

Nobody should BE PERFECT

Doing everything to 100% of your ability while trying to maximise your capacity at all times will guarantee suboptimal results, advises **Colin Foster**...

None of us are perfect, but we can at least always do our best, can't we? No one can ask more than that from us. Isn't that the message we'd want to give our students? 'Try your hardest at everything, give it your best shot – and even if it doesn't turn out perfectly, you'll know that you did everything you could.'

It sounds like the kind of positive, 'high expectations' message that we should surely be promoting and modelling in everything that we do at school, no? Well, I'm not so sure...

Your best handwriting

I can still remember a teaching colleague who kept an old-fashioned fountain pen in his pocket. He could do extremely fancy and neat calligraphic writing, which was very useful in the days when students' certificates would be handwritten. The ones he did looked superb.

However, he was known for using this pen whenever he wrote anything, always in that same elaborate cursive. It was a point of pride for him that he'd never allow a cheap Biro to sully his hands. Whatever he wrote, it would be via that slow, careful and beautiful script he was famous for. Many colleagues admired how even short, throwaway notes from him would be penned with such craft that you could frame them on the wall.

And yet, I wouldn't hold up his penmanship habits as a great example for others to

follow. Might they not equally be indicative of someone who struggles to prioritise effectively? Treating *every piece of writing* as deserving of equal attention to detail seems like an inability to distinguish between differing levels of importance.

When writing a congratulatory card, or drafting a personal letter expressing sympathy, our attempts to make our script look as good as we can may well convey to the recipient the level of care and attention we've given to the task, thus making the end result all the more meaningful and moving.

But if we then commit the same amount of care and detail when writing ourselves a quick note or shopping list, doesn't that diminish our other efforts somewhat? Adopting a single mode for everything seems like a failure to adapt appropriately to different circumstances.

Limited resources

All of us only have so much time and energy. Everyone can only write by hand for so long before their wrist starts hurting, so shouldn't we try to deploy our resources as strategically as we can?

All things being equal, we should probably take more care when writing something that hundreds of people will read than when writing something intended for only one person's attention. We should all take more care when writing something that will, say, be printed and

distributed to parents than a quick internal memo to a colleague they'll hastily read before binning.

One activity where you'll likely see this more often nowadays is proofreading emails. Some emails warrant being carefully reviewed, checked and if necessary, edited before being sent. Others simply don't. If I email you a request to send me a file I need urgently, and you reply with a curt response of 'Attached' spelt with just one 't', that really doesn't matter – I just want the file.

“For many tasks, satisfactory is good enough”

It shouldn't be a 'point of pride' that every email you send comes with full boiler-plate, AI-generated or otherwise ('If there are any other files that you require, please do not hesitate to get in contact with me...') After all, your recipient is busy too. All that extra verbiage merely indicates that you, the sender, possess questionable skills of time management and an inability to prioritise.

We should all be much more understanding of how busy and stressed our colleagues often are. I don't want to waste my time, and I don't want my colleagues to waste theirs either.

'Adequate' versus 'amazing'

This isn't a recipe for laziness and general sloppiness. It's actually quite the opposite. Economists will sometimes say that if you frequently fly and never miss a flight, then you're probably wasting far too much of your time hanging around at airports, arriving for your flights much earlier than necessary.

Absolute goals, such as 'I must never miss a flight' or 'I must never make a grammatical error', would be better replaced with an acknowledgement of the trade-offs involved. Yes, I want to avoid certain errors, and make them as rarely as possible

– but if I persist with a dogged determination to avoid making errors at all costs, then I'll likely end up wasting too much time that I don't have.

For many tasks, *satisfactory is good enough*. By doing some things *adequately*, rather than amazingly, we can create a lot of additional space for doing other things to a better standard, or doing more things overall.

Or for simply taking some time to rest and recharge. Not everything will require from us the very highest level of commitment.

What can you de-prioritise?

We need to consider the things that really matter and prioritise those, but even that's only half the task. The harder part involves thinking carefully which things matter *less*, and *de-prioritising* those. For every thing

that we prioritise, we need to de-prioritise something else.

If I want to plan my lessons to a higher standard, then it may be that I end up writing my routine emails to a lower standard. That's a trade-off that I'm happy to accept. What might be some of the things you could spend less time on – or even safely rush? What are those tasks where a few minor mistakes won't actually matter all that much? What are the things you have to do, but which ultimately don't really matter so much to that many people in the broader scheme of things?

You may still have to perform those tasks, but you don't have to *excel* at them. They need only be 'good enough'. You should feel no guilt about this; the aim isn't

to necessarily give you an easier life, but rather to enable you to be more effective in other areas.

Perfectionist expectations

Dare I say it, the same might even apply to students' efforts. Can they really be expected to be 110% committed to every aspect of every subject, every day of every week? Perhaps it's reasonable – helpful, even – for them to realise that they only have so much time and energy, which they ought to be directing towards those tasks that will have the biggest impact on their learning.

Saying 'Always give 110%' can risk setting up unrealistic, perfectionist expectations that make lots of people – students and teaching colleagues alike – feel like they've failed most of the time.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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