



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Record of Reflection

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Introduction

An interesting observation I've made about academic hustle culture is that working hard and failure are often not compatible. That is to say, you want everyone to know you work hard and that you're constantly pushing the limits, but you don't want to push to the point of failure. As such, we glorify the process of struggle - but only if it equates to success.

In the past few years, I have rediscovered my love for exercise and working out. One core principle at improving in the gym is the idea of progressive overload. Progressive overload is deliberately increasing the difficulty of your weights in order to optimize muscle growth. Often times, it means training close to failure, also characterized as not being able to push/pull or carry the desired weight for your exercise. This concept of progressive overload and training to failure has been part of how I view all of my physical hobbies – including weightlifting, rock-climbing, running and crossfit. The idea that it *should* be hard, because if it's hard it means you're pushing the limits and growing as a person. This is not to say that it should *always* be hard, because the body has limits. Hence why rest and “deload weeks” which are periods of time where you deliberately go lighter in your weight, is essential for maintaining your progress.

While my athletic hobbies and academic pursuits have remained separate, this summer research period has pushed me to synthesize the two for a different outlook on what failure and success can look like.

Key Reflections

1. If it's hard, it just means you've gotten stronger

One of the biggest milestones in weightlifting and bodybuilding is what I call “upgrading weights.” This is the idea that what was once a challenging weight for you is now too easy to

promote muscle growth. Whenever I would get stronger at an exercise, it was always motivating and exciting to load on an extra 2.5 pounds on the barbell. Usually, this change would make a big difference – enough for me to struggle and have to work on this weight for another 2 weeks before I can think to go up in weight again. Two important observations to make here:

- a) Things being easy is not ideal
- b) Things getting harder is a sign that you've grown stronger

Applying this to academic pursuits is a little bit more difficult. Firstly, the stakes at failing in the gym are not as high unless you're a professional athlete. If you can't lift the dumbbell, it will not be the end of the world. However, when you're getting graded on a paper and your GPA is affected – it may seem like somebody has turned up the pressure in the room. When thinking about how I should approach this research project, I realized that it is less similar to my other school projects and more like my gym goals. For one, it is not directly graded nor have a strict set of criteria that I have to adhere to. At the gym, part of what is so fun is that I can personalize my workouts to feel the best for me. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to get stronger, as long as you do it safely. Similarly, I realized that the Laidlaw Scholars program is built to give me as much flexibility as possible so that I can have the most enjoyment. Secondly, I am in control of my progress. Since being at the gym is usually an individual activity, nobody is really there to tell you what to do. You're in charge of yourself to make things difficult and harder so that you can be stronger. This autonomy in raising your own “difficulty level” was an important realization I had to make when pursuing new things for my research project. For example, when I was combing through literature and reading through multiple sources to figure out what was relevant and not relevant with my research, I faced feelings of self-doubt that I wasn't good enough to be analyzing others' content. However, this feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer

amount of resources and sources that were available to me was actually just the principle of “progressive overload” naturally appearing in my research process. As I combed through sources, I found connections between literature that extended to others fields of study and themes. This meant that I was deliberately (but maybe not consciously) expanding my own pool of sources to ensure I got a more accurate picture of what I was studying. When I realized that the feelings of being overwhelmed by research was just a byproduct of me being a more detail-oriented researcher, it reframed the way I felt when things got difficult.

2. Enjoyment is key to sustainable progress

Before I started enjoying exercise, it always baffled me when people told me they were going to the gym or going for a run. In my mind, it seemed like a version of torture but to them, it was pure fun. Understanding that happiness and having fun is key to sustainable progress reshaped what my goals were for this research process. It is not to create the most “perfect” paper but rather to do my best while enjoying myself. However, enjoying yourself is not as easy as it may seem – especially to someone (me) that often equates suffering to success.

Before going to the gym, it’s important to fuel yourself and be in the right mindset. This means that I am not personally a fan of morning workouts since I know that I won’t have enough time to be properly fueled nor will I be awake enough to hit the gym. As such, there is no point in making myself suffer morning workouts if I know they aren’t going to be good workouts in the first place.

With the concept of building strength, there are such things called “wasted reps.” Wasted reps essentially mean that the ideal number of repetitions in an exercise should be between 8-12, with you nearly hitting failure by the end of that set to be most optimal. However, if you are

doing sets with repetitions up to 30, then the amount of effort you put into the first 15-20 repetitions are considered “junk volume” and don’t really do anything for your strength besides make you more tired. When writing the research report, I had blocked out times for myself to write a few pages to avoid last minute procrastination. However, there were days where I sat in the library for hours, not writing anything more than a few sentences. Looking back, I realized that the time I spent just sitting there – racking my brain for the “right things to say” is my academic version of “junk volume.” It didn’t really improve my writing nor expand my knowledge by forcing myself to stare at an empty word document. Instead, I pivoted to reading qualitative dissertations that were enjoyable to read or even opted for reading relevant literature that piqued my interest. Not only did this make the process a lot more fun and enjoyable, it also helped me generate more ideas for how I wanted to express myself. I found that the best writing I produced was when I was in a flow and enjoyed myself. Thus, it isn’t about forcing “goodness” out of me but rather thinking about how I can best set myself up for more productivity.

Conclusion

The formula for success can be defined as follows: Success = progressive overload + sustainable enjoyment. Progressive overload is the mental reframing of what hard work means and what difficult moments represent. They don’t reflect an inadequacy in skill or intelligence but rather the natural pathway of becoming stronger, smarter and discovery new things. Sustainable enjoyment is the synthesis of having fun while optimizing for productive work. Being wary of “junk volume” and how to better use your time and resources in order to make you feel mentally and physically ready to do your best!