



Regarding 'Participation in small-group learning'

In Wilkinson and Rudland's commentary on students' experience of small groups (Wilkinson TJ, Rudland JR. Participation in small-group learning. N Z Med J 2004;117(1205). URL: <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/117-1205/1140>), I was surprised by the assertion that 'humiliation for wrong answers can be a powerful negative reinforcer' leading to reduced participation (page 1).

In my introductory Psychology course, I carefully explain that 'reinforcement' tends to increase the likelihood of a behaviour happening again, while 'punishment' tends to decrease that likelihood. Positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of a behaviour by adding a desirable consequence (e.g. receiving praise after being helpful), while negative reinforcement increases the likelihood of a behaviour by removing something aversive (e.g. when you put on your driver's-side safety belt and the annoying beep stops).

Students frequently have difficulty grasping these concepts, and seeing the terminology used incorrectly in the NZMJ (twice in the same article) can only confuse them further.

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Response

Dr Trevena's definition of 'reinforcement' and 'punishment' is a useful reminder of the importance psychology plays in education and also the care needed to use the correct terminology. However, it is important that the reader does not lose sight of the practical point being made.

Irrespective of how it is engendered or termed, humiliation can have a detrimental effect on student learning and should have no place in education.

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