

## Reflections on Perseverance

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I don't know what your attitude toward dandelions is, but mine was generally one of tolerance, provided there were not too many. That is because as a child I enjoyed the wild green mix my grandmother picked and cooked in the spring, and tender dandelion leaves were one of her favorite ingredients. As an adult, I looked forward to her freezing and saving some of her wild green mix to cook for me when I returned home for summer visits. While living on our acreage in the country I did not feel too guilty about seeing a few dandelions growing. They evoked that pleasant memory of childhood and home, and since there was no other house near by I could still maintain a semi-positive attitude toward them – at least they were attractive before they reached maturity. Besides, there must also be some nutritional value too, even though I was never quite sure what it was.



Living in a residential neighborhood that values weed-free lawns more than the taste and nutrition of dandelions produced a paradigm shift. Maintaining good will with neighbors became more important than making a statement for the environment, so dandelions became something to be disdained, like all other weeds. When summer weather produced an outbreak of dandelions in my backyard, there was a need for action.

With the purchase of a well-advertised herbicide it seemed a solution to the problem was at hand! The herbicide proved to be more effective on the grass around the dandelion, with minimal impact on the weed, but I observed a change in the dandelion's growth pattern. It changed from upright and visible to low and spreading, hugging the ground in a way that made it more difficult for the lawn mower to retard the growth by cutting off the flower heads. With renewed determination, I re-seeded the brown patches in the grass and purchased a different weed killer, one that actually worked. One interesting observation was they did not die without a fight. The bright yellow flowers drooped, progressed through a rapid life cycle, and quickly produced heads of white, fluffy spores waiting to open and be launched by the wind, potentially sowing hundreds of new seeds. It seemed that if the plants must die, they were not giving up without a fight! Not to be foiled, I plucked and destroyed the swollen heads while waiting for the leaves to turn brown and die.

As annoying as the situation was, I could not help but marvel at the perseverance of the plant to survive in the face of my deliberate attempts to eradicate it. I began to see the dandelion as an object lesson in determination and resilience, the embodiment of perseverance, and mused on how perseverance can be nurtured in the classroom. What does it take for a generation of students raised on TV, loud music, and numerous distractions competing for their attention to become engaged in learning and continue learning in spite of difficulty?

Brain research tells us that emotions and thoughts are intertwined, and the way we feel influences the brain. The neural pathways of the brain are built through experience, and

perseverance can lead to that experience being sustained in order for learning to take place. “When our network connections are awash with emotion chemicals, synapse strength is modified and the responsiveness of neuron networks can be dramatically changed” (Zull, 2004).

Emotional responses drive perseverance in learning. Emotions arise from curiosity, interest, or hands-on experience. Many times the learner does not see the value of things to learn either from past experience, or from perceptions of present or future need. The learning process becomes an unpleasant chore, which develops an aversion in the learner to the material he is supposed to learn. When students feel good about what they are learning through experiencing success, the strength and quality of the learning is enhanced. The teacher’s role then is to find a magic button to spark feeling of pleasure and satisfaction in the learner, rather than feelings of frustration and despair. Active involvement that engages the brain and allows the learner to create his own understanding helps make learning intrinsically rewarding. When that happens, no matter what obstacles the learner faces, he will be persistent like a dandelion, and remain engaged in the learning process.

#### Resources

- Zull, James. The Art of Changing the Brain. *Educational Leadership* 62(1), 70.