

Performance Culture: Best Practice

It's not enough to be busy, so are the ants.

The question is, what are we busy about?

- Henry David Thoreau

During the fall 2010 Convocation NMU president, Doctor Les Wong, stated: "Living up to our own standards and reaching for our full potential, is the goal for this year" (P.O). This is nice words. What can be done then, at a university, to increase the probability that its students reach their full potentials? The title of a seminar arranged by the Norwegian Olympic Committee this fall, was: "Why are the best one better?" (Olympiatioppen). Athletes, sports teams, learning environments and businesses that have experienced success, are excellence sources to ask for advices in regards to performance and how to reach for one's full potential. Based on real stories, examples and values obtained from mentioned performance cultures, this article will present concrete suggestions of what can be done at university to facilitate great accomplishments. It turns out that Thoreau is right. What we achieve is not only about how many hours we work. It is about how we work. Enjoy a glimpse into the best practices!

First, always keep the whole student and the whole university in mind. Chef and public speaker, Mark Bittman, says: "It is not about the beta-carotene, it is about the carrot" (TED). That means that details are only valuable when they are a part of an entirety. Additionally, a well-known quote from the former Norwegian prime minister and former general secretary of the WHO, Gro Harlem Brundtland, says, "Everything is connected to everything else!" (Brundtland). Successively, it is important that this whole is built on a solid foundation. Thomas Alsgaard, five times Olympic champion and six times World Champion in cross country skiing, says that there are two conditions that are essential for us to create a breeding ground for great achievements: attitudes and culture (Alsgaard). During NMU ski coach Sten Fjeldheim's pep talks, it is often

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repeated: "First you form an attitude, then it forms you" (Fjeldheim). Therefore, we need to carry the right attitudes. Four key criteria in Alsgaard's development as a skier were: honesty, patience, evaluation and well-being (Alsgaard). The two latter cornerstones are maybe not precisely attitudes, but it might be allowed to say that they are consequences of certain attitudes and principles. Moreover, an attitude doesn't only form individuals, because "Attitudes Are Contagious," as is the title of a book of Dennis E. Mannering. Consequently, the attitudes that students, professors and staff carry around on campus should be "worth catching" (Mannering). The attitudes found on campus form the university's culture and make a vast impact on its learning environment.

A university campus hallmarked of enthused students creates a good atmosphere for learning. Therefore, measures that can help student motivation should be taken seriously. When used well, student counseling can be vital. From 2003 until 2006, Odd Snerthammer was an influential physiotherapist for the Norwegian male national biathlon team. The team's members brought home more than 20 medals in the Olympics and World Championships during those years. Snerthammer didn't only have a role as a health professional and masseur; he also was an important sparring partner for the athletes, both physically and mentally. Being on a high athletic level himself, he was able to shadow the athletes on certain high intensity workouts. From this he gained respect, and also got as close to the athletes as a person from the support crew possible could get. One mantra Snerthammer often repeats is, "You have to know what you are doing!" (Snerthammer). This call can be used as a starting point for many awareness-raising conversations.

Any action that is more than just a necessity for survival needs some kind of motivation. To study isn't a basic need for a human to stay physically alive. That means that a student needs some kind of real incentive to continue being an active "syllabus-reading" student. To have apparent and true answers to the questions: "Why am I a student? What and why do I want to learn?" is an important step to develop and keep motivation. Students should be faced with such challenging questions early in their university career, in a setting where it is not possible to get away with shallow and obvious answers. Odd Snerthammer's expert eye was, and still is (for us who like to spend time with him), painfully difficult to escape. Even though not every person radiate

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such an authority as Snerthammer, commitment and honesty are more likely to occur when people talk face to face, compared with answering questions on a piece of paper. It may not be implemental, to arrange a meaningful talk between every new student entering campus with a person from the student counseling center. However, the power of real human interaction is something that should be taken advantage of. A suggestion could be to arrange talks between freshmen and upper classmen that have shown to be successful and reflected students. To get these conversations to start taking place, the university could develop a worksheet with certain quality-assured questions. At least two welcomed windfalls from such a drafted discussion are likely to occur.

First, it is more probable that the new students will be directed, or better, direct themselves, to a more optimal initial placement into courses. To know the mindset of students who experience that they consistently are staying on a track they find interesting, meaningful and enjoyable, can be an invaluable good reference to have for freshmen when choosing classes, majors and minors. Sir Ken Robinson debates a lot about education. In his TED-speech, "Do schools kill creativity?" (K.R.), he shares a beautiful story. The setting is a mother who, upon the request from her daughter's school teacher, has taken her beloved, but also restless and unconcentrated daughter to the doctor. The doctor's mission is to suggest what can be done to make the young, energetic girl more suitable for school. This was in the 1930s, so ADHD etc. was not invented yet. No solutions is suggested, until the mother and the daughter is about to leave the doctor's office. Accidently, the doctor turns on the radio. Immediately the little girl starts to move to the music that sounds from the radio. For several minutes the doctor is just gazing at the dancing girl. Then he turns to the mother and says, "Woman, your daughter is not sick. She is a dancer". Consequently, the girl was taken to a dance school, where she met other children who had to move to think. As time went by, she grew up to be a successful dancer and later, among others, came to choreograph the musical "Cats". The girl's name was Gillian Lynn (K.R.). Many talents are explored incidentally. However, a university should do its best to increase the possibility that students come across tones that spontaneously make them dance; to express it in a figurative language.

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A second bonus from the freshman and upperclassman conversations is that the more experienced student also is forced to rethink his or her pillars for educational motivation. The freshman might also spark some fresh thoughts and reasons for education with their older peer. Kristen Skjeldal was a member of the Norwegian national male cross-country-ski team from 1988-2006. He has explained several times, how it was positive, refreshing and needed that the team regularly was influenced by new skiers who showed youthful enthusiasm and great appetite for athletic improvements. This helped the well-established skiers remain sharp and hungry too. Additionally, from the exchange of experiences between the mature and younger team members, confidence got a chance to grow in a healthy way (Skjeldal). This recalls something Oestein Skallberg, founder of a successful Swedish corporation named Skaltek, frequently communicates: "Confidence is the start of it" (Skaltek). It has been suggested how a university possibly can meet a new student. The next, and even more essential part is, how to keep the student going.

The two final sentences in Skallberg's quote are, "Joy is a part of it. And love is the heart of it" (Skaltek). The teaching in a university should have the ambition of making the students enjoy and love the subjects taught. Not by doing convulsive attempts to present the subjects in mediums and ways the students know from their daily, high-tech modern life, but rather by being something different that will contribute to variation in the student's impressions and working posture. Mathematics might serve as a good example here. The way mathematics is written, which include a lot of quirky mathematical notations (just think of the integral and square root signs) and the importance of seeing mathematical expressions from different angles, it is impossible to get the same flow in writing mathematics on a computer compared with doing it with paper and pencil.

Mentioning flow, the word *flow* is sometimes used in the context of an extraordinary state of mind. It was first introduced by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He explains: "The experience of flow is the state of consciousness in which one is completely absorbed in the activity at hand. During flow, people exist seemingly outside of time and outside of themselves" (quoted by Levine 47).

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Csikszentmihalyi discovered the concept of flow by observing artists who spent inordinate periods of time on their work with what appeared to be absolute focused concentration (Levine 47). A university should have as a duty to carve out space for “flow-like” experiences.

The way universities are organized in regards to time with weekly schedules etc., students are being assisted into a form of time structure. The idea that time structure creates time space, is an important principle included in my work ethics. Human nutrition professor, Mohey Mowafey, takes this a step further and reminds his students, that whenever structure is implementable, without heroic effort, it should be worked out. The reason why, is that structure in general creates space. “Leave the garbage out!” is one of his repetitive calls. “Create some space for creativity, impulsivity and the unexpected!” he continues. Additionally, when we already are listening to Mowafey’s voice, it fits in quite well to include another of his quotes: “Motivation is only first gear. Habits are what keep you going!” (Mohey). To have a daily and weekly rhythm during a whole semester makes it probable that students will develop some habits.

There are good habits and bad habits. The habit of multitasking is a bad one. Let’s give the word to Jordan Grafman, chief for cognitive neuroscience at the National Institution of Neurological Disorders and Stroke:

I think that one of the big trade-offs between multitasking and ‘unitasking’, as I call it, is that in multitasking, the opportunity for deeper thinking, for deliberation, or for abstract thinking is much more limited. You have to rely more on surface-level information, and that is not a good recipe for creativity or invention.
(Patoine)

Also knowing that attitudes and actions are contagious, and that we are paced by the other people in our environment (Levine), multitasking should be prohibited at certain places and rooms on a university campus. A possible rule to introduce could be to define the university’s library a Facebook- and all other social-media-free zone. To make a Facebook-page of the university’s library, like the NMU Olson Library has done (Facebook), is a totally misunderstood attempt of meeting the students where they are.

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The students are not supposed to be on Facebook. It would be better if they were in the state of devoted studying their self-chosen classes. "... lead us not into temptation," Jesus advised us to pray (Matthew). Thus, a university library should not be accessed via Facebook, regardless of how rural it might be placed geographically.

Another researcher Michael Friedlander, head of neuroscience at Baylor College of Medicine, echoes Grafman's sentiment:

If a child is doing homework while on the computer engaged in chat rooms, or listening to iTunes and so forth, I do think there is a risk that there will never be enough depth and time spent on any one component to go as deep or as far as you might have. You might satisfactorily get all these things done, but the quality of the work or of the communication may not reach the level that it could have had it been given one's full attention. There's a risk of being a mile wide and an inch deep. (Patoine)

It is a good habit to always search for doing one's best, within the time limits offered. The difference between doing things satisfactorily well, compared with doing our best, is, precisely, the satisfaction. At the bottom of Marquette Mountain, on a rainy, chilly, autumn morning, before the NMU nordic skiers are about to start doing intervals of moose-hoofs (a mix of running and jumping with poles), the passionate engaged coach-voice of Sten Fjeldheim can be heard: "We are not doing this because it is easy. We are doing it because it is hard and unique. Take some pride in what you are doing. And go as hard as you can!" (Fjeldheim). On Fjeldheim's office door there used to be a sign that read: "Go hard. Or go home." (Mohey). It has a joy in itself to challenge personal limits, either it is within the field of academia, business or sports. Whether we succeed or not, in regards to grades or result, is secondary, because by knowing that we did our best, we might have learned something that we can try do better at our next shot. Whether we choose to look upon ourselves as losers of a competition or gainers of experience, is an individual choice. Choosing the most fruitful approach to this choice, there are also possibilities for developing our self-respect.

Although a classroom is spared for hash weather, the teacher sometimes feel like giving a motivational speech. J.D. Phillips is a teacher that sometimes follows this urge:

I'm a bit older than you, and I know what I'm talking about. Several reasons. Among others I can mention personal experience, all the books I've read, movies I've seen and songs I've heard. It takes time to get to know, and eventually, really love a woman. The fascinating phenomenon, though, is that if you find the right one, the more you get to know her, the more you love her! (Phillips)

These sentences were just the introduction to an allegory. Eventually, he asked "How many of you are now beginning to fall in love with abstract algebra?" That actually meant: who had taken the necessary time and effort to fall in love with abstract algebra? – A math class that in its nature (it is all about writing mathematical proofs), is totally different than what undergraduate math students have ever experienced before.

Further, Professor Phillips tried to explain why some people were willing to devote their lives to such, on the surface, meaningless and narrow things as group and ring theory. "A part of it, is the joy in itself to understand something on a deeper level, and the moments of excellence rarely experienced, plowing new soil, entering landscapes neither you nor others have ever been before" (Phillips). March 2007, Kristen Skjeldal did his last World Cup 50 K in Holmekollen. He finished with style. Still as smooth, and at the same time square, as when he won the Norwegian Championship back in 1990. Draining himself for every calorie available in his all over trained body. A newspaper, Nettavisen, published in 2006, a longer article about him. The headline was: "But he never became rich..." (translated from Skjerdingsstad). No, Kristen Skjeldal never became rich in money, but that wasn't what he found valuable either. Being equipped with racing skies, light poles, a race suite and perhaps a pair of Briko ski-goggles, feeling energized, having a groomed course or "crust-snow" in front him, a competitor next to him, or simply alone; Kristen could live out his passion and desire: Go as fast as he could. Express the art of skiing and performance sports to the fullest. Experience physically and mentally phenomenon he had never been in touch with yet. Be an example for other people, that: Love is the heart of it! On top of that, he

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added: "By the grace of God, for God's glory" (Skjeldal). Doctoral student, and former college nordic skier at University of Colorado Boulder, Erling Christiansen, is continuously working on an interpretation of Adam Smith's "The Theory of Moral Sentiments". The title of Christiansen's article is: "The man within the breast. On virtue and utility in any enterprise of production". Christiansen discusses thoughts and ideas about what should be the proper motivation for doing business. His final sentence is: "Moments of excellence, on the other hand, last forever" (Christiansen).

A university should be an institution that facilitates and encourage "moments of excellence." To exemplify how to do this, the Norwegian male national cross-country skiing team head coach, in the golden years from 1990-94, Inge Bråten, can serve as a model. He was, in fact, originally a high school teacher. In retrospect, despite the outstanding results, his role within the national team has been questioned. Some have come up with satirical comments like, "His role was only to blend the athlete's Gatorade". However, what the skiers themselves explain, though, is that he offered them a safe, strong framework and structure consisting of training camps, travel arrangements, expectations of basic, healthy athletic lifestyle and support crew. Within this framework, the skiers where given the freedom to experiment and challenge each other (Skjeldal). That meant that there were spaces for even more of Alsgaard's basic principles: doing the right things, in the right way, at the right time (Alsgaard). Inge Bråten was a teacher, who knew how and "when to leave [his] kids alone" (PinkFloyd). On the other hand, and importantly, to make sure that his athletes didn't end up on totally wrong tracks; Bråten arranged both standardized and authentic test races (Skjeldal). Now, Odd Snerthammer's mantra should again echo.

If the students at a university get to experience confidence, the joy in itself and love in regards to what they are studying; together with a feeling of allowance to develop their own individuality, Thomas Alsgaard's principle of well-being (Alsgaard), is probably already met. Subsequently, a university that succeeds in doing this will not need to spend too much time and energy on student well-being events and services.

"You have to know what you are doing!" (Snerthammer). Just like successful people and businesses, the ants know perfectly well what they are doing. They are all

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cooperating about building an anthill, and that's also what they are getting wildly good at. What are people at the university busy and enthusiastic about? The answer has to be easy, simple and clear: Education. The goal with the education should be to develop self-thinking, living, steaming, fragrant human beings (Isachsen). The world cries for help to deal with problems like global warming, damage of natural diversity and equitable resource allocation. The solutions to deal with such big challenges are most probably found outside the box. Therefore, the society does not benefit from universities, if these learning institutions content themselves with produce mainstream "brick[s] in the wall" (PinkFloyd). What we need, though, is to make sure that, "It is a great day to be a wildcat!" (P.O), also within the universities' venerable walls. Nature and exceptional best practices are nonstop exemplifying how to do this in simple, although brilliant, ways.

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