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PERSUADING AT-RISK STUDENTS TO SEEK APPROPRIATE HELP

Jacqueline Hill

The Problem

At GVSU, as well as across the country, professors meeting over lunch frequently complain that the students who are barely passing their classes never come to their office to seek help. The writing and peer-tutoring centers report that students who are most likely to come to them for help are those wanting to bring B's up to A's, not those wanting to bring D's up to C's. Studies have confirmed this informal data: notably Knapp and Karabenick's (1988) survey of over six hundred college students at Eastern Michigan University, which found that students' self-reported intention to seek help—whether from their professor, a tutor or even a classmate—could be accurately predicted from their course grade so far. Those students earning a C, C+ or B- were most likely to intend to seek help; those failing or receiving A's were least likely. Some research has been done to determine the causes of this problem, but very little to seek a pedagogical model to solve it. At the Grand Valley campus workshop on August 23, 1995 entitled "Persuading At-Risk College Students to Seek Appropriate Help," we first examined the problem and then explored an outreach model intended to bring about changes in student behavior.

Why are some students reluctant to seek help?

Attribution theory suggests that, if we want to understand a person's behavior, we must learn what that person attributes his success or failure to (Weiner 1984). For instance, the individual who is convinced that her past grades have all been a matter of luck does not see any connection between help-seeking and success. Not surprisingly, several studies (Ames 1982, Shapiro 1983, Mealey 1990) have found that individuals who don't view themselves as having the power to affect their own outcomes, who have an external rather than an internal locus of control, don't see much point in seeking help. Bandura (1977, 1986) found that individuals' expectations of their self-efficacy determine how much effort they will expend when faced with obstacles. McHolland (1989) demonstrated that underachievers attribute both their successes and failures to noncontrollable factors like ability and task difficulty.

McKean's recent article (1994), "Academic helplessness: Applying learned helplessness theory to undergraduates who give up when faced with academic setbacks," defines academic helplessness as a self-defeating pattern that involves a passive, maladaptive response to a negative event. A student's sense of helplessness depends on two cognitive factors: the belief that academic tasks

represent uncontrollable, inescapable setbacks, and a tendency to view these setbacks in the most pessimistic style.

Most of us, in deciding on a course of action, weigh the costs against the benefits. For student with low self-efficacy, the perceived costs of seeking help are possible embarrassment and ridicule, guilt, a feeling of helplessness, and a public admission of failure (Gross 1983, Karabenick 1988). Adding to their reluctance can be a learned mindset to value independence over receiving help. In some families, while growing up, one may receive over and over the message, "We solve our own problems; don't ask for help" (Nelson-LeGall 1991). Anyone who has been a passenger in a car driven by someone with this kind of mindset knows how fruitless it is to suggest asking for directions. In some sub-cultures, help-seeking is viewed as weak or stereotypically female behavior and is not approved of for males (Good, et al, 1989, Gross 1983).

Models intended to increase help seeking

Three of the most common methods to increase help-seeking in higher education were noted by my colleague, Dick Koch, Professor of English at Adrian College (Hill and Koch 1992). The first, the store model, lets students know we are open for business to provide help by including our office hours in the syllabus and further announcing them in class. Tutoring centers distribute flyers and post bulletins. These methods bring in some students, but usually not the at-risk ones. So next we try the evangelism model: we preach to the class about the benefits of seeking help or tell them of the evil they risk by not being good and seeking help. A few more students may seek help, but probably not the at-risk ones. To attract these, something more pro-active is called for—the outreach model.

The outreach model can take various forms, but they all have several key features which attempt to address those student concerns identified in the research. Any successful model must remove perceived barriers, demystify the process, and offer rewards for learning new behavior. In the outreach model, we teach students directly about the perceived barriers to help-seeking and show them that others have found it necessary to learn help-seeking behavior in order to be successful in college. The outreach model might be seen as attribution retraining, because it offers students the opportunity to understand their underlying assumptions and choose to change them. Smith and Price (1996) urge that "attribution retraining should be considered as a possible intervention. . . . It is possible to encourage not only an internal sense of attribution connected to academic outcomes but also a belief that such outcomes are largely contingent on effort." We need to create opportunities for students to experience themselves as okay in help-seeking situations, to perceive that they are not fundamentally different from the help providers, and to be able to see themselves in either role.

The outreach model is active and engaging of student attention, not a passive offering of information. We are asking those students who never seek help to make a fundamental change in their personality, to let go of some long-held beliefs and

patterns of behavior. To accomplish this transformational learning, we need to offer reinforcement and encouragement.

Outreach Model: Suggested Strategies

The easiest strategy is to discuss resistance to help-seeking in class, acknowledging the various barriers that exist for many of us, including those who seem successful. An instructor may share a self-revealing story about overcoming a reluctance to seek help and encourage students to express their own stories. This strategy is recommended in several sources (Smith and Burkhardt 1993, Johnson, et al, 1991, Smith and Price 1996).

A second approach is to invite former students or other professors to participate in a panel discussion which would focus on what they were like as undergraduates, especially on what they learned the hard way. We all enjoy hearing stories of others' misadventures, and stories can be a powerful teaching tool (Ellis 1991).

Third is an assignment to write about an interview of a professor, the focus of the interview questions to be the professor's experiences as an undergraduate, particularly help-seeking ones. This assignment is frequently given in Freshmen Seminar and other study skills courses and recommended in several texts (Gardner and Jewler 1995, Kanar 1991). When I use it, I also have students reflect in writing on their experience in the interview. Most often they report being surprised at how easy it was to talk to their professor, and they end up being grateful for an assignment they frequently "hated" initially.

A fourth strategy is one Dick Koch and I developed to try with at-risk freshmen at Adrian College (Hill and Koch 1992). Our intention was to increase these students' utilization of the Writing Center. In class the students were learning about what a writing tutor does and then participating in a group in which they acted as if they were the Writing Center tutors. We found that they definitely changed their perceptions of what it would feel like to seek help, and most reported their intentions to change their behavior and seek help more readily. We had the most success in actually changing behavior in those classes in which the group activity was followed up with a required assignment to work with a writing center tutor on a paper.

Margaret Simons, a philosophy professor at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, and I devised a fifth, a course-controlled peer-tutoring strategy to bring about increased help seeking as well as a higher pass rate in a campus-wide, required critical thinking course (Simons and Hill, 1995). After the first exam, students were given the following options: if they had received an A or B, they were eligible to tutor a classmate; if they received a C or lower, they were eligible to be tutored. Tutors and tutees would each receive one point of extra credit for each session in which they worked together. Emphasis was placed on the little difference between tutors and tutees, and students were given class time to make arrangements for meetings. Getting extra points made an excellent rationale for participating, and, since many students were signing up, an easy accepting atmosphere was established. Students turned in brief, weekly tutoring logs, which often indicated a mutual helping relationship and dialogue, real benefits in any

learning strategy. The pass rate for the class significantly improved, and, in course evaluations, student enthusiasm and changed attitudes were obvious.

Workshop Participant Responses

At the workshop held in August, the session participants were challenged to think through their own responses to reluctant help seeking. The discussion that followed was far-ranging and provocative. At the conclusion of the session, participants were asked to comment on 3x5 cards about what they might try to increase help seeking in their own classrooms. A sampling of these comments can give you a feel for their responses.

- [I intend to] address issues before they become problems—maybe discuss resistance the first day of class [as well as] try peer tutoring partnerships in class.
- I never realized I could be more active about explaining/demystifying help seeking, and I intend to try some of the suggested strategies.
- My experience has been that there needs to be individual contact with the student to let him/her know that I care and to ask if I can help in some way.
- I may try addressing the problem directly to some degree at the start of the semester. I may require anyone making a D or lower on tests to see me.
- I use cooperative learning extensively in all my classes. I believe that the course-centered, peer-tutoring partnerships would fit in very well with what I am currently doing.

The Future

I continue to be very interested in changing student reluctance to seek help. Students who may be excluded from success in higher education because of early negative experiences or a disadvantaged background can learn behaviors that promote success. I encourage the readers of this article to contact me if they have suggestions to offer or questions to ask on this topic.

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