

Growth Mindset

People who believe intelligence is a trait that can be grown—those who have a “growth mindset”—tend to outperform those who see it as a fixed quality.

Carol Dweck introduced the concept of fixed and growth mindsets in 2006. Growth mindset is now invoked in classrooms so frequently that Dweck has had to call out a “false growth mindset”—the facile notion that effort, divorced from learning, warrants praise. To the contrary, the growth mindset is all *about* learning and reflecting on how one learned, not fostering a positive attitude. In other words, coming up with the same wrong answer again and again does not demonstrate learning. However, it’s okay to come up with multiple, different, wrong answers, so long as each mistake emerges out of new and refined approaches to a problem. By practicing **metacognition** with your students—thinking about how one is thinking—you can shift students’ focus from achieving high scores to achieving high growth. When the prospect of getting an answer wrong becomes less important than the opportunity to give the brain a good workout, students generally overcome their hesitations and self-doubt, becoming far more willing to throw their thoughts into the ring.

Some ways to encourage a growth mindset:

- Explain the growth and fixed mindsets to students, and highlight the positive relationship between learning and “brain training.”
- Praise learning, not effort: a strong show of effort—whether resulting in success or failure—is less important than identifying what is and is not working, and what to try next.
- Emphasize that setbacks are a crucial part of learning. To a student who is stuck, offer: “Let’s talk about what you’ve tried, and what you can try next.”
- Frame academic successes as a process of acquisition: “Great score, you must have prepared/studied hard” rather than “great score, you’re so smart.”
- Think deeply about assignment design. **Scaffolding**, incorporating **low-stakes assignments**, creating space for **metacognitive reflection**, and continuing to foreground the “big picture” of an assignment’s *purpose* all help to generate intrinsic drive.
- Incorporate plenty of opportunities for ungraded, formative feedback. Students can share their work with each other, and you, in contexts that have nothing to do with evaluation.
- Use the word “yet.” Dweck states that “not yet” is a favorite phrase. When you see students struggling with a task, acknowledge that they haven’t mastered it...yet.

References

- Aronson, Joshua, Claude Steele, and Catherine Good. “Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat on African College Students by Shaping Theories of Intelligence.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 38, pp. 113-125, 2002.
- Dweck, Carol. “Carol Dweck Revisits the ‘Growth Mindset.’” *Education Week*. 22 Sept. 2015. Digital.
- Dweck, Carol, Gregory M. Walton, and Geoffrey L. Cohen, “Academic Tenacity: Mindsets and Skills that Promote Long-Term Learning.” *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*. Digital.

See also

High-stakes and Low-stakes Assignments
Metacognition
Scaffolding Student Learning