

How to Build Persistence and Confidence



BY Julia G. Thompson

The inspirational words below have been copied with permission from Julia Thompson's blog. <http://juliagthompson.blogspot.com/>

SATURDAY, MARCH 26, 2011

How to Build Persistence and Confidence

One of the most frustrating situations for any teacher occurs when seemingly capable students won't finish simple assignments or, even worse, won't even attempt assignments that appear to be even slightly challenging. Students who stop working at the first moment of perceived difficulty are even more perplexing because their lack of persistence is often confused with laziness. While it may be tempting to just advise students to keep trying, this advice seldom resolves the problem.

There are many reasons for the unwaveringly feeble effort that many students present at the first sign of a challenge. For many students, the fear of their work not being "good enough" is paralyzing. Rather than earn a failing grade from a teacher, they give it to themselves by just not doing the work.

Other students are so accustomed to overly helpful adults who respond to their learned helplessness with so many hints and clues that they do not really have to think for themselves. Unfortunately, this pattern of behaviour is all too recognizable. These are the students who ask others for the page number rather than check a table of contents, ask dozens of anxious questions rather than read the text for information, or who put their heads down on their desks rather than work independently for any length of time.

Whatever the reason, it is possible to mitigate the patterns of learned helplessness. Below is a list of strategies that you can use to help your students develop into persistent and confident learners.

1. Start a unit of study by activating prior knowledge. Students who can connect new learning with previous knowledge will be far more likely to persist in facing learning challenges than those students for whom each concept in the material is unfamiliar.
2. Begin a unit of study or even smaller assignments within that unit with work that is easier than it will be near the end of the unit or assignment. Once students see that they can do the work, they will be less intimidated.
3. Break longer assignments into smaller, more manageable ones so

that students won't be overwhelmed at the thought of a long task.

4. When students work in pairs or triads on even part of an assignment, they tend to do well. Working with a study buddy allows instant support when students are not sure of an answer or a procedure.

5. Nothing succeeds like success. Design activities where your students can shine, and they will want to continue the positive feelings generated by that success. Use differentiation techniques to reach as many learners as you can.

6. Help students see the connection between effort and success. Often less persistent students believe that good students somehow are just smarter or find the work easier than they do. Learning that everyone needs to work hard at times can be an epiphany for some students.

7. Teach students how to accurately estimate the time that it may take them to complete a task. Students who think that it will take them hours and hours to do their homework will be far more prone to quit than those who realize that a shorter time commitment is required.

8. Offer plenty of rubrics, models, samples, and demonstrations so that students know when they are on the right track.

9. Have students set reasonable goals and work to achieve them. When students work to achieve a personal goal, they have a vested interest in working.

10. When you see students struggling with an assignment, use one of the most powerful questions in your teacher's toolbox: ask, "How can I help you?"

11. All learning should have a clear and pragmatic purpose. Students who know why they have to complete an assignment will be more willing to do so if they know how it will benefit them now and in the future.

12. Have students write their questions during independent work in a certain area of the board or on the Smartboard. Answer these questions at predictable intervals.

13. Formative assessments serve a dual purpose. They not only let you know what your students do and do not know, but they can be useful tools in making sure that your students know exactly how to proceed to

be successful. Frequent small formative assessments can be very useful tools in helping students stay on track.

14. Teach your students that their work does not always have to be perfect to be acceptable. Sometimes “good enough” is really good enough.

15. Harness the power of peer pressure. Having students work together in a class challenge to reach a specific goal can encourage those students who are willing to short-change themselves, but who don't want to let their classmates down.

16. Many teachers find that stopping periodically and having peers make brief checks of each other's' work can help students stay on the right track.

17. School success is not a big, flashy event. Rather, academic success lies in a pattern of small accomplishments. Work with your students to help them internalize this idea through brief class discussions, reflections, and other shared conversations.

18. Some students benefit from seeing a visual representation of the sequence of assignments that they are required to do. A bar graph or chart with spaces to be filled in as students complete the various steps of a unit of study will make it easier for students to persist until they complete the big task.

19. Frequent praise and even more frequent encouragement will keep students on task far longer than brusque corrections will.

20. Careful and close monitoring of students as they work will allow you to catch problems when they are manageable. Small problems are not roadblocks to confidence building—big problems are, though.

21. Encourage students who are working independently to signal that they are having a problem and then to keep working until help arrives. Some teachers offer a desk sign that is red on one side to signal for help and green on another to signal that they are on the right track.

22. Some teachers do not answer oral questions when students are working independently except at set intervals. Used correctly, this technique encourages students to keep working because they know that their questions will be answered at a predictable time.

23. Offer students time to reflect at the end of a lesson. Have them write responses first and then encourage them to share what went right and what caused stress during an assignment. Sharing the results of their metacognition can be a powerful way for students to learn how other students overcome their learning problems.

24. Often older students who have mastered the material current students may find difficult can be helpful resources. They can offer quick, informal advice and encouragement from a student's point of view.

25. Providing opportunities for students to look back on how far they have come in their learning--to review their past success—allows students to see the big picture of what they have already accomplished and encourages them to continue.

26. Be sure to offer a sufficient amount of appropriate practice before moving on to the next topic of study.

27. Offer a variety of different activities to review material. At the end of each class, when you provide a quick review of the day's lesson, use a variety of different activities that appeal to the various learning styles among your students.

28. Work with your students to focus on their strengths. Once they know what they are doing right, what individual study techniques work well for them, then students will be able to use those techniques and strengths to work quickly and efficiently.



About Julia Thompson

As a workshop leader and writer, best-selling author Julia Thompson has taught thousands of teachers how to create student-centred classrooms, thrive during that important first

year of teaching, motivate reluctant learners, prevent discipline problems, and sustain high expectations for the success of their students as well as for themselves.

A practicing classroom teacher, Julia is the author of several resources for teachers. In each of her books, she presents classroom-tested ideas, activities, and strategies designed to make each school day a successful one. Because she is a full-time teacher herself, Julia focuses her advice on the practical aspects of a teacher's busy professional life. She understands first-hand the realities of today's classroom. This extensive experience and the insights she has gained as a teacher trainer have shaped her beliefs about the daily challenges that can confront even the most steadfast teachers.

Julia's dedication to promoting excellence among her colleagues and to helping new teachers translate their dreams into successful practice is the focus of her work as an author of professional development resources and as a teacher trainer.

Books written by Julia and available to order from Amazon:

