

How Not to Support a Student Who Is Struggling (and What To Do Instead)

Description

Last week, we looked at a study which found that having a fixed mindset¹ as a teacher, can have a pretty negative impact on students' learning. Where not only do they enjoy class less, but their grades suffer as well (you can read that [here](#)).

And why is that? Well, it seems that we tend to communicate our mindset beliefs to students in many subtle ways. Which in turn leads students to worry more about being evaluated negatively by the teacher or their classmates, feel like they don't fit in, and question whether they have what it takes to be successful in the class.

Umm...so what is it exactly that fixed mindset teachers do or say that communicates this mindset to students?

This question went beyond the scope of that particular study, but a number of readers shared some of the experiences that they've had with fixed and growth mindset teachers, and how this affected them in either negative or positive ways (you can check that out [here](#)). And, there are some other studies, which have looked a little closer at the ways in which our mindset beliefs as teachers seep into how we interact with students.

So today, I thought we could take a closer look at a study that looks at one particular teaching moment. Specifically, how we might be inclined to respond to a student who is struggling, if we ourselves have a fixed or growth mindset.

And, what should we say to a student who is stuck on a plateau? How do we console a student who has had a string of bad days in rehearsal? Plays poorly in an audition? Is crashing and burning in studio class?

A study of teachers

A team of researchers ([Rattan et al., 2011](#)) recruited 41 Ph.D. candidates in math-related fields, who were teaching undergraduate-level courses at Stanford University.

They all started by taking a growth vs. fixed mindset assessment. And then they were asked to imagine that they were teaching an intro-level course, and had to meet with one of the students in their class during office hours, to discuss the first test of the year, that the student had failed.

The participant was asked how they might respond to the student in this scenario. Like, would they try to comfort the student in such a way that suggested they performed poorly because of an inherent lack of

ability? By “Consol[ing] him for his grade by telling him that plenty of people have trouble in this field but go on to be very successful in other fields.”? Or “Explain[ing] that not everyone is meant to pursue a career in this field.”?

Or even select a teaching strategy, like talking to the student about the possibility of dropping the class, that might discourage the student from continuing?

Or would they try to support the student by suggesting new study strategies or that they find a tutor?

Fixed vs. growth mindsets

Well, as you can probably guess, the Ph.D. candidates with more of a fixed mindset were more likely to select comforting strategies that assumed a lack of ability. They were also more likely to pick discouraging teaching strategies.

Hmm...and how might students respond, if their instructor spoke to them in this way?

A study of students

To take a closer look at this question, the researchers recruited 54 Stanford students, and asked them to imagine being in calculus course, where they meet with the professor after the first test of the year, who tells them that they got a 65%.

The professor notices that they aren't happy with the grade and says, “I can understand that you are probably disappointed by your grade.”

And then the participants were presented with one of three different types of feedback.

1. Some of the participants received feedback which suggested that the student focus more on their strengths, and avoid their weaknesses (**comfort feedback**): “I want to assure you that I know you are a talented student in general — it's just not the case that everyone is a “math person.” I want you to remember how great you do in other subjects. I want you to know what I'm going to do too — I'm going to make a point not to call on you as much in class because I don't want you to have the added pressure of putting you on the spot and I'm going to give you some easier math tasks to work on so you can get more comfortable with those skills. I want to assure you that I really care, so let's stay in contact about how you're doing in the class.”
2. Other participants received feedback which implied that they were capable, but might need to work harder or try different ways of studying (**strategy feedback**): “I want to assure you that I know that you are a talented student in general. I want you to change your study strategies and consider working with a tutor. I want you to know what I'm going to do too — I'm going to make a point to call on you more in class and I'm going to give you more challenging math tasks. I want to assure you that I really care, so let's stay in contact about how you're doing in the class.”
3. And then there were participants who received relatively neutral feedback (**control feedback**): “I

want to assure you that I know you are a talented student in general, and I want to assure you that I really care, so let's stay in contact about how you're doing in the class."

So how would students interpret this feedback? Would they feel encouraged? Motivated? Feel that the professor believes in their ability or is invested in their success? And how well would they ultimately expect to do in the class?

Comfort vs. strategy vs. control feedback

Well, the participants who received comfort feedback rated the professor as having lower expectations for their future performance, and being less invested in their success than participants who received strategy or control feedback.

They also reported being less motivated and feeling less encouraged than participants who received strategy or control feedback.

Furthermore, while the strategy and control feedback participants expected to improve their grades over remaining weeks of the semester/year and finish with an 80% average in the class, the comfort feedback participants anticipated that their grade in the class would stay pretty much the same – at about a 65%.

So what are we to take away from all of this?

Takeaways

The researchers make some really good points in their conclusion that I think think are worth highlighting, because the practical implications of these studies – especially when combined with last week's – seem to be potentially quite meaningful.

Going back to that first study with the Ph.D. candidates who had to meet with a struggling student, remember that we're talking about a student who was admitted to Stanford. So they're presumably quite competent and capable. But they are still new to college. It's the first test of the year. And fresh out of high school, with no idea what kind of background they've had, it's likely that they haven't yet developed an effective set of study skills and strategies for college.

Yet, instead of attributing their poor initial test score to these situational factors, and recommending strategies that could help them improve, the tendency for the fixed mindset Ph.D. candidates was to suggest that they consider giving up and going in a different direction after running into their first real challenge.

Even though this might come from the most well-meaning place, where the instructor just wants to put the student in a position where they can be successful, the authors note that this is potentially a key turning point in students' lives. Where the student learns to persevere through challenges, remains engaged, and goes on to major in that field and overcome other speed bumps along the way. Or, learns to quit when at

first they don't succeed, that it's important to focus only on those things that come easily to them, and that as a consequence, certain fields or opportunities are closed off to them.

Take action

This all reminds me of a saying that I've heard among coaches. That when you lose or something doesn't go right, it's best to blame the strategy, not the player.

This seems like a pretty good way to remember the gist of these studies. Where instead of attributing failure to a student's talent or intelligence, we can perhaps get more curious about their practice habits, study strategies, mental game, and performance preparation methods.

Where we help them find something there to adjust and tweak. And perhaps they remember us as that teacher who helped them believe in themselves when they weren't quite sure if they had what it took.

References

Rattan, A., Good, C., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). "It's ok — Not everyone can be good at math": Instructors with an entity theory comfort (and demotivate) students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48 (3), 731–737. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.12.012>

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