Evidence-based ideas that nurture student talent

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In an earlier SEDA Blog (Gibbons, 2022a), I outlined some of those ingredients used by students who managed to navigate their way successfully through the challenges of studying during a pandemic. A couple of important elements related to levels of conscientiousness and a student's level of situation or context-related control. Conscientiousness can be interpreted as that dogged determination to stick at it through thick and thin. It is sometimes called drive or grit but think of it as plain effort. Most graduate employers do not have a particular preference for specific named degrees, but they do value those important generic skills – time management, communication skills, showing initiative and problem-solving, *and* they are impressed by certain personal attributes, notably conscientiousness and drive (Velasco, 2012).

During the pandemic, for example, I found those high in conscientiousness experienced higher learning motivation and this changed little irrespective of the distress ratings given to the sources of stress faced. For those average in conscientiousness, their mean on learning motivation was lower and it fell more as distress increased. This trend was most pronounced for those low in conscientiousness – their learning motivation was the lowest and this dropped dramatically as stress demands increased (Gibbons, 2022b).

However, what I was seeing was not just conscientiousness – applying lots of effort, if it is not combined with the skill-set one needs to succeed in higher education, will not help. When I am seeing conscientiousness function as a powerful coping mechanism, it is because it is going hand-in-hand with control in an education context (Gibbons, 2022b).

In a recent survey of 175 second year UG psychology students, control remained a powerful ingredient in those who coped well (Gibbons, 2023). It was associated with lower anxiety and it played an important mediating role. Mediators are variables that act as underlying influences between the relationships in other variables. For example, I found that where students rated the efforts by friends and family to offer support as actually unhelpful and distressing, it was associated with increased anxiety. Observing a relationship between distress and anxiety is not unsurprising, however, the relationship disappeared when one factored in context control: The greater one's level of control the lower were the ratings given to this source of stress and the lower the anxiety. There are two take-aways: one, control is associated with good coping and two, when you are coping well you have more coping reserve and this changes your perspective towards other stressors. In this case, for example, you might recognise the kind intention in the attempts by friends and family to offer support, even if it is not, in the end, helpful.

Building control as a university student includes learning and executing key study skills to help one keep ahead of the curve. Being organised, disciplined, striking a balance between work and down-time and finding efficient ways into a topic can sustain motivation. Drawing on online sources, podcasts and the ever-expanding array of AI and study apps and using subject librarians to keep abreast of the best ways to do literature searches; understanding the marking scheme and learning how to develop one's academic writing and critical analysis are just some of the ways students build context control.

Induction periods and the early weeks in the first semester frequently put the spotlight on these skills. The challenge, of course, is how to incentivise students to engage in and hone these skills, preferably *before* they are assessed on them. In my school, we mark our students' first assignments as a draft that they can resubmit. We give them feedback on how they can develop their structure, the balance between descriptive and explanation and evaluation and on how to develop a critical argument and, for final year thesis students, we do something similar because the primary research they engage in is new territory.

Both these examples require heavy staff investment. An example I use that doesn't involves providing students with a link to a folder I created with two documents summarising critical thinking and writing skills in higher education (there are plenty of institutions that make available relevant resources but this is one of my favourites) and a third document outlining a seminal study in psychology and that illustrates some of these different skills. Their task is to write a short summary on the critical thinking material. With the third document, they are to add tracked comments where they flag what they think is evidence of description or explanation or evaluation or application, or that attempts to illustrate the eclectic nature of psychology. The task is introduced in week one and they submit it by week three. I

spell out that it is optional, it is not required or marked but it is an opportunity for them to develop and test their understanding on critical thinking and academic writing and to get ahead of the curve in developing their own context control.

The tracked comments task is a searching exercise and easier to do than writing a piece. The incentive is, if they do it and submit it, they will receive my attempts at the same exercise *and* I will give them an introductory text on psychology. I find most students are incentivised by this! I do skim over their efforts but I don't have to. I have no resources, by the way, to buy 250 undergraduate psychology textbooks, but with a little digging, one can find a range of resources that are pre-print or on free to share platforms, like Research Square and non-commerical-shareAlike. You are welcome to use my critical thinking searching exercise here, and my answers here. Students who succeed cope better and they realise the benefits in developing a sense of control as a student. As educators, we need to be creative and collaborative in our efforts to nurture those skills our students need to flourish and achieve.

Chris Gibbons is Associate professor in health and positive psychologist at Queen's University Belfast (c.gibbons@qub.ac.uk Twitter: @DrChrisGibbons). He has an interest in exploring those ingredients associated with good coping. This is not to be equated with avoiding stress. Rather, in utilising stress (called eustress) to enhance performance. He has explored this across a range of different populations, including in university students. In 1995, he established and continues to be chair of the Association for Psychology Teachers, a body set up to support students and teachers and lecturers in psychology. This hosts annual student conferences and CPD events.

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