Building Growth Mindset in the Classroom: Assignments From Carol Dweck

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Growth mindsets aren't just for students. It helps for teachers to have a growth mindset about their students' mindsets, too.

A teacher's classroom approach shapes whether their students believe they are born with fixed academic skills or can grow them through practice and experience, according to Carol Dweck, the Stanford University researcher who pioneered the study of academic mindsets.

"Mindsets create a psychological world with very different meanings," Dweck said in a keynote at the annual Association of Psychological Science conference this weekend. "Those with a fixed mindset tend to think that if you have to work hard at something, you're not good at it. ... When you have a growth mindset, you're not fearful about your abilities all the time; setbacks promote challenge-seeking and greater learning."

For example, she pointed to "one high school chemistry teacher who told the class, 'Within a week, I know who will get an 'A' and who will get a 'C.' Further, I will know the difference between a real 'A' and a fake 'A'—a fake 'A' is one you had to work for."

This kind of approach can make students hesitant in class or prompt them to disengage completely, particularly if they already fear they will end up fulfilling negative stereotypes about their gender or race.

She pointed to one new study by researchers at the University of Indiana-Bloomington, which analyzed the academic mindsets of 150 college instructors in science, technology, engineering, and math, and tracked the achievement of some 15,000 of their students. In surveys after the classes, the students in classes taught by fixed-mindset and growth-mindset instructors reported their classes required about the same amount of time. But those students taught by fixed-mindset instructors also reported feeling less motivated to do their work than the students of growth-mindset teachers. In particular, the students of fixed-mindset teachers said their classes had not emphasized their own learning and development as much as their peers did in growth-mindset classes.

Not only were racial achievement gaps more than twice as large among students taught by instructors who believed STEM talent was fixed, but students of all ethnicities performed better in the classes taught by instructors with growth mindsets. Even after controlling for other teacher characteristics, like teaching experience, tenure, gender, or race, instructors' academic mindsets predicted their students' motivation and achievement.

Dweck said she uses a few basic class assignments to get students to question their own academic mindsets. She asks them to:

- **Identify contexts that tend to trigger a fixed mindset.** Students and teachers alike can believe skills are more or less fixed depending on the context; someone who feels math skills are innate may believe reading ability can be developed. Dweck said that teachers can help students recognize when and why they feel differently about different subjects or skills.
- **Plan and do something "outrageously growth mindset"** such as tackling a challenging project in an area outside their comfort zone.
- **Try to change another student's mindset.** Dweck described activities in which each student around the class said one area they were struggling with; other students often jumped in with both support and suggestions, such as study groups.
- **Write a letter from yourself, 20 years in the future,** identifying the most important thing you have learned. Students, she said, "torture themselves all the time with upward social comparison. There's always going to be someone better than you; so what? You need this set of skills, so do it."

The focus of assignments like these, Dweck said, is to focus students on underlying reasons they are learning. "I tell students, 'you are quitting your old job and starting your new job. Your old job was getting as many 'A's as possible. Your new job is to use all the resources ... to become the person you want to be, and to contribute something important to the world."

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