

New Insights into Student Success in Higher Education



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Opinion

In earlier blogs [1,2] for the Staff and Education Development Association (SEDA), a forum, based in the UK but that aims to support all educators in higher education, I commented on some of my research findings on successful student coping. My earlier research had pointed to the value of student conscientiousness and of developing context control or mastering the skills needed in higher education. For students, this includes honing one's time management, searching efficiently for relevant material, finding easy ways into study material (through selected websites and podcasts), using generative AI strategically and learning to precise key points in class and when studying independently. Successful students have study buddies too - others they can share course specific issues with and bounce ideas off.

Students who succeed are motivated and appear to have strong willpower. However, interestingly, most have average willpower but adopt a good set of habits that prevent them 'slipping'. They focus on the longer-term benefits when facing difficulties today. They break down an assignment into smaller, more manageable tasks and begin with the bit that is easier first or that interests them.

Those with good time-management will look at assignments early. They'll break the brief down and start in-roads early, even if it is just baby steps into parts of the assignment. Getting ahead of the curve increases one's sense of control. This is associated with good coping, and it means new demands are less threatening. Students who achieve, develop these study skills. They become efficient in them and that means, downstream, they can invest less effort and remain efficient. It's analogous to a good tennis player or golfer who strikes the ball well because of their efficient technique.

Being on the front foot in time management buys students time to 'mind-wander' and problem-solve. The default setting in the human psyche is to be creative and to seek solutions to problems.

Students do this problem-solving consciously when dealing with the challenge an assignment poses but, and here's the magic, they will do it when consciously switched off from studying. For students, working on projects and assignments and finding ways to weave in critical comment – that precious ingredient necessary to get a 2.1 or a first, requires problem-solving and creativity and this is optimized if done not just as a conscious focus but when the student is switched off from studying, during down time and even during sleep!

The sooner students can begin to look at an assignment, the sooner they will be mind-wandering on it. They'll be thinking about how to structure their answer, about what information is important, and how to develop their argument and how to make critical points. To maximize the benefits from mind wandering, it is important students' factor in regular breaks in their study regime (ten minutes every forty minutes or so is optimal), and breaks involving no cognitive load, such as chilling, listening to music or going for a walk or some light exercise (and preferably some time away from devices because these do make a demand on cognitive reserves). Breaks that make no or minimal cognitive load, maximize the cognitive reserves to mind wander on the task outside of awareness. Some research findings add further ingredients to this winning formula, and some of these are not what we expect [3]. While students who succeed are often high on optimism, my research suggests there may be circumstances where pessimism works better. When students face new challenges that cause anxiety, and this is pretty well true for all students as they step out of their comfort zone, and where they have tended to do well in the past, pessimism not optimism can, ironically, help.

Where optimism and success are associated, it is often that the optimistic outlook merely reflects an accurate recall of past successes. We call this realistic optimism. Sharot (2011) however claims that around 80% of those who say they are optimistic

are, in fact, unrealistic optimists – they are biased to expect success when they experience just average success. This means they experience disappointment more and because they have an

inflated expectation of success, they don't experience the highs as much when they do succeed. Pessimists do not experience this downside (Figure 1).

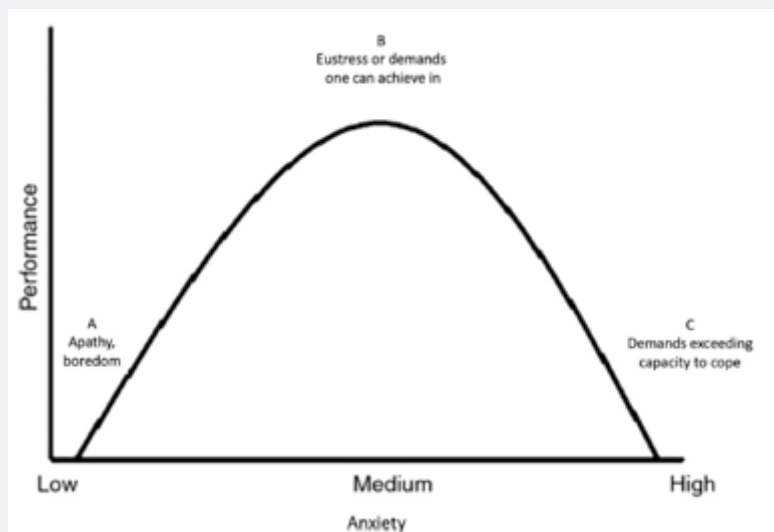


Figure 1: The curvilinear relationship between stress and performance (Gibbons, 2008).

As illustrated in Figure 1, stress has a curvilinear relationship with performance. Rather than avoid stress, students need a moderate amount of stress (x-axis) to optimize performance (y-axis) – the peak of that inverted U we call eustress. The optimistic bias to expect success may add a pressure that tips one past the optimum, or the peak, in the inverted U. Adopting a pessimistic outlook is defensive because it relieves the student of the pressure of having to do really well, and, if they have tended to do well in the past, telling themselves that it doesn't matter if they don't do well is unlikely to lessen the effort that they will invest. It is likely that they will still sustain their effort despite setting the bar low [4].

In one study, I found that students high in defensive pessimism scored just as high on learning motivation as those high in optimism [5]. I explored this further in my latest research [3]. I tested those ingredients I outlined earlier – levels of conscientiousness and control, together with levels of extraversion and self-efficacy (or confidence). These are other robust qualities associated with good coping. The optimists, compared to the defensive pessimism group, were higher on each attribute by medium to large effect sizes but, despite this, the defensive pessimism group were lower on anxiety, higher on course satisfaction and learning motivation!

It seems that defensive pessimism is even more powerful than I thought. The take-away for students is not to ignore the benefits associated with these other attributes: If students have tended

to do well, then they will likely be employing the optimal levels of control, effort and support, but in the specific circumstances university students face – new challenges, moving out of one's comfort zone and feeling vulnerable as one grapples with new learning, adopting the mind-set that 'it doesn't matter if I don't do well' is likely to relieve the student of the pressure of having to achieve and make it more likely that they will hit that sweet spot of eustress associated with good results [6,7].

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