



Mindsets: The Power to Help or Hinder Student Motivation

Motivation is central to student academic achievement. And research shows that there is one crucial factor that greatly impacts academic engagement and performance: whether a student has a 'fixed' or 'open' mindset (Dweck, 2006). Students with a *fixed mindset* view intelligence, or general ability, as having a fixed upward limit. Viewed from this perspective, accomplishments are explained largely by one's intellectual potential, with effort playing only a minor role. In contrast, students with a *growth mindset* see intelligence as 'malleable': they have faith that increased effort will result in more effective learning and accomplishment. When growth-mindset learners are challenged by academic tasks, they interpret these struggles as "an opportunity for growth, not a sign that a student is incapable of learning" (Paunesku et al., 2015; p. 785).

Why should teachers be concerned about students having a fixed mindset? When such students encounter difficulty or setbacks, they are likely to respond by becoming discouraged, withdrawing effort, or even giving up entirely. Of even more concern, a fixed mindset can result in learners 'disidentifying' with (i.e., disengaging from) those academic subjects or tasks that they find difficult. Research indicates that rates of cheating may also be higher among students with a fixed mindset (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007).

Yet students with a growth mindset have a much more positive reaction to setbacks. When they experience difficulty with schoolwork, they respond by viewing the setback as an opportunity to learn, putting more effort into mastering the task, and analyzing where their work or study processes fall short and correcting them. It's no surprise, then, that--because growth-mindset learners remain optimistic and engaged in the challenging task-- they are likely to be successful (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007).

Teachers have an important role to play in promoting a growth mindset among their students. First and foremost, instructors should take care not to use statements in their classrooms that reinforce a fixed-mindset. For example, a teacher who says "Excellent essay, Rebecca. You are a natural-born writer!" is implying that writing is an innate talent, immune to skill-building. Similarly, when an instructor responds to the student with a poor math-test grade, "That's OK. Not everyone is good at math", the educator has suggested that "math ability" is a fixed quantity that cannot expand much despite the learner's efforts.

On the other hand, when instructors structure their statements of praise, process feedback, and encouragement to reflect a growth-mindset attitude, even learners with a habitual negative fixed-mindset attitude can receive a boost of optimism and motivation. 'Growth mindset' statements can be as varied as the educators, students, and situations they address. However, they typically:

- lay out a specific process for moving forward.
- recognize difficulties or struggles to be faced and frame them as opportunities to learn.
- convey optimism that the student can and will move toward success if the learner puts in sufficient effort, follows the recommended process, and makes appropriate use of any 'help' resources.

In their day-to-day communication with students, instructors have many opportunities to craft statements according to growth-mindset principles. Below is a sampling of statements--praise, work-prompts, encouragement, introducing of assignments-- that teachers can use to foster motivation in their classrooms:

Praise

Effective teacher praise has two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher (Hawkins & Hellin, 2011). Because this 'process praise' ties performance directly to effort, it reinforces a growth mindset in students who receive it. Here is an example of process praise:



"Your writing is improving a lot. The extra time you put in and your use of an outline has really paid off."

Work-Prompt

When students stop working during an independent assignment, the teacher can structure the "get-back-to-work" prompt to follow a growth-mindset format. An example of such a work prompt is:

"Sarah, please keep reading....you still have 10 minutes to work on the assignment. It's a challenging passage, so if you get stuck, be sure to use your reading fix-up skills. Remember, it's also OK to ask a neighbor or to come to me for help. Use your strategies and you WILL be successful!"

Note in this example how the teacher directs the student to resume the assignment, acknowledges the challenging nature of the work, reminds her to use her fix-up strategies and that she has the option to seek peer and teacher assistance, and ends by linking effort to a positive outcome.

Encouragement

Students can become discouraged if they are unsuccessful on an academic task or receive a low test or quiz grade. The teacher can respond with empathy, while also framing the situation as a learning opportunity, describing proactive steps to improve the situation, and expressing confidence in the learner. An example of growth-mindset encouragement is:

"I can see that you didn't do as well on this math test as you had hoped, Luis. Let's review ideas to help you to prepare for the next exam. If you are willing to put in the work, I know that you can raise your score."

Introducing Assignments

The teacher can make assignment directions motivating by giving them a growth-mindset spin--describing the challenge(s), offering a realistic appraisal of the effort that will be required, reminding learners of the strategies or steps to apply, and closing with a confident statement tying methodical effort to success. Here is an example:

"You should plan spend at least an hour on tonight's math homework. When you start the assignment, some problems might look like they are too difficult to solve. But if you give it your best and follow your problem-solving checklist, you should be able to answer them."

Closing Thoughts: Use Growth-Mindset Statements Frequently. Instructors who want to attain the full motivational benefit of growth-mindset statements should ensure that they use those statements often to promote an optimistic 'can-do' climate. In busy classrooms, teachers may feel so pressed to cover the demanding curriculum that they overlook the need to use growth-mindset statements as a daily motivational tool. They wrongly assume that all students are already adequately motivated to do the expected work. In fact, though, many learners have fallen into a pattern of 'learned helplessness' and choose to withdraw in the face of challenging academics (Sutherland & Singh, 2004).

But the right teacher communication, if sustained, can motivate even students with negative, fixed mindsets to apply their best effort on an assignment or test. Yet research shows that process-praise is often dramatically *underused* in both general- and special-education classrooms--even though it is a prime means of shifting students toward an optimistic view of themselves as learner (Brophy, 1981; Hawkins & Heflin, 2011; Kern, 2007). So, as their own optimistic goal, teachers should adopt the regular use of a variety of growth-mindset statements to promote student achievement.

References

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