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Higher Education Psychology Teacher of the Year: Finalist Case Study 2019

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Summary

Encouraging students to 'believe that they can achieve' is a central element to teaching. The belief that it is our efforts and techniques, rather than our innate abilities which lead to success has a positive outcome on learning behaviours. As such, I strive to promote this malleable view of intelligence (or growth mindset) in my students via my teaching practices. Below I outline how I use feedback, a direct growth mindset intervention and an indirect literacy intervention to achieve this.

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

According to Dweck's (1999) influential work, learners hold one of two views of intelligence. Some see intelligence as a fixed trait and think that some people are naturally more intelligent than others (fixed mindset). Others view intelligence as malleable, and that it increases with hard work (growth mindset). As it gives a sense of control to the learner, a growth mindset is associated with positive learning behaviours such as holding learning goals and persisting following failure (Haimovitz, et al. 2011; Kinlaw & Kurtz-Costes, 2007; Mangels, et al., 2006; Wirthwein et al., 2013). A growth mindset can be particularly powerful for students from widening participation (WP) groups, such as ethnic minority groups who may doubt their ability to succeed (Claro et al., 2016).

Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning, (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Despite this, the National Student Survey consistently lists "assessment and feedback" as having the most negative responses (HEA, 2012). There has therefore been an increasing focus on how we can better use feedback in HE. To promote a growth mindset, I use effort-based feedback, which focuses on what students did rather than on their talents or outcomes. In addition, I developed a paragraph which explains what feedback is and how to use it. I also include headings in feedback: what they did well, what to improve and how to improve. This helps students to understand why they got the mark they did and how to improve. Rather than vague comments like 'more critical evaluation' I give concrete examples and signpost students to resources which give them more information.

I also developed an intervention to promote a growth mindset. Previous growth mindset interventions had been successful with younger students (e.g. Blackwell et al., 2008) and one did not exist for university students. My intervention involved presenting research exploring brain plasticity and focussed on how success is more due to effort and techniques than abilities (Dweck, 1999).

In addition, I developed an intervention with colleagues "White Water Writers" (WWW), which promotes a growth mindset more implicitly, through writing. Writing is an important skill as

“professional and academic success in all disciplines depends, at least in part, upon writing skills” (Cho & Schunn, 2007, p.409). WWW gives groups of people the chance to collaboratively write and publish a full-length novel in just one week. On Monday, students plan their novel, on Tuesday and Wednesday they write it using specialised software, on Thursday they proofread it and on Friday they design the cover and write the blurb. The book is put up for sale on Amazon with any profits going to the authors and a few weeks later, students receive professionally printed copies of their novels at a book signing event where friends, and the local press celebrate their achievement. We have now helped more than 1000 people to become published authors. The project promotes a growth mindset as it facilitates learners to achieve a challenging goal in a short space of time. Each stage of the programme is based on educational literature around mindset, motivation, engagement and collaboration. The project has proved immensely popular with students, raising skills and self-belief.

Benefits

Students are very positive about the feedback they receive e.g. *“Yvonne always provides detailed and thorough feedback for formative and assessed pieces of work with suggestions of improvement.”* I shared this work with colleagues, many of whom also now use this approach e.g. *“Hearing Yvonne speak about feedback has stimulated me to reflect carefully on my own practice and examine what sort of feedback I give my students.”* Feedback in our school has recently been described by our external examiner as *“the best I have seen in a UK institution”*.

To evaluate my growth mindset intervention, three seminar classes participated in the intervention, while three classes received a presentation on memory. Both groups completed pre, post and delayed questionnaires. Results suggested that the intervention successfully promoted a growth mindset this had a positive impact on learning behaviours (See Appendix).

We have also conducted research exploring the outcomes of WWW, both in the short and long term using questionnaires and interviews. Results suggest that the project improves skills such as writing, proofreading and teamwork. Participating in the programme also leads to increased self-belief and feelings of control (Skipper, Reddington & Leman, in prep; See Appendix).

Additionally, over the last 3 years more than 50 students have been trained to facilitate WWW with primary, secondary, children with SEND and looked after children. These student volunteers told us that they gained experience in working with diverse groups and in leading activities rather than simply assisting teachers. This had a huge impact on them, developing their skills and confidence. One volunteer is using the writing process and the structure she learned in WWW to write her own PhD. Many of our alumni have gone on to teaching roles and credit the experience they gained with WWW as being instrumental for this. Another volunteer said:

"I was taken aback as to just how rewarding it has been. Next time I feel I can't do something I'll think of this project!"

Issues

There have been challenges with promoting a growth mindset. Growth mindsets are often taught in schools, but this does not always accurately reflect the theory. For example, teachers often focus on effort "keep trying and you will get it". However, techniques are also vital to success. If a learner does not have the techniques or core skills/knowledge required for a task then they will not succeed regardless of effort. This can lead learners to disengage and form a fixed mindset as even their best efforts do not lead to success. I overcame this giving clear guidance on how students can develop their skills to improve.

Furthermore, by the time students are 18 they have a clear idea about intelligence and their abilities. Changing these deeply held beliefs can be a challenge. To overcome this, I carefully frame my feedback to make it clear that it is what you do and not who you are that leads to success. Also, in the intervention I provided psychological evidence for the theory. This encouraged students to see that this is an evidence based approach and to evaluate this evidence and reflect on it in a scientific way. I believe this led to greater change in mindsets (Chaiken, 1980).

In WWW, writing a full length novel in a week is a challenging task. Many students worry that they will not be able to complete the novel and that it will not be "good enough". To overcome this, facilitators 'scaffold' writers; setting simple tasks, creating structure in the early stages and gradually withdrawing support as the writers become more confident. Additionally, the writers have control over every element of the book. This level of freedom can increase anxiety at the beginning of the project, but once they complete the novel, this sense of ownership creates a real feeling of self-belief. They have achieved a seemingly impossible goal. This process works well. We have never had a student drop out of WWW and every group has produced a novel.

Student's perspective

As previously discussed, students are very positive about their feedback and comment on how it helped them to improve their skills and enhanced their self-belief: e.g. *"Feedback has been prompt, insightful and useful; helping me develop my skills as a researcher and writing style beyond where I thought it could go. Thanks to Yvonne I have faith in my academic abilities to pursue a career in a field I never thought I could."*

Students who participated in the mindset intervention felt very positive about it. As well as the quantitative data presented in the Appendix, informal comments indicated that students felt that although it 'seemed obvious', learning more about the science behind the approach made it more

convincing and helped them in their course but also outside of the classroom too, for example in sport.

Quotes about WWW include: *"I feel this was a very effective workshop that developed my skills and raised my confidence," "10/10, now I can write anything" and "I really, really enjoyed this workshop. And I will never say 'I can't' again."* Another author commented: *"The program has been very helpful to me. It gave me a confidence boost in my ability to complete works, and has allowed me to become eligible for Canadian writer's grants, which can further help me with becoming a professional author."*

Reflections: Your own reflections on your teaching practices.

I believe that over time I have developed more of a growth mindset for my students, but also for myself. I believe I need to 'practice what I preach'. This has helped me to become a more innovative teacher. I am more willing to try different approaches and take risks in the classroom knowing that it may not always work as I planned, but I and my students will learn from these experiences. WWW is an example of a risky intervention which has become very successful. After each book, we reflect on how we can improve the process and discuss this with participants. I use this approach with my other teaching innovations to constantly improve them.

I have also found, in line with recent research, (Sisk et al., 2018) that growth mindset interventions appear to be particularly effective for groups who may doubt their abilities to succeed, for example students from WP groups. This is because it focuses on what they can be, rather than what they are and gives them a clear route to improvement.

My experience also suggests that when students enter a new phase of education they are more likely to be open to new ideas about what leads to success in this environment. This is why I trialled my mindset intervention with Year 1 students (Skipper, 2015). However, I believe there is still more to be done across the degree programme to fully embed a growth mindset.

Dissemination and publication

I have published several influential papers on the impact of feedback and my mindset intervention. I have also co-organised a very successful national conference on feedback to disseminate this work and create a community of practice exploring feedback. I have presented this work at conferences including: British Psychological Society, American Educational Research Association, and International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD). I have been invited to present this at teaching away days at other institutions and different schools.

For WWW I am currently preparing a number of papers about the design of the project and the outcomes. I have also delivered a number of workshops e.g. at ISSBD explaining how the

intervention was developed and the underlying theory in order to assist others who are interested in developing their own evidence based interventions.

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