A matter of effort and perseverance

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The expression ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’ is meant to remind us that achieving results takes time and effort. However, we often forget this and blame a lack of ‘ability’ when we can’t solve a mathematical problem, draw a geometric shape or paint a scenic picture.

Think of Mozart, who at the age of three started playing music under the tutelage of his father, and only after studying composition and practising for over a decade, composed his greatest symphonies. The effort and perseverance required to achieve such proficiency is often overlooked as we are rarely witness to the years of hard work that takes place behind the scenes. In the classroom, attributing success or failure to ability over the value of hard work and perseverance could have negative implications for student motivation and performance.

Research by Nicholls in the late 1970s found that children’s understanding of effort and ability changes dramatically with age. The research revealed that young students believe that smart students work hard. On the contrary, older students tend to believe that smart students do not work hard and view working hard as an indication of not being ‘smart enough’. As students get older and progress through school, there may be an increased tendency to attribute performance to an innate ability that is fixed, and therefore beyond an individual's control.

Recent findings that further Nicholls’ original work indicate that older students are ‘more likely to attribute a negative outcome following high effort to ability-related causes’ than their young peers (Folmer et al. 2008). Attributing failure to a lack of ability can lead to what Abramson, Metalsky and Alloy (1989) term ‘learned helplessness’ and feeling disempowered to improve. On the contrary, attributing poor performance to low effort has been linked with maintenance of motivation and an ability to recover more quickly from a negative outcome.
The importance of effort and ability differs across cultures and the notion that ability is a direct precursor to performance appears to be a Western construct. International research conducted by Stevenson in the early 1990s examining effort and ability in schools in America, China and Japan found that teachers and students in China and Japan regard mistakes as an ‘index of what still needs to be learned’, and expect that with effort and persistence, an individual will eventually overcome making errors and develop the required skills.

The research further highlighted that Chinese and Japanese societies regard high scores on a test as a sign of diligence and low scores not as a lack of ability, but that the student has not yet learned what will eventually be possible through perseverance. This does not mean that there is a belief that people are all born with the same endowments, but ‘more important was the degree to which a person was willing to maximise these abilities through hard work’ (Stevenson 1992).

The valuing of effort over ability is based in Confucian philosophy and contrasts with a Western mindset. Stevenson uses the example of someone stating that ‘I can’t draw’, as being countered in China with ‘That’s a shame that nobody taught you’.

Dweck (2000) advocates turning the focus from a ‘fixed mindset’ to one of potential and infinite growth, in which achievement is connected with effort. This can be both encouraging and empowering for learners. In her research, Dweck also found that directly challenging a student’s ‘fixed mindset’, in which they ascribe their mistakes to a lack of ability, can encourage them to become more persistent and improve achievement.

In attempting to assess whether Japanese students would persevere for longer on an impossible mathematical problem compared to their American counterparts, Stevenson and his team faced a problem in that the Japanese students refused to give up long after the researchers had anticipated. Facing such a difficult task, the Japanese students’ value of effort over ability, a belief that if they tried hard enough they would succeed, provided them with the drive to persevere.

Encouraging students to work hard and not give up when faced with challenges is no simple matter. Skill development is incremental and is not something that can be reached rapidly. Further, students should understand that this process often involves initial failure and errors, but this should be regarded as a natural part of the learning process and an indication that the challenge is worth pursuing.

Teachers can help students to understand the value of perseverance by modelling such behaviour in class. When talking through examples, support students to be confident that they will succeed if they persist and not to lose patience when success is not achieved easily. It is also important to encourage students to try different strategies or to look for some error in their application of a strategy when tackling a task (Brophy 2004). Encourage vulnerable students to see that hard work is not a sign of a lack of ability, but an acknowledgement there is more to be learnt.

Study in certain domains has been linked with increasing students’ perseverance. Learning in the arts and particularly intensive arts experiences for example, can help develop students’ task persistence (Catterall 2002). The practice required to perfect playing an instrument or performing a dance routine, or the concentrated effort to animate a short film, could have relevance and application to other domains.

Encouraging students to persist requires helping them to see hard work as a natural part of learning, and failure not as a lack of ability, but as a sign that there is yet more to be learned - and hopefully in the process instilling a belief in students that they can achieve anything.

### How to encourage perseverance

- Feedback to students should encourage persistence and patience to allow time to develop skills
- When scoring students, emphasise their accomplishments and progress made so far (and if they have performed below expectations that there is still learning to be done)
- Avoid attributing performance to ability only, and acknowledge the hard work required (e.g. ‘You did well on the spelling test, how much time did you spend practising?’)
- Encourage students not to lose patience when success is not instant
- Reassure vulnerable students that persistence (possibly with additional help) will eventually pay off
- Make students aware that learning may involve confusion or mistakes, but persistence and effort will eventually produce results and lead to skills development
- Support students to become risk takers in their learning and equip students with problem solving strategies specific to different challenges
- Present difficult work not so much as requiring strenuous effort, but as a challenge to stay goal orientated and persist in using adaptive learning strategies
- Encourage students to see that giving up means they will miss an opportunity to learn
- Invite ‘experts’ from different fields such as the arts, sciences, sport and business to share their experiences

Adapted from Brophy 2004, Motivating students to learn
Bibliography


