012). *Interviewing for solutions*. Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.
- De Shazer, S. (1985). *Keys to solution in brief therapy*. W.W. Norton.
- de Shazer, S. (1988). *Clues: Investigating solutions in brief therapy*. W.W. Norton.
- de Shazer, S. (1994). *Words were originally magic*. W.W. Norton.
- De Shazer, S., & Berg, I. K. (1997). “What works?” Remarks on research aspects of solution-focused brief therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 19(2), 121–124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00043>
- De Shazer, S., Berg, I. K., Lipchik, E., Nunnally, E., Molnar, A., Gingerich, W., & Weiner-Davis, M. (1986). Brief therapy: Focused solution development. *Family Process*, 25(2), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1986.00207.x>
- De Shazer, S., & Isebaert, L. (2004). The Bruges Model. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 14(4), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1300/J085v14n04_04
- Duncan, B. L., & Miller, S. D. (2000). The client’s theory of change: Consulting the client in the integrative process. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 10(2), 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009448200244>
- Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., & Sparks, J. A. (2004). *The Heroic Client: A revolutionary way to improve effectiveness through client-directed, outcome-informed therapy* (Revised ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., Wampold, B. E., & Hubble, M. A. (Eds.). (2010). *The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/12075-000>
- Dweck, C. S. (2007). The perils and promises of praise. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 34–39.
- Eubanks, C. F., Muran, J. C., & Safran, J. D. (2018). Alliance rupture repair: A meta-analysis. *Psychotherapy*, 55(4), 508–519. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000185>
- Fiske, H. (2008). *Hope in action: Solution-focused conversations about suicide*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843819>

- Frank, J. D., & Frank, J. B. (1961). *Persuasion and healing: A comparative study of psychotherapy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Franklin, C., Guz, S., Zhang, A., Kim, J., Zheng, H., Hai, A. H., Cho, Y. J., & Shen, L. (2020). Solution-focused brief therapy for students in schools: A comparative meta-analysis of the English and Chinese literature. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.1086/712169>
- Franklin, C., Streeter, C. L., Kim, J. S., & Tripodi, S. J. (2007). The effectiveness of a solution-focused, public alternative school for dropout prevention and retrieval. *Children & Schools*, 29(3), 133–144. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/29.3.133>
- Gassmann, D., & Grawe, K. (2006). General change mechanisms: The relation between problem activation and resource activation in successful and unsuccessful therapeutic interactions. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 13(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.442>
- Geuens, S., Dams, H., Jones, M., & Lefevere, G. (2020). Back to Basics: A Solution Focused Take on Using and Teaching Basic Communication Skills for Health Care Professionals. *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*, 4(2), 6. <https://doi.org/10.59874/001c.75031>
- Gingerich, W. J., & Eisengart, S. (2000). Solution-focused brief therapy: A review of the outcome research. *Family Process*, 39(4), 477–498. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2000.39408.x>
- Guasch, T., Espasa, A., Alvarez, I. M., & Kirschner, P. A. (2013). Effects of feedback on collaborative writing in an online learning environment. *Distance Education*, 34(3), 324–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2013.835772>
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Hawkes, D., Marsh, T. I., & Wilgosh, R. (1998). *Solution focused therapy: A handbook for health care professionals*. Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Isebaert, L. (2007). *Praktijkboek oplossingsgerichte cognitieve therapie*. Uitgeverij De Tijdstroom.
- Isebaert, L. (2016). *Solution-Focused Cognitive and Systemic Therapy: The Bruges Model* (1e druk). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315559414>
- Isebaert, L., Cabié, M.-C., & Dellucci, H. (2015). *Alliance thérapeutique et thérapies brèves: Le modèle de Bruges*. Eres.
- Isebaert, L., & Lefevere, G. (2022). *De therapeutische alliantie: Het Brugs model van oplossingsgerichte cognitieve systeemtherapie*. Academia Press.
- Iveson, C. (2002). Solution-focused brief therapy. *Advances In Psychiatric Treatment*, 8(2), 149–156. <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.8.2.149>
- Kim, J., & Franklin, C. (2009). Solution-focused brief therapy in schools: A review of the outcome literature. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(4), 464–470. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.10.002>
- Kim, J., Jordan, S. S., Franklin, C., & Froerer, A. (2019). Is solution-focused brief therapy evidence-based? An update 10 years later. *Families in Society*, 100(2), 127–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389419841688>
- Kirschner, P. A., Claessens, L. C. A., & Raaijmakers, S. F. (2018). *Op de schouders van reuzen: Inspirerende inzichten uit de cognitieve psychologie voor leerkrachten*. Ten Brink Uitgevers.
- Kirschner, P. A., & Hendrick, C. (2020). *How Learning Happens: Seminal Works in Educational Psychology and What They Mean in Practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429061523>
- Lambert, M. J. (1986). Implications of psychotherapy outcome research for eclectic psychotherapy. In J. C. Norcross (Ed.), *Handbook of eclectic psychotherapy* (pp. 436–462). Brunner/Mazel.

- Le Fevere de Ten Hove, M. (2018). *Korte therapie: Een leidraad bij het “Brugse model” voor psychotherapie met een toepassing op kinderen en jongeren*. Garant Uitgevers.
- Le Fevere de Ten Hove, M., Callens, N., Gheysen, T., & Maene, W. (2008). *Survivalkit voor leerkrachten: oplossingsgericht werken op school*. Garant.
- Metcalf, L. (2021). *Counseling toward solutions: A practical, solution-focused program for working with students, teachers, and parents* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003122128>
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674041127>
- Minuchin, S., & Fishman, H. C. (1981). *Family therapy techniques*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674041110>
- Moon, H. (2022). *Efficacy of training in solution-focused coaching: Process study of learners’ progress in response choices* [Doctoral dissertation, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto]. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22785.53608>
- Murphy, J. J. (2022). *Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Panadero, E., & Lipnevich, A. A. (2022). A review of feedback models and typologies: Towards an integrative model of feedback elements. *Educational Research Review*, 35, 100416. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100416>
- Rosenzweig, S. (1936). Some implicit common factors in diverse methods of psychotherapy. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 6(3), 412–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1936.tb05248.x>
- Schlosser, L. Z., & Gelso, C. J. (2001). Measuring the working alliance in advisor--advisee relationships in graduate school. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 48(2), 157–167. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.48.2.157>
- Seko, Y., & Lau, P. (2021). Solution-focused approach in higher education: a scoping review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(5), 1710–1726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1920893>
- Simmonds, S. (2019). A critical review of teachers using solution-focused approaches supported by educational psychologists. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, 5(1), 1–8.
- Sitindaon, F. R., & Widyana, R. (2020). Investigation of Solution Focused-Brief Counseling’s effect on reducing the stress levels of college students. *Jurnal Konseling Dan Pendidikan*, 8(3), 117–122. <https://doi.org/10.29210/144600>
- Stark, C. J., & Metcalf, L. (2025). *Solution-Focused Strategies for K-12 Leaders*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003463504>
- Tadros, E., & Jordan, S. S. (2024). Solution-focused therapy and diversity. In *The sage encyclopedia of multicultural counseling, social justice, and advocacy* (Vol. 4). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071808023.n501>
- Telio, S., Ajjawi, R., & Regehr, G. (2015). The “educational alliance” as a framework for reconceptualizing feedback in medical education. *Academic Medicine*, 90(5), 609–614. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000560>
- Thomas, F. (2016). Complimenting in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*, 2(1), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.59874/001c.75115>
- van Dijk, D. J. (2013). *De taal van oplossingen: Een empirisch begrippenkader voor oplossingsgerichte interactie* [Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/1741288/129877_thesis.pdf
- Visser, C. F. (2013). The Origin of the Solution-Focused Approach. *International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices*, 2(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.14335/ijfsp.v1i1.10>

- Wampold, B. E. (2001). *The great psychotherapy debate: Models, methods, and findings*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Weiner-Davis, M., de Shazer, S., & Gingerich, W. J. (1987). Building on pretreatment change to construct the therapeutic solution: An exploratory study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 13(4), 359–363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.1987.tb00717.x>
- Żak, A. M. (2022). What is helpful: The client's perception of the solution-focused brief therapy process by level of engagement. *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*, 6(2), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.59874/001c.75017>
- Zubrzycka-Maciąg, T. (2021). Zastosowanie podejścia skoncentrowanego na rozwiązaniach w pracy wychowawczej nauczyciela. *Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze*, 604(9), 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0015.5790>