

Is persistence taught or caught? Two contrasting case studies in the context of first year University teaching.

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at contrasting case studies involving two tutors of first year students enrolled in an education course at an Australian University. Both tutors were given the same brief of designing a semester-long course that would foster the development of the habit of mind of persistence in their students. The two tutors went about it within different content areas and chose different approaches. Both worked within the principles of good practice to select their teaching strategies, but one explicitly taught her students about the habits of mind in general and persistence specifically, whereas the other did not mention it at all. Both sought to model the habit for their students, though the tutor who did not explicitly mention it to her class was more deliberate about the modeling. Given that the two courses were different it is not possible to compare student results to see if one approach worked better than the other. However, in both cases, the tutors felt that the students had demonstrated more persistence than previous groups they had taught. The tutors also commented that they had personally learned a lot from engaging with this specific focus and would seek to continue to incorporate it into their teaching and learning plans. Rather than emphasising conclusions based on these two cases, this paper aims to open up the topic for discussion at this conference.

Key words: persistence, habits of mind, principles of good practice.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It has been well documented that students of today are facing more constraints in their university studies. These include:

- Needing to earn an income whilst studying (Cushman, 2004; DEST, 2005; Hillman, 2005)
- Increased family and parenting responsibilities, especially for those students commencing tertiary study for the first time after a period of time out of school (Cushman, 2004; Horstmanshoft & Zimitat, 2003)
- Fewer contact hours on campus as Universities make economic cutbacks (DEST, 2005)
- Less regulated learning environment than school (Flinders University, 2007)
- Poor time management skills and ensuing stress (Lahmers & Zulauf, 2000)

All of this means that first year success is a predictor of ultimate success (DEST, 2005), especially as most departures from study occur in the first year (Hillman, 2005; McInnis, 2001). Central Queensland University, mindful of these difficulties, has adopted a revised Management Plan for Teaching and Learning that includes Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Seven Principles of Good Practice. These are:

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty;
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. Uses active learning techniques;

4. Gives prompt feedback;
5. Emphasises time on task;
6. Communicates high expectations; and
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

(Chickering and Gamson, 1987)

Whilst lecturers and tutors were exhorted to incorporate all of these into their teaching and learning programs, in order to see the effects clearly, we chose to focus on one of these in this research, that of an emphasis on time on task. "Energy plus time equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task" wrote Chickering and Gamson (1987, p. 1). Some teaching and learning groups (Ohio Learning Network, 2009; The TLT Group, 2009) take this to mean a transition to a technology-based approach in which greater use of electronic media is more engaging to students and cuts down wasted time in commuting. However, we were interested in ways to maximise time on task within a classroom medium. Halasz, Behm and Fisch (1984) found that teacher behaviours that significantly linked to the amount of time students spent on task in class were goal definition, organisation and planning, deliberately maximising the use of available time, using appropriate teaching methods and modelling the work ethic. We sought to find effective ways of achieving this within our courses.

However, to get maximum benefit from such methods, students need to persist, to maintain effort even in the face of obstacles. So we also considered Costa's (1991) habits of mind, specifically the habit of persistence. We deliberately narrowed our focus down to the feasibility and possible outcome of having tutors design and teach with new emphasis on just this one habit of mind (out of the possible 16). This enables us to see the effect without a lot of confounding factors, and also avoids overburdening the tutors. We felt persistence was particularly important for first years to develop because it also fits in nicely with general time management skills and reduction of stress if they have good strategies for dealing with difficulties when they arise.

What is persistence? As Lufi, Parish-Plass and Cohen pointed out in 2003, many studies (such as Parker, 2003; Tinto, 1987), that are concerned with attrition rates and funding issues appear to define persistence solely in terms of getting the degree. They regard it as a synonym for retention and are caught up with finding the factors that influence keeping students at the University, such as Grade Point Average, locus of control and satisfaction with faculty. This is institutional persistence theory. Others such as Roberts (2006) take a broader view, defining persistence in terms of positive and negative forces that are brought to bear on students, and the strategies they need to maximise the positive and deal with the negative. This is a sociological theoretical perspective of persistence. These are 'big picture' views of persistence, whereas our interest was on more immediate persistence with a particular task at hand. Consequently, we were drawn to Costa and Kallick's (2000) model of persistence as an intellectual habit. Specifically, we were hoping our students could go beyond the primary student's view of persistence as "sticking to it and not giving up" and that they would see persistence as "keeping goals in mind, identifying obstacles toward achieving the goals, and finding effective ways around them" (Anderson, Costa & Kallick, 2008, p.60).

We also found insight in Marzano and Pickering's (1997) discussion of specific overt ways in which classroom teachers may encourage their students to use the habits and learn to persist. These researchers recommend that the habits themselves firstly need to be defined, explained, discussed and rewarded to develop student understanding. Once such an understanding is achieved, teachers should then employ a range of strategies that "overtly and intentionally" (p. 264) assist students to develop the productive habits of mind that will enhance learning outcomes. Strategies recommended by these researchers include:

- Help students understand the habits of mind;
- Help students identify and develop strategies related to the habits of mind;
- Create a culture in the classroom and the school that encourages the development and use of the habits of mind; and
- Provide positive reinforcement to students who exhibit the habits of mind.

(Marzano & Pickering, 1997, pp. 264–269).

Contrasting that is the Wiggins approach. Wiggins (2008) agrees on the importance of positive reinforcement, but places less emphasis on explicitly teaching about the habit and more on providing multiple opportunities to develop it.

You don't develop a habit by direct instruction or informing students of the value of the habit, and you don't develop a habit by having it merely demanded of you ... To talk of better habits is to talk about something becoming "second" nature. It depends upon incentives, reinforcement, modeling. It means that you have to recognize when the old habit is acting, when to try a new habit, and practice in using the new habit and seeing its value. That takes time, repetition, situations which reward the new habit; and it takes wise, savvy, tactful teaching.

(Wiggins, 2008, p. 1).

Consequently, in this project, two tutors were challenged with the task of developing a learning program within their discipline to support the development of persistence in their first year students. The following section explains the process of data collection.

METHODOLOGY

We utilised the case study approach due to its ability to "gather an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). It is also "a particularly suitable design if you are interested in a process" (Merriam, 1998, p. 33) such as the process of teaching investigated here, as it provides immediate feedback on an implemented element of a program. Specifically, we looked at how two tutors attempted to incorporate the desired pedagogic practices into their teaching. In this context, the case study is a "focus for enquiry" (Golby, 1989, p. 168), and there is no intent to generalise the results to a population of teachers. However, a case study can serve as an exemplar of good practice which may help others make sound professional judgements (Stenhouse, 1985).

The tutors whose work is the focus of this study both teach within the first year Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) program at a regional Central Queensland University campus. The induction to the

project began with a briefing session, which outlined the research plan and specifically, the part they would play. The session also covered the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education and the Habits of Mind that underpin the project. They were provided with background information about the theoretical aspects and practical application of the *principles* and *habits*, and exposed to teaching and learning strategies that specifically support the principle of 'time on task' and the habit of 'persistence'.

They were advised that the research project would span the whole of one term (semester) and directed to design their tutorial activities to include a selection of teaching and learning strategies that might enhance the students' capacity to persist at a given task or activity. As Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 250) recommend, we provided the tutors with a "participant journal" and asked them to make a note of the teaching and learning strategies utilised throughout the term and the effect, if any, of such strategies on student performance. We wanted their immediate thoughts and observations so care was taken to stress to them that the journal should not be burdensome to compile, and would be used primarily as a tool to record events for later reflection. The journal data would be complemented by an individual interview at the conclusion of the term, where they could elaborate as desired.

Lankshear and Knobel (2004) recommend the individual interview as an effective means to gain an 'insiders perspective' of any given research situation. Ramsden and Dodds (1989) maintain that this method of data collection is the very effective in an educational setting as it enables the researcher to fully explain the purpose of the research and to ask open-ended questions that seek rich, descriptive responses. The interview has the added advantage of allowing the researcher to continually check for understanding. Consequently the interviews were semi-structured, and the pre-prepared questions were used as a guide only, in order to elicit the rich, descriptive data we sought.

The three pre-prepared questions were:

- 1- Can you please provide examples of the learning and teaching strategies that you utilised this term with first year undergraduate students?
- 2- Do you believe that these strategies assisted students in any way, to enhance their time on task? That is, their ability to persist at a problem using a range of strategies to assist them to get to the end point or solve the problem.
- 3- What evidence do you have to support this belief?

During the interview, the tutors were encouraged to elaborate upon their responses to these questions, so that a full 'picture' of the case could be established. To enhance the collection of valid and reliable data, we employed transparent and unambiguous questions and permitted the tutors to elaborate as desired. Trustworthiness was also sought through the use of two data gathering techniques, thus maximising the chance that interviewee was 'saying what the researchers thought they were saying' (Merriam, 1998).

Data analysis was viewed as the "process of organising the pieces of information, systematically identifying their key features or relationships (themes, concepts, beliefs etc) and interpreting them" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 266). To begin the process, interview tapes were transcribed verbatim

and the participant journals collected and reviewed. The data was then categorised into groupings that were alike, similar or homogeneous. This was achieved through the iterative process of reading and re-reading the transcripts and journals in order to identify potential relationships between data items, in this case teaching and learning strategies that might enhance a student's ability to persist at a task. Data that was dissonant to the main themes was also noted.

RESULTS

Despite having received the same briefing, the two tutors went about their tasks in entirely different ways.

“TAUGHT”

Tutor 1, working in the area of literacy, approached her participation in the study project in a systematic manner. She conveyed that she did not change her usual teaching methodology, but was careful to enhance her pedagogical planning with a backdrop that considered the principles for good practice in undergraduate education with a focus on the development of student persistence. From her journal it was evident that she paid explicit and focused attention to Marzano and Pickering's (1997) suggested methods. She explicitly mentioned habits of mind and persistence, explained and defined it, gave personal anecdotes of her own methods of persistence and rewarded evidence of persistence in her students. She also selected assessment tasks that required persistence for success. She included for the first time a written reflection task for the students, also a short article on persistence that was discussed in class. She asked her students to brainstorm strategies that represented persistence to them. This was a tremendous success, with students generating a lot of different strategies.

Marzano and Pickering (1997) further categorised behaviours that represent ways of demonstrating and enhancing persistence into five overall groups. We have reduced the rich descriptions of these to the following simple slogans:

1. Break it down
2. Find another way
3. Find support and encouragement
4. Visualise success
5. Take a break

Tutor 1 found that ALL of the strategies that the students suggested in the brainstorm could be categorised into one of Marzano and Pickering's (1997) five groups. Doing that with the students enabled them to see that they were richer in strategies in some groups than in others. Some strategies were also more at the primary school “stick to it” level. This gave her opportunity to suggest other, more advanced strategies, particularly for group 5 which was the most lacking. The students seemed reluctant to stop and take a break in case that would be tantamount to admitting defeat, and needed encouragement and explanation of the benefits to the thought processes of doing so. Table 1 summarises just some of the responses the students made in the brainstorm and how they were categorised.

Table 1: Student responses to the brainstorm about strategies that demonstrate persistence.

1. Break it down	2. Find another way	3. Find support	4. Visualise success	5. Take a break
Draw up a study timetable	Use multiple texts and resources	Try to study at Uni rather than at home	Have a determination to pass	Prioritise family commitments
Get bookwork and notes organised	Use the look, come, say, write, check spelling strategy	Go and talk to my tutors (the case study tutor and the CLC tutor)	If at first you don't succeed, try again	Attempt a problem when I'm not so tired, eg next morning
Set goals and write them down	Go to the extra English classes	Buddy tests	Feel a sense of achievement	Take time to think
Get the children fed so I can study	Complete all the practice tasks	My friends and family encourage me to persist	Believe you will get it eventually	
Time management	Look at it again and again	Bounce ideas off others	Keep motivated	

“CAUGHT”

Tutor 2, working in the Arts, chose to adopt a Wiggins (2008) approach. She didn't explicitly mention the habits of mind or persistence. She modeled it to her students by using lots of different teaching and learning strategies in order to persist with certain concepts and principles. Essentially she was teaching them the dance steps by doing the dance herself. From her perspective of students coming into the course with inappropriate conceptions of what constitutes the Arts, she made them persist by setting up opportunities for them to return to the Arts Curriculum documents repeatedly to further refine their understandings.

In virtually every tutorial, students were encouraged to reflect critically on their ideas and encouraged to persist in exploring them. Tasks such as (1) constructing organisers to assess activities as being appropriate to the Arts curriculum and (2) deconstructing a model lesson she taught were difficult for the students. They required persistence to work on these over a period of time individually and as a group. During this process she also showed them how to break big tasks into small goals, another aspect of persistence. She provided a lot of support and encouragement throughout the course.

She found that students broke out of their preconceived, rigid maze of ideas about what constitutes the Arts. In particular, the students' previous emphasis on “skits and egg carton caterpillars and other craft activities as ways of teaching the Arts” was considerably reduced over the course, and they began to suggest more appropriate and thoughtful activities that focused more on the Arts as different forms of literacy. They became better able to identify best practice strategies that fit the curriculum and greatly improved their choice and rating of strategies that would also fit the perceived levels of their students.

During her tutorials, the tutor observed them using various persistence strategies such as breaking tasks into small goals and looking for alternatives. At the end of her course, her students went out on teaching

practice, and she observed them using appropriate activities and strategies in their classrooms. So she knew they had persisted with the new ideas she had presented and challenged them with in her course.

DISCUSSION

So in these two case studies, we had:

- 2 different approaches, one more conceptual, the other more sensorimotor
- In general, one tutor more didactic, the other more kinaesthetic in style
- One gave more feedback specifically designed to reward persistence, the other modeled personal thinking processes of persistence
- One paid a lot more attention to not persisting the same way and continually tried new strategies.

These differences may reflect the different discipline areas (literacy and the Arts), and the personalities, styles and philosophies of the 2 tutors. We didn't set out to have one tutor adopt the Marzano and Pickering (1997) approach and the other to adopt the Wiggins (2008) approach; that happened entirely by chance.

One point in common was their emphasis on reflection. Both tutors linked this with persistence, believing that without reflection, persistence appears as dogged stubbornness that achieves little, instead of thoughtful and intelligent problem-solving. Tutor 1 stressed that reflecting on learning as well as on your own practice is a powerful demonstration of perseverance. This prompted her students to raise the question of how they could teach this in future. Tutor 2 linked everything she did to critical reflection. Both tutors demonstrated on more than one occasion that they reflected on their own practice and the benefits they gained from doing this.

OUR CONCLUSION BASED ONLY ON THESE FINDINGS

Admittedly, our study is preliminary with limited data. It does not include any objective measures of the students' capacity to persist or whether this changed over the course of the term, or indeed whether it persisted into the future. However the subjective appraisal from both tutors was that both "taught" and "caught" worked, in that they both felt these students had done better than previous classes and that the evidence they saw in class and in the students' work demonstrated greater persistence.

Our concern for it being "caught" rather than "taught" is the lack of metacognition those students have about what they have learned about persistence. They don't know that they know about persistence.

Without that metacognition, they would presumably be less likely to

- recognise its importance
- have the desire or the will; and

- have a repertoire of strategies

for teaching this or passing it on to their students. In that sense, for education students who will go on to be teachers, a case could be made for the added value of teaching them explicitly how to persist.

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