

Reducing Perfectionism

You cannot learn and be perfect at the same time.

When young people perform tasks and are corrected before obtaining feelings of success, they become candidates for discouragement, rather than for empowerment. People cannot improve on what they don't yet own.

A friend of mine related an incident which occurred at the birthday party for his young daughter. After the daughter opened a present he had just given her, my friend asked, cajoled, and finally coerced his daughter into sharing her new toy with other children present. My friend did not realize that his daughter had been asked to share her new present *before she had taken possession*. It is hard for a child to share or open to others that which the child does not yet own. The same principle holds true in learning. Young people need to feel some degree of ownership or success in performing a task—or have a feeling that they are capable of it—before correction becomes beneficial. Otherwise, the good intentions of correction are perceived as criticism, which leads to a dampened desire to perform the task.

Unless a student is very motivated, he normally does not like doing something for which he will be criticized. However, once possession is felt—once he feels the skill is his—he can open himself to others.

A well-meaning but misguided attempt to correct before possession is taken can have unfortunate results.

In the first grade, when I finished my picture with the sun in the sky, I brought it to my teacher. He looked at it and said that there is no such thing as a green sun. The sun is yellow. Everyone knows that. He said that my picture wasn't realistic, that I should start over. Nightfall came to me in the middle of the afternoon.

The next year my second grade teacher said to the class, "Draw something—anything you want." I stared at my paper and when the teacher came around to my desk, I could only hear the beating of my heart as he looked at my blank page. He touched my shoulder with his hand, and whispered, "How big and thick and nice is your cloud."

The awareness of the negative effects of criticism and the positive effects of empowerment may be one of the most distinguishing marks of superior teachers—and parents. When our daughter was first learning to speak, she made the sound of “s” in a nonstandard way. We called attention to it only once at the dinner table. For the next several weeks, every time Hillary spoke any word which contained the sound of an “s,” she hesitated and tried to make the sound perfect. We witnessed the first stage of stuttering. Attention was never called to her speech again, and her parents were greatly relieved when her normal speech pattern returned.

The idea that a student should learn without error is a sound approach when first learning kinesthetic positions because poor neuromuscular habits are harder to break than learning procedures correctly. So students should be instructed at the outset on how to hold a pencil, a flute, or a baseball bat. But if criticism is constant during performance—unless the student is committed to the activity—motivation soon dissipates. This is not to infer that accuracy and precision are not important. They are, but they come later with a focus on continual improvement.

When an infant first attempts to walk, we offer encouragement because we know that learning comes by degrees. We do not expect the child in one day to stand up and walk. Similarly, we encourage an infant to speak even though the sounds are only approximately right. Exactly right is made up of a whole series of approximately rights. Suppose you want an infant to say, “I want a glass of

water.” If you wait until the child articulates that request with a flawless, complete sentence, you will have a dehydrated, dead child.

Young children are cute and it is easy to empower them through encouragement. But when infants become children and children become adolescents, we treat learning differently. But should we? Whatever the age, having an orientation for participation should hold a higher priority than perfection. Participation is the way to success. Perfection is too often a burden.

The tendency adults have to correct should be modified by a consideration of where the child is in his stage of learning. For example, when the child is desperately struggling to express an idea or use his brain to solve a problem and is put down by constant correction, he may simply not want to volunteer again.

Unfortunately, a focus on perfection has opened pathways for many students to live with the perception that only perfection is acceptable. And some children grow up with the idea that they have to be perfect for people to love them. The perception that if a person ever makes a mistake, he will be rejected—the sense that he has to be perfect for people to find him acceptable—is an idea which plagues classrooms all too often.

One way to look at the orientation of a classroom is to watch for both the teacher’s and students’ reactions to mistakes. When mistakes are welcome, learning is enhanced—first because they are invaluable clues as to how the student is thinking, and second, because to welcome mistakes is to create a climate of safety that ultimately promotes more successful learning.

When a student expects perfection but errs, he often faces self-rejection or failure. Young people marginalize themselves, feel like failures because they make mistakes. Striving for perfection—rather than for constant improvement—leads to other manifestations. It leaves students in a situation where they do not want to admit that they make mistakes in other areas.

Perfectionism can also negate a willingness to say they are sorry and apologize because they are afraid that if they ever admit to wrongdoing people will reject them.

An even sorer manifestation with too many students who work toward perfectionism is that they stop learning; they just give up. With these students, perfectionism becomes so tyrannical to them that they develop anxiety attacks. Such attacks have their beginnings in the idea that only perfect work is acceptable. This leads to a thinking pattern that they can't do it because it won't be good enough. The next stage is total paralysis.

Humans are the only species that think of failure. But we should think of failure simply as feedback, not as an end state. The teacher's message to students, therefore, is to emphasize that experiences should be viewed as processes and as information, not as weapons for self-punishment. This positive mindset breeds a willingness to experiment, to try, to risk. This is extremely important since improvement only comes with practice.

Practicing participation rather than perfectionism should be the message to learners. *Implement now; perfect later* should be our teaching principle.

Marvin Marshall is a professional staff developer who presents for several leading seminar companies and international associations, at universities across the country, and to schools around the world.

He is the author of Phi Delta Kappa's "**Fostering Social Responsibility**" (800.766.1156) and "**Discipline *without* Stress[®] Punishments or Rewards – How Teachers and Parents Promote Responsibility and Learning.**" (800.606.6105) www.DisciplineWithoutStress.com

Copyright © 2001 Marvin Marshall