

Center for Teaching Excellence

This is the twenty-fourth of a series of newsletters encouraging faculty enrichment and excellence in teaching by announcing opportunities, sharing ideas, and promoting collaboration.

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*Remember to talk with your students
about completing the online evaluations of your courses
at the end of the semester.*

Seaver Faculty Colloquium

Thursday, November 19

4:00 p.m.

Kresge Reading Room

Payson Library

Dyron Daughrity

Assistant Professor of Religion

“From Sect to Secularization:

How Christianity Became the Largest Faith on Earth”

See attached flyer.

**But I Really Tried!
Helping Students Link Effort and Performance
By Tracy E. Zinn**

“But I really tried!” is a refrain teachers often hear from students who do not get the grades they feel they deserve. Growing up, our students heard that hard work leads to positive outcomes and that they can be anything they want to be. As such, our students often see effort as the goal rather than a means to an end. As teachers, this poses a problem. First, students, more so than teachers, tend to think that effort should factor into grades (Adams, 2005; Zinn, et al., 2009). Also, students tend to have different views than teachers when it comes to defining “outstanding” effort. For example, a student might argue that she studied “for over 2 hours for the exam,” to which her teacher might reply, “Only 2 hours?” Similarly, students might view “cramming” before a test as effortful, whereas their teachers might view the same practice as less-than-optimal effort. These pieces add up to student expectations that are different from those of their teachers and, subsequently, to grades that students often feel they do not deserve.

But that’s not all. As teachers, we *want* students to work hard and to learn the value of taking on difficult tasks; we certainly do not want students to

think that effort and work ethic have nothing to do with meaningful outcomes. In fact, most teachers would probably take a hard-working, interested student who learns more slowly over a disinterested student for whom things come quite easily. However, teachers also recognize that assigning grades based on effort — a tricky construct to measure — is difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, one might question whether grading based on effort would even be fair. Teachers want students who know how to interpret statistics, not students who simply tried to learn how to interpret statistics. Furthermore, as much as teachers would like every student who works hard to earn a good grade, there are many situations where this is just not feasible. How, then, do college teachers encourage and reinforce hard work (i.e., effort) while still evaluating students' performance? More importantly, how might we develop *learned industriousness* (Eisenberger & Cameron, 1994), where hard work becomes a valuable reinforcer in and of itself because of its connection with meaningful consequences? Below are some strategies to help accomplish this feat, through (a) aligning goals and expectations at the beginning of the course, (b) using specific teaching strategies throughout the course, and (c) finding ways to incorporate feedback.

Aligning Students' and Teachers' Goals and Expectations

At the onset of any class, it is important for teachers to align their goals and expectations with those of their students. Benjamin (2005) suggested that teachers might start by having students give their reasons for taking the class, what they hope to accomplish during the semester, and what their general expectations of their teacher and the class are. Teachers could then give the class a *realistic course preview* (Brinthaupt, 2004; Yorges, 2008), providing students with a realistic view of what the course will be like and correcting discrepancies between students' expectations and reality. When teachers are clear about the procedures they use and are open to sharing their expectations, students tend to perceive the expectations as more fair than they would otherwise (Yorges, 2008).

After gathering information about students' goals and expectations and providing a realistic course preview, teachers can construct a *promising syllabus* (Bain, 2004) to put this information in writing. Along with the usual course information, promising syllabi typically include: (a) a discussion of the opportunities that a class provides, (b) what students must do to have those opportunities, and (c) how the teacher and student can determine that learning occurred. Bain suggested that promising syllabi are helpful because they instill in students a trust of the educational process and help set high expectations from the beginning of class.

By taking the time to align students' and teachers' expectations, teachers can avoid many of the problems associated with misdirected or misunderstood effort on the part of students. Teachers can also use the methods discussed above to encourage good performance and hard work from students.

Teaching Strategies

Describing good performance. Teachers may assume that students know what good, average, and poor performance looks like. However, this is not necessarily the case. There may be many situations where students work very hard on a project, but because of their misdirected efforts, the resulting product may be poor. A way to prevent this is to take the time to develop explicit instructions and rubrics for assignments (Appleby, 2007). To take this a step further, teachers can link the instructions for the assignment to the course goals. This way, students can see how effort to produce a certain type of product may lead to obtaining those skills in which they are interested.

Although teachers can eliminate much ambiguity with well-crafted rubrics, students may still have trouble deciphering good and poor products. This is where alternative teaching methods like just-in-time teaching (JiTT) can be useful (Benedict & Anderton, 2004; Novak, Patterson, Gavrin, & Christian, 1999). When using JiTT, students submit answers to a variety of questions online, and the instructor evaluates those responses before class. In class, the instructor shows students anonymous answers exemplifying excellent, average, and poor responses. These responses then spark class discussion and help students understand what constitutes a "good" answer.

Finally, using peer review can also be helpful in showing students different types of performance, as well as highlighting how students meet the objectives on a rubric. Students can provide feedback on their peers' papers, in-class quiz questions, or other assignments. Opportunities to see other students' work can lead to better performance on the students' own assignments. Thus, these types of methods can help link the effort students put into an assignment with the outcomes that they reap.

Use distributed practice. Teachers know that distributed practice is better than massed practice for student learning (e.g., Dempster, 1996), but how many structure their classes to capitalize on this effect? Incorporating teaching methods that encourage daily preparation and practice will likely lead to better performance and learning. Specifically, by asking students to exert a little effort each day, that effort will likely produce better performance than the same effort massed over a few days.

One way to encourage daily practice is to give in-class quizzes over material. Researchers find that these contingencies can result in positive learning outcomes (e.g., Connor-Greene, 2000). Teachers can also encourage daily preparation by using *interteaching* (for a more thorough description, see Boyce & Himeline, 2002, and Saville, Zinn, Neef, Van Norman, & Ferrari, 2006). Interteaching requires students to complete pre-assigned material before coming to class, which they then discuss in class with their peers. Ultimately, by using contingencies that lead to daily preparation, students engage in effort that is more likely to result in better subsequent performance on exams.

Relevant practice. In some courses, teachers provide opportunities for students to earn points that may be tangentially or unrelated to the overall course goals. Teachers may see these assignments as opportunities for students to improve their grades; students, however, may view them as "busy work," unrelated to their performance. Teachers should explicitly link smaller, daily assignments to the course goals and objectives so that students see that effort on these smaller assignments is important to meeting the course goals.

Furthermore, how closely related are the practice opportunities that teachers provide to the assessments they give? If teachers want students to be able to answer analytical questions on an exam, students should practice answering analytical questions both in and out of class. By doing so, the students' effort will more likely result in better performance.

Provide opportunities for "active" learning. What do students do in a typical class? Sit passively and copy notes. What do students do outside of class? Read passively and skim notes. Taking notes and passively reading are not the behaviors teachers hope students will develop in their classes. Instead, teachers should ask students to engage in more active and relevant behaviors, both in and out of class, that are tied to performance on assessments.

In class, teachers can make any number of changes to encourage more active and course-relevant behaviors. Interteaching, as discussed above, is one way of encouraging these active and relevant behaviors. Teachers can also ask students to "think, pair, and share." In this less formal interaction, teachers pose a question to students, ask them to take the time to think and write about it, and then share that response with a neighbor, explaining the rationale behind their answers.

Teachers can also provide students with opportunities for active learning outside of class. For example, teachers could require students to post discussion questions about some topic, answer specific questions about the text, complete practice questions, or even design activities themselves that would be relevant to the course objectives. The idea is for students to engage the material actively. Both in and out of class, making these types of changes can redirect students' effort into more meaningful and productive behaviors and, thus, better performance.

Use mastery criteria. Mastery-based systems require mastery of material (and allow students multiple attempts to achieve mastery) before moving on to the next unit. Using mastery criteria will allow students to see that learning the material is of paramount importance. Furthermore, students will see a

clear link between their efforts and how they perform. Also, recent research suggests that repeated testing may enhance learning more than repeated studying (Karpicke & Roediger, 2008). Therefore, by using mastery criteria teachers can capitalize on this testing effect. However, in a pure form, mastery-based courses, which allow students to work at their own paces, are difficult to conduct given the typical college structure. Luckily, there are ways of incorporating mastery or repeated testing components into a course without the hassles of self-pacing.

First, teachers can impose mastery criteria for certain basic skills in the class. For example, in a statistics class a teacher might require that students earn a score of 100% on a basic math skills test in order to take the first exam. By posting these quizzes on a course management Web site, teachers can allow students to take similar quizzes multiple times until earning the appropriate number of points. Similarly, a teacher could allow students to take an assessment covering a certain skill set a specified number of times (for example, up to three times), keeping the highest score. Alternatively, providing practice tests for students can capitalize on the benefits of repeated testing, without changing the structure of the course. Using course management software can make these types of assignments much more feasible for teachers. Each of these techniques results in more effective effort from students and subsequently better performance.

Highlight the meaning of material. As the semester rolls along, both teachers and students can tend to lose sight of how the class material relates to their own lives. This can result in students feeling as if their efforts are disconnected from their goals and course performance. It is worthwhile, therefore, to remind students how the material they are learning is related to course outcomes and long-term goals.

Teachers can achieve this goal in a number of ways. For example, teachers can encourage students to bring in newspaper or online articles that are related to the material. The teacher can then use these articles to start each class with a current event related to the course topic. Teachers can also regularly revisit the goals and realistic course previews that they and the students constructed at the beginning of class, specifying how the students' work has helped achieve the course goals. By reminding students of the goals they had at the beginning of the semester, teachers can be explicit in showing them how their efforts are tied to meeting those goals. Third, teachers can ask students to link the material they are learning with meaningful life scenarios. This might be in the form of a short personal relevance paper, where students explain how certain course concepts are relevant in their own lives. By emphasizing the meaning of course material, teachers can show students how their efforts impact the outcomes of the course, both learning and the students' subsequent grades.

Focus on Feedback and Reinforcement

Teachers know the importance of contingent reinforcement and feedback in helping students perform better. However, it takes a great deal of time and effort to provide specific, meaningful, and relatively immediate feedback to students, time that teachers often do not have. How can teachers provide this type of feedback, solidifying a link between student effort and performance, while remaining sane?

Feasible ways of providing feedback. There are ways to build feedback into assignments that are not labor intensive. For instance, teachers can use course management software (e.g., Blackboard) to prepare practice quizzes, which provides students with immediate feedback. If a teacher does not use course management software, the JiTT method discussed above is another good way of providing relatively immediate feedback to students. In class, students see what good answers are and compare those answers with ones they submitted. Although JiTT feedback may not be specific to each individual student, it often serves the same purpose. Students see a variety of answers, some very similar to their own, and see what the strengths and weaknesses of those answers are. After using a pair and share technique, teachers can provide feedback for a few of the responses. Finally, teachers can also implement peer reviews or peer grading (with appropriate rubrics) to provide more immediate feedback for students. Ultimately, each of these methods allows students to receive relatively immediate feedback, which helps students see that their efforts are aligned with performance goals.

Avoiding ratio strain. When students enter college, they move into a drastically different academic environment than the ones to which they are accustomed. The college environment has less structure, more autonomy, and more responsibility. Moreover, entering college means moving from an environment that is often rich in reinforcement (often for effort alone and not performance) to one that is much less so. Because of this drastic change in reinforcement "schedules," students are likely to experience ratio strain. Ratio strain is the result of moving from a situation that richly reinforces a certain behavior to one in which reinforcement comes much less frequently (Mazur, 1998). Just as nonhumans may stop responding when their efforts do not produce reinforcement every so often, students, too, may quit trying if their efforts go unrewarded. To help students avoid a feeling of helplessness that may come when behavior that used to produce reinforcement no longer does, teachers can structure their courses to avoid ratio strain.

New behaviors require a great deal of feedback. Thus, when students are learning a new task or skill, teachers need to be diligent about providing them with frequent feedback — or in other words, providing reinforcement for small but effective effort. Once effortful behavior is established, teachers can move to a leaner schedule of reinforcement. By providing reinforcement for small, distributed effort, we can encourage learned industriousness, where effort has been paired with positive consequences, and avoid learned procrastination, where effort has been paired with aversive consequences. Providing opportunities for relevant and distributed practice, as discussed above, help preclude ratio strain.

Conclusion

It is troubling to hear "But I really tried!" because as teachers, we want students who try harder to do better even though this is not always possible. The strategies outlined here offer a starting point from which teachers can try to make more explicit connections between students' efforts and course performance. By structuring our classes in ways that help students see the link between how hard they work and how well they do in class, we can avoid such exhortations, because, ultimately, those students who really tried will be the ones who are performing better. ♦

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Tracy E. Zinn earned her PhD from Auburn University in 2002. She was on faculty for two years at Stephen F. Austin State University, before going to James Madison University (JMU) where she is currently an associate professor in the Department of Psychology. At JMU she teaches, among others, courses in statistics and research methods, performance management, and industrial/organizational psychology. In addition, she conducts research on effective teaching practices, and faculty and student perceptions of students as customers in higher education. She also serves as the program coordinator for the APS-STP Teaching Institute, held in conjunction with the APS Annual Convention each May. She can be contacted at zinnte@jmu.edu.

This article was contributed by Don Thompson.

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Or contact me if you need help in finding helpful information.