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Smart Praise for Students

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ADVICE

Smart Praise for Students

How we commend undergraduates can affect not only their attitudes but their performance



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By James M. Lang | JUNE 17, 2015

In the late 1990s, the psychologists Carol Dweck and Claudia Mueller conducted an experiment to see if the way we praise children influences their learning.

They gave more than 100 fifth graders (from two very different population sets: one urban and multiracial and the other Midwestern and mostly white) four minutes to solve 10 math problems. Afterward, all of the children were lauded for their achievement: "Wow, you did very well on these problems." But then two groups of children were given additional praise: some for their abilities ("You must be smart at these problems") and some for their effort ("You must have worked hard at these problems"). The objective was to explore the differing effects of "ability praise" ("you must be smart") versus "effort praise" ("you must have worked hard").

Then the children were given another set of 10 problems, but much more difficult ones. No matter how well they did this time, all of the children were told they had performed "a lot worse." The idea was to test how they would respond to failure.

In the final stage of the experiment, the children were given a third set of 10 problems to solve, at the same level of difficulty as the first set. Dweck and Mueller used multiple measures throughout the project to assess how the children thought about intelligence, about learning, and about their performance.

The results: Different types of praise turned out to have wide-ranging effects on the children's attitudes, motivation, and performance. For example, those who had been commended for their natural abilities "enjoyed the tasks less than did the children praised for effort." More disturbingly, "children praised for intelligence were less likely to want to persist on the problems than children praised for effort." When children commended for their intelligence were told they had done poorly, they seemed to attribute low performance to low ability. Meanwhile, the authors noted, children praised for hard work "did not show such a marked tendency to measure their intelligence from how well they did on the problems."

In short, the ability-praised children came to believe that their performance reflected their natural intellectual abilities. Children praised for their efforts, by contrast, believed that their performance reflected the effort they had put into the problems.

That distinction has clear and profound implications: Rather than seeing a weak score as the result of too little studying or a bad day, children praised for their abilities will think: "I did not do well on this exam. I must be stupid." Those praised for their effort will think: "I did not do well on this exam. I will have to study harder next time."

This experiment, and many more like it, led Dweck to formulate the theory of "mind-sets" — to help explain what was happening in the minds of those fifth graders. She offers the fullest description of this theory in her 2006 book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, which is my recommended read for faculty members this summer. I've long believed that a small commitment to reading one excellent book on teaching and learning each year could make a positive difference to anyone's teaching, and Dweck's book should make for an enlightening read for teachers at any level.

In the book, she argues that people have either a "fixed" mind-set or a "growth" mind-set when it comes to their beliefs about learning and intelligence. If you have a fixed mind-set, that means you believe your intelligence is a fixed, stable quantity; someone or something stamped an IQ on your forehead at birth, and you are limited to that IQ for the remainder of your life. If you have a growth mind-set, in contrast, that means you believe that your intelligence is malleable, and can improve with hard work and effort.

Her early research in this area focused on children, but she came to believe that mind-sets influence people at all ages, including college students: "*The view you adapt for yourself*," she writes, "profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value."

In *Mindset*, she explores how the debilitating effects of a fixed mind-set and the positive effects of a growth mind-set have influenced major figures in the worlds of sports and business, as well as how the two mind-sets can influence successes and failures in teaching, parenting, and relationships. In my own case, her book has influenced my thinking about parenting as much as it did about my teaching.

If you're having some doubts as you read this, walk down the hallway or across campus and step into the office of the first math professor you see. Ask how many times that professor has heard students say some variation of "I'm not very good at math." You can probably also walk into the office of any English professor and pose the same question about this statement: "I'm not a very good writer."

Those are classic examples of fixed-mind-set statements, and they absolutely infect the classrooms of math and writing instructors on college campuses, not to mention other types of courses that rely heavily on mathematical or writing skills. Dweck's theory would suggest that a profound gulf exists between students who make such blanket statements versus students who might recognize that they are not very good at math *right now* but believe they could improve over the course of the semester.

If you believe you will never be good at math, the implications spill out generously: First, you will avoid math whenever possible; second, if confronted with a context in which you must learn math, you will choose the least challenging possible route; and third, you will find the whole process pointless and depressing, since each time you fail at a math problem it will simply confirm your negative self-assessment.

This all might read as a poor prognosis for fixed-mind-set students in our classroom, were it not for an essential finding of the research of Dweck and many others: Namely, mind-sets can change. In fact, as has been shown in multiple experiments by Dweck and

other researchers, mind-sets can change as the result of deliberately constructed interventions.

Knowing that can help you better understand what Dweck and Mueller were after in their experiment with those fifth-grade students. When they were praising students for their ability, they were attempting to nudge them toward a fixed mind-set. When they were praising children for their effort, they were attempting to nudge them toward a growth mind-set. It took only a few words of carefully designed praise — in either direction — to nudge the children into a fixed or growth mind-set.

We may have to work harder than that to change the mind-sets of college students. My own feeling is that faculty can make a difference here through lots of small efforts: through the stories we tell about learning and discovery in our disciplines, through how we evaluate student work, and through how we talk about the ways to succeed in our courses.

Dweck's theory of mind-sets has not been immune from criticism, some of which rightly points out that a growth mind-set does not provide a ticket to guaranteed success. Natural abilities do put limits on all of us, as do environmental factors like socioeconomic status. And we should most certainly not use mind-set theories to blame and shame low-performing students for their failures.

But mostly the mind-sets theory continues to garner praise. Faculty have mind-sets, too. And if you have been teaching for a while now, you probably can remember times when you thought you were a terrible teacher, just not cut out for this business. But something in you persisted, and you got better. That something, Dweck's research would suggest, may have been a growth mind-set. It has helped you succeed — and may likewise help your students.

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