

# How the Learning to Learn Experiences Model the Seven Universal and Perennial Principles of Student Learning and Persistence

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## Abstract

*For 25 years, the Learning to Learn Experience, whether offered as a Learning to Learn Camp, an Academic Recovery Course, or a First Year Seminar, has continuously and successfully focused on increasing student success. Concurrent research has resulted in the identification of seven universal principles conducive to student learning and persistence. These seven principles, along with additional and parallel/supporting principles from Process Education, are why the Learning to Learn Experience has such a large impact on learner transformation and success. This article describes how components of the Learning to Learn Experience align with each of the seven principles of student learning and persistence. This, in turn, provides a research-based explanation for the impact each component has on student success.*

## Introduction

A *learning experience* is an activity which is deliberately designed to extend beyond the constraints, both in time and space, of a typical class meeting. The *Learning to Learn Experience* is a collection of discrete learning experiences. The overarching goal of the Learning to Learn Experience is to improve learning performance through the development of 50 key characteristics of a collegiate learner (Apple, Duncan, & Ellis, 2016). Each learning experience contributes to improving learning performance (Apple & Ellis, 2015) using explicit methodologies that model selected learning processes (Apple et al., 2013). The current collection of learning experiences includes the following:

1. Understanding the performance model and learning tools for performance analysis
2. Setting performance criteria and self-growth goals
3. Understanding and applying the learning process (Watts, 2018)
4. Using the classification of learning skills (Leise et al., 2019) For facilitating self-growth
5. Practicing self-assessment and reflection (Desjarlais & Smith, 2011)
6. Analyzing the past to change the future
7. Increasing productivity, especially in learning
8. Creating a life vision
9. Engaging in and analyzing team performance
10. Performing when being evaluated
11. Reading for learning
12. Increasing metacognition

13. Using failure as a means of achieving success
14. Use of mentoring
15. Turning evaluation into assessment

The Learning to Learn Experience began in 1995 as a summer Learning to Learn Camp (Apple, Ellis, & Hintze, 2016; Apple, Ellis, & Hintze, 2015). Since then, it has evolved into a variety of academic recovery courses (Wenner et al., 2019) and expanded into the online environment (Apple & Leasure, 2018). In any format, a learning to learn experience improves learning outcomes by modeling a shift to a culture of student success (Apple, Jain et al., 2018). The capstone activity of all learning to learn experiences is the self-growth paper, where students determine and document the degree of growth they've achieved. The 35 self-growth papers excerpted in the *Professional's Guide to Self-Growth* (Apple, Ellis, & Leasure, 2018) provide ample evidence of the magnitude of improvement possible.

The Learning to Learn Experience has been proven to help students succeed when used as an academic recovery course for students who have been dismissed from college or are in danger of dismissal. Wenner et al. (2019) reported the success of the face-to-face version of Grand Valley State University's (GVSU) academic recovery course as seen in Table 1.

For the last nine years, Hinds Community College has offered an annual academic recovery course for nursing students who have been dismissed. Of the students who completed the course and re-enrolled in the nursing program, 66% graduated and achieved nursing licensure. In 2017, Hinds Community College held Project You, a one-week recovery course for all students. Seventy-seven percent of the students who succeeded in the course and re-enrolled

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went on to successfully completed the next academic term (personal communication from program director, 2018).

**Table 1** Grand Valley State University's Academic Recovery Course Success Rate

Year	2015	2016	2017
<b>Students Enrolled in Recovery Course</b>	89	75	77
<b>Students Completing Recovery Course</b>	83	70	77
<b>Students Re-enrolled after Recovery Course</b>	61	62	51
<b>Students Continuing on One Semester Later</b>	41	N/A	N/A

A series of six, month-long online academic recovery courses was offered to non-traditional students at Western Governors University in 2017 (Pacific Crest, 2017). The results from a group of more than 180 students showed 95% of students completing the course rated it as highly beneficial and 54% said it was life changing. Of the students who started the course, 72% went on to complete it and 84% of those who completed the course and re-enrolled at WGU achieved satisfactory academic progress, with 64% completing a full-time or greater course load. One student earned 30 credits in the next term (Apple & Leasure, 2018)

The recovery courses discussed here comprise only one variety of wider set of Learning to Learn Experiences. The accrediting criteria, such as used by regional accreditors, reflects the generalized mission that institutions of higher learning exist primarily to support and certify learning. College and university administrators regularly speak about retention, graduation, and withdrawal/failure rates at professional development events. In his keynote address at the 2018 National Symposium on Student Retention, Joe Cuseo summarized his previous writings (Cuseo, n.d.) and, from pertinent research, identified seven universal principles for learning and persistence (2018). These principles help to explain the impact that the Learning to Learn Experience has on students.

### Seven Universal and Perennial Principles of Student Learning and Persistence

The following list (lightly edited) is from the speaker notes of Joe Cuseo (2018), who permitted its use in this article (personal email to Leasure).

1. **Personal Validation:** Students are more likely to learn and persist when they feel personally significant

— when they're recognized as individuals, feel they matter to the college, and that members of the college community care about their success (see Muraskin et al., 2004; Rendón, 1994; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Terenzini et al., 1996).

2. **Self-Efficacy, Growth Mindset, and Grit:** Student learning and persistence is maximized when students believe: (a) they can influence or control their educational fate, (b) their intelligence isn't "fixed" but can be "grown," and (c) that positive academic outcomes are achieved through personal effort, perseverance, and resilience (see Aronson et al., 2002; Bandura, 1977, 1997, 2010; Chemers et al., 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dweck, 2000, 2006; Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Elias & Loomis, 2002; Multon et al., 1991; Paunesku et al., 2015; Rendón & Garza, 1996; Solberg et al., 1993; Weiner, 1986, 2000).
3. **Finding Meaning and Purpose:** Students are more likely to learn and persist when they find meaning and purpose in their undergraduate experience — when they appreciate the significance of a college education and make relevant connections between academic learning, their current life, and their future goals (see AAHE, ACPA, & NASPA, 1998; Ausubel, 1978; Daloz, 2012; Fink, 2013; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Mezirow, 2000; Nash & Murray, 2010; Palmer, 2000; Parks, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Winkelmes, 2013; Wlodkowski, 1998).
4. **Active Involvement (Engagement):** Student learning/persistence increases proportionately to the depth of student involvement in the learning process — i.e., the amount of time and energy students invest in their college experience, both inside and outside the classroom experiences (see Astin, 1984, 1996, 1999; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Christensen et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; McKeachie et al, 1987; National Institute of Education, 1984; Pace, 1980, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).
5. **Reflection:** Student learning/persistence is optimized when students reflect on their learning experiences, think deeply about them, and transform them into a form that connects with what they already know or have previously learned (see Baxter Magolda, 2004; Belenky et al., 1986; Bransford et al., 2000; Bruner, 1990; Dewey, 1933, 1938; Ewell, 1997; Flavell, 1985; James, 1890; Kahneman, 2011; Kolb, 1994; Piaget, 1972; Rogers et al., 1977; Svinicki, 2004; Symons & Johnson, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

6. **Social Integration:** Student learning/retention is facilitated by interpersonal interaction, collaboration, and formation of relationships between students and other members of the college community — peers, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni (see Astin, 1993, Berger & Luckman, 1967; Bruffee, 1993; Ewell, 1997; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Johnson et al., 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Slavin, 1996; Tinto, 1993, 2012; Vygotsky, 1986).
7. **Self-Awareness (Self-Knowledge):** Students' learning persistence increases when they gain self-insight into, and remain mindful of, their (a) learning strategies and habits, (b) ways of thinking, and (c) personal talents, interests, and values (see AAHE, ACPA, & NASPA, 1998; Brooks, 2009; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Hart, 2004; Langer, 1997; Pintrich, 1995; Schön, 1987; Smith, 2011; Weinstein & Underwood, 1985; Willis, 2006; Zimmerman, 1990).

The remainder of this article explains how implementations of Learning to Learn Experiences succeed in their goals, through implementation of these seven principles.

### Personal Validation

The whole design of the Learning to Learn Experience (Apple, 2018) is about the individual learner. The process of the experience focuses on their performance development, their life vision, their risk factors (Horton, 2015), and the necessity of their heading in a direction conducive to success and the betterment of their life (Jain et al., 2015). At the beginning of the process, students quickly realize that they are the center of the experience — each student is critical to the process itself, as well as to their learning community. They leave the first meeting knowing that the coaches believe each student can and will be successful. This aligns well with some traditional high-impact practices for giving students personal validation: creating a welcoming impression, getting to know students, and treating each student as a whole person, not just a name on a roster (Cuseo, 2012).

At the beginning of the Learning to Learn Experience, students are asked if they would like to double their rate of learning and performance (Apple & Ellis, 2015). This query presents a 200% improvement in performance and students immediately realize that the coaches/facilitators know that the students are capable of making this level of improvement. Each student has a support group (their team), a community (all the teams), a team mentor/academic coach, and a facilitator. The teams work together to complete the experiences while

a high level of expectation and challenge is maintained by the coach/facilitator. Throughout the process, the team coach reads each student's work, especially their life vision, and provides individual assessment feedback to strengthen the work being produced (Nancarrow, 2013). The individual and improvement-focused feedback further confirms the value of each student as an individual who is important to the process, the college, and wider society.

### Self-Efficacy, Growth Mindset, and Grit

Two high-impact practices that support self-efficacy are scaffolding work so that students have support (scaffolding) during challenging events and providing students with role models to whom they can relate. In the Learning to Learn Experience, students are required to perform actively as learners from the moment they begin the first experience (Elger, 2007). Expectations are so high that few (if any) students initially feel they can meet the expectations (e.g., 130 pages of writing during an 80-hour experience). Students tend to estimate that based on their current writing speed of two pages per hour, they will barely meet the writing requirement, which is far from the only requirement in the course. They are left wondering how they can possibly get everything done (Apple, 2018). These situations are intentionally designed to be so overwhelming that students doubt that any amount of perseverance (grit) will be enough for them to meet the challenges. The students are kept in challenging situations where they experience multiple successes and failures in any given hour. As students learn to turn their failures into success, they begin to build a can-do attitude that they start to carry with them through other challenges (Apple, Ellis, & Leasure, 2018). Students' belief in themselves shifts from external validation (the belief of the coaches and facilitators) to internal validation (their own self-efficacy and grit). As the Learning to Learn Experience progresses, students see that they are continually increasing their performance from where they were at the beginning (e.g., writing two pages per hour) and they realize they'll be able to meet the challenges of the experience. This hard-won and authentic sense of self-efficacy is achieved not only through continual practice but also through the use of tools available in the *Student Success Toolbox* (Pacific Crest, 2011). These tools include targeted prompts for shifting from self-evaluation to self-assessment, transforming previous failures into successes, strengthening planning, increasing daily productivity, and strengthening the ability of writing to think. It is when students do the reflecting necessary before writing their self-growth papers that they realize that they have persevered to perform beyond their own greatest expectations.

## **Finding Meaning and Purpose**

At the heart of the collegiate experience is creating meaning in life (Jain et al., 2015). During the Learning to Learn Experience, students explore the concept that they are the director of and main character in their own life. They analyze their own history and understand the process through which they have become the current representation of themselves (their past), analyze who they currently are, and then envision who they want to become and the meaning of life they want to realize (their future). Within the Experience, students use a set of learner characteristics that align with professional characteristics to strengthen their ability to set goals and make changes that will lead to success not only academically, but within their chosen profession and life (Apple, Duncan, & Ellis, 2015; Apple, Ellis, & Leasure, 2018). Students capture the result of these experiences in a life vision portfolio (Mettauer, 2002). By the end of the Learning to Learn Experience, they have developed the critical connections between who they are, what they desire from their life, and how they can become the person they want to be.

## **Active Involvement (Engagement)**

Every hour of the Learning to Learn Experience sees students engaged in active learning (Astin, 1999) for which they are prepared through reading-for-learning and personal discoveries and explorations (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008). Students are continually collaborating, thinking critically, writing to think, and applying new learning to the next learning performance (Hanson, 2007). Students are aware that their continuous performance of learning is public, and they know their learning and performance are being assessed by coaches and facilitators (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

The Learning to Learn Experience is not just about learning performance; through the student council (Armstrong et al., 2007), students are actively involved in improving the process of their Learning to Learn Experience and participate in decision making with real consequences, both of which shifts ownership and responsibility for performance to the learners.

On the last day, students are required to perform in six challenges — a math contest, a problem-solving competition, a talent show, an art contest, a writing contest, and a speech competition — all areas where students generally experience a high degree of anxiety. When the Learning to Learn Experience begins, students are typically anxious about these final performances. However, over the course of the Experience students have developed self-efficacy and realize they can learn to

perform at the highest level. This leads to strong ownership, commitment, and confidence by the learners. The whole of the Learning to Learn Experience is one of engaging pedagogy (Cuseo, 2012) — it is impossible for a student to passively sit back and not engage with the community.

## **Reflection**

Reflection is widely recognized as a high-impact practice (Cuseo, 2012). During the Learning to Learn Experience, students increase their reflective practice in different contexts by using at least 25 different tools. They also receive assessment feedback on their reflections in order to improve their reflective capability which is further augmented through the purposeful development of self-assessment. The carefully designed life vision prompts help the learner process and construct meaning for themselves by reflecting on their past, present, and future.

These active practices of reflection are balanced with opportunities for stepping back to increase understanding and metacognition (for self-improvement and growth development). The structure of the assessment journal (Carroll & Beyerlein, 1996) and the multiple uses of the tools geared toward building reflective ability help learners appreciate that self-development occurs as a result of the reflective process. Building the means to integrate and elevate critical thinking (Center for Critical Thinking, n.d.) into the reflective and self-assessment process produces stronger reflection and more powerful assessments.

## **Social Integration**

Integration of students into the college community strengthens student success (Cuseo, 2012). The learning to learn process is necessarily anchored in a quality learning environment consisting of teams and learning communities (Apple, Ellis, & Hintze, 2016). Each team/learning community has at least one coach, who is responsible for the success of the students as individuals and as a team. The structure of cooperative learning, use of rotating roles, constant reflection on team performance by the reflector (Hanson, 2007), and timely team assessments by the team and/or their coach constantly strengthen individual performance within the team and the performance of the team as a whole (Hanson, 2007). Through friendly competitions, students unite within their own team, but also build cross-team relationships. The conversations that take place between students engaged in Learning to Learn Experiences enhance these meaningful relationships. Often, peer mentors, who have previously been through this experience, also con-

tribute their mentoring and insights to the process, expanding the participants' social circles in a meaningful way.

The academic coaches (faculty and staff) use the Learning to Learn Experience to build stronger mentor/mentee relationships by sharing their life experiences and forming meaningful relationships with their facilitation team.

### **Self-Awareness (Self-Knowledge)**

The Learning to Learn Experience helps students grow their academic mindset and develop their identity as a collegiate learner through the targeted practice of metacognition, reflection, and self-assessment (Cuseo, 2012). Because the Learning to Learn Experience focuses on metacognition, learners explore how they think, how they learn, and how they effectively solve problems (Apple, Ellis, & Hintze, 2016). Explicit use of the Learning Process Methodology enhances learning by helping students become aware of their own learning process and performance. It is this awareness that is the key to improving learning performance.

There is a significant amount of writing, especially writing to think, and learners use this writing to explore who they are, who they want to become, and their history in order to develop a life vision (Metauer, 2002). Learners are provided with performance measures (rubrics) to increase their performance in each of these characteristics (Apple, Duncan, & Ellis, 2016). The combination of writing their life vision, 50 pages of reflective writing, and use of methodologies to assess performance in multiple performance areas (Apple, Duncan, & Ellis, 2016) increases self-knowledge, awareness of students' own strengths, understanding with respect to how they can leverage their strengths, areas of opportunity for growth, and significant insights about themselves.

### **Professional Development Opportunity**

The Learning to Learn Experience offers a unique opportunity for professional development, as it directly integrates faculty in a model that produces student success in real-time. Faculty learn to increase their skills as facilitators of learning by facilitating learning activities with peer coaching. They assess student performance directly as well as assessing students' assessments (in order to improve students' ability to assess). They work with diverse groups of students with diverse needs and, with the help of lead mentors, learn how to mentor these students to success. When faculty act as mentors, measuring student performance both at the beginning and conclusion of the Learning to Learn Experience,

they appreciate the degree to which the process transforms students.

Perhaps most importantly, the faculty who participate learn how students struggle with developing personal validation, understand how students' self-efficacy is strengthened, watch students gradually embrace a growth mindset, observe the various practices that develop grit in the students, observe how students create personal meaning and purpose for their collegiate experience, and how they build the metacognition that forms the basis of their own self-awareness. These faculty also work to construct the kind of learning environment that fosters engagement, learning, and growth, create a learning community within that learning environment, all while practicing ongoing reflection and self-assessment.

### **Ongoing Faculty/Cultural Impact**

Learning to Learn Experiences have been contributed to continuous positive change in a number of colleges. At Madison College (Madison, WI), the Learning to Learn Camp provides a yearly professional development opportunity involving 30 faculty who advance the student learning practices for 200 students each year. At Grand Valley State University (Grand Rapids, MI), the annual recovery course is preceded by an online professional development event; as of March 2020, more than 200 GVSU faculty members have become experienced facilitators, with a waiting list of additional faculty who wish to participate. The Nursing Allied Health Center at Hinds Community College (Jackson, MS) has offered a week-long academic recovery camp for the last nine years and a significant percentage of the Hinds faculty have taken advantage of the opportunity the camp provides for improving teaching and learning skills.

### **Future Research**

While students who re-enroll in college or their programs are proof-of-concept that Learning to Learn Camps and Experiences are successful, there is less data available about these alumni. Tracking these students would provide meaningful insight about the lasting and/or long-term effects of these programs. Data that could indicate student success include enrollment in subsequent semesters, time to graduation, semester and cumulative GPA, etc. These quantitative data points could also be used to improve the Learning to Learn Experience. In addition, longitudinal, qualitative data from the students about the lasting impact of the Learning to Learn Experience (for example) would allow for a data-driven assessment of the Experiences.

## Conclusion

A Learning to Learn Experience is a comprehensive package that implements all seven of Cuseo's Seven Universal and Perennial Principles of Student Learning and Persistence in supporting success for students (2018). For the last 25 years, faculty and administrators who experienced a Learning to Learn Experience have seen that it worked — it increased student learning and success — but have not always understood *why* it worked. The authors have tried to clarify how elements of the Learning to Learn Experience

relate to high-impact practices associated with student success and, further, to demystify the Learning to Learn Experience for all potential stakeholders so that Learning to Learn Experiences can be justified and accepted by faculty, staff, and administrators, as a time-tested strategy for increasing student success. Implementation of the Learning-to-Learn Experience can strengthen program-wide ownership of student success at an institution, helping to change the culture around learning, teaching, student risk, and success factors.

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