SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL STUDENTS’
PHSycOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATION

The student must be oriented towards success

1.1 THE STUDENT ORIENTED TO SUCCESS VS FAILURE

Success and failure are two sides of the same coin, which are at stake whenever you act; whenever you make an evaluation. Notwithstanding the apparent clarity of the concepts, both have extensive cultural and individualistic connotations. In other words, success for some may be a failure for others.

In addition, the way you interpret the results you obtain in evaluations and, in a broader sense, the perception you have of yourself as a student may be crucial for you to overcome the obstacles inherent in your academic path or lead to negative results in a systematic manner and leave you visibly dismayed. Again, in face of the tragedy, you can either roll up your sleeves or give up. But do not “cry over spilled milk”.

As mentioned before, most of the different courses of action derive from your attributions to any of the two possibilities, both in success or in failure. Thus, the success oriented student believes in his/her skills and, before failure, he/she faces it as a result of less effort that does not jeopardize his/her skills or intelligence. The same happens with success. In this case, the student feels his/her effort as being paid off and faces the desired outcome as a result of his/her own merit.

As far as failure oriented students are concerned, the attributions are made antagonistically; in other words, in view of success the incredulous, or poorly self-confident student about his/her skills, tries to attribute it to external factors such as luck or the degree of difficulty of the task at issue. Conversely, before failure, the student blames his/her lack of skills for the feared outcome, stressing the disbelief in himself/herself as a competent student.

The figures below show how these attributions impact on the way the student feels and how this interaction influences performance.

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In competition settings, the fundamental motivation for many students is to avoid failure and protect their self-concept of the perception that they are poorly competent, which often leads to the adoption of strategies consisting in avoiding potential failure situations (Alderman, 1999).

### 1.2 SUCCESS-INSURING STRATEGIES

Another way to avoid failure is to adopt strategies that assure success. These strategies try to avoid people’s suffering caused by failure. The students that resort to them consider that self-worth depends on their never failing, or trying their best, or establishing very low objectives, or even using less adequate means. Nevertheless, they deeply fear not to have the skills – a student who tries very hard.

This type of student has an immense desire to avoid failure, trying to success, trying hard and being committed to academic tasks, very often at the detriment of other things in life, making the search for success some kind of obsessive ritual. There are neither moderate requirements nor forgiveness for this type of students, because perfection is their goal. From the point of view of their self-worth, risk is high, so when they fail, they suffer the worst of failures - failure after a great investment.

These students are in a limbo between the hope to be successful (confirmed by their academic record) and fear of not being intelligent enough (because they try too hard). That is why an isolated fear may be devastating because, for them, this is the confirmation of their worst of fears, i.e., of being really incompetent and not being able to fully meet the requirements of perfection. Ironically, some of these students ultimately trap themselves, as nobody manages to avoid failure for ever. Failure and success are
inevitable. Humanity is generally unsatisfied and this is what makes it go further and further, by establishing increasingly ambitious, but sometimes unattainable objectives.

1.3 LOW OBJECTIVES

Another way to ensure success consists in establishing such low objectives that it is unlikely to fail. In fact, in terms of self-worth, there is an illusion of respect based on a life of little effort and dedication: mediocre people do also their best.

These students establish for themselves an interval between the lowest performance that they may attain and the best they can expect. It is the case of students that say, before the exam, that they will be satisfied only with a pass mark. There are disadvantages in this type of strategy, in that success is predictable and lacks any value associated with the satisfaction to overcome a true challenge.

1.4 ACADEMIC CHEATING

This behaviour has long been a source of concern in the academic sector. Some consider that cheat notes are a sign of difficulty and represent little tolerance for frustration: others think that it is a sign of bad educational policies that encourage fraud and cheating. Once again, this behaviour is based on the fact that the student considers that his/her value exists if he/she has a good performance, even this is not real and, because of that, he/she feels the unpredictability of later situations.

The fear of staying behind, relatively to the other students, pays off the risk of being caught.

The students who are interested in learning usually:

• try to get the necessary means to accomplish a task (place, materials, etc);
• take care of their own resolution process and not just the outcomes;
• interpret and analyse the mistakes as a way to improve learning and try to learn with them;
• search for the necessary information to solve the problems, resorting to all means at their reach;
• often resort to teachers as a source of aid;
• would rather carry out somewhat difficult and new tasks which stimulate their learning process;
• do not apply success or failure criteria to evaluate their learning, as the success of the task is associated with the task itself;
• carry out the task with effort and sacrifice, if necessary.

There is a distinction between having knowledge and learning. To learn you have to actively process the information you received, reflect and make criticisms to what you are assimilating so that this can be applied later on in a professional setting. The “old” strategies of secondary education to memorize and forget immediately do not work any longer. You should consolidate information that will have practical use in your future daily life.

Last but not least, you have to pay careful attention to self-knowledge. The better you know yourself, the better you may eliminate distracting factors that jeopardize the proper academic performance, such as, for example:

• the lack of establishment of explicit objectives;
In short, it only makes sense studying when we are interested in learning (then we become active throughout the whole process) and motivated for study. To make this happen, effort and concentration are essential requirements, much more than outstanding intellectual aptitudes, which in themselves do not assure academic success.

Thus, be self-confident, believe in your intellectual and working aptitudes (that is, orient yourself towards success), allow yourself to be happy at the end of each outcome and consider failure as learning moments. Learn to work hard to attain your goals and try to set up realistic goals, be honest to yourself and do not “postpone until tomorrow what you can do today”. Faster than you imagine, academic success will be a reality in your life.

Technical information:
Sources and authors – referred to as footnote
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