

Implementing Growth Mindset Language in the Syllabus

Cultivating a growth mindset is a particularly important quality for college students, but not all students come equipped with this mindset. Thus, it is critical for instructors to demonstrate the key values of a growth mindset in classroom practice and in their syllabi.

There are many ways that instructors can highlight the components of a growth mindset in their syllabus. First, instructors may note that the content of the course may be challenging, and that is a normal part of the learning process. Instructors may include some information about the challenges they faced in certain courses and how they overcame those challenges. More importantly, Instructors can include phrases that suggest all students can learn the material and eliminate sweeping generalizations and claims. This includes deleting and/or revising “fixed mindset” language from the syllabus. Experts at the SEP call attention to how even the best-intentioned professors may use language that could discourage students and encourage a fixed mindset.

Fixed Mindset Phrases Compared to Growth Mindset Phrases in Syllabus

Instead of: If you have not mastered those concepts, you should consider dropping this course.

Instead of: I do not give partial credit on answers—students either get the questions correct or they do not. If you do not do well on the first exam, you should consider dropping the course.

Use: If you have not mastered those concepts you should visit me or a TA and we will provide resources that can help you learn and review the concepts from Calculus I, which should prepare you for this course. If you still have more to learn after that review, you might consider auditing Calculus I again before taking this course, because this course will build on that knowledge and grow your understanding of these topics

Use: I am interested in your learning and your approach to problems. Therefore, partial credit will be given when you have solved parts of the problem correctly. Showing your work allows us to assess whether you are on the right track.

Instead of: I do not give homework assignments or quizzes, because in my experience students either get the material or they do not. Students are responsible for their own performance and should judge their own ability to learn the material through the exercises provided in the course materials. If the material is too advanced for one's ability, students should find a course that is better matched to their ability and skills.

Instead of: In my experience, some students can do well in the course without attending class and I will not penalize these gifted students. If you are not a math person, attending class alone may not result in a strong performance. You are adults and I expect you to know whether you need to attend class to do well in the class or not.

Instead of: Students who are not quick learners should consider dropping the course. In previous years, some students fail this course due to their poor performance on the final exam. Some students just do not have what it takes to pass this course.

Use: There is a quiz every week covering the material from the previous week. If you do all of your homework and understand the material, there is no reason for you not to do well on the quizzes. I assign these quizzes for two reasons. One reason is to show me how well students are understanding the material, whether there are some students who are not there yet, and whether I need to review certain concepts with the class. The other reason is to let you assess how well you are understanding the concepts and where you need to focus more of your efforts to learn the course material. If you are struggling on the quizzes, it means that you need to seek help from me, one of the TAs, the Department resources listed below, or your peers, so that we can help you learn the material.

Use: You are adults and I expect you to be motivated to grow your knowledge and abilities by engaging in assignments and course lectures. I recommend that all students attend live lectures if possible because I believe attending lectures is the best way to learn the concepts and improve your math skills.

Use: I provide multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback on their performance throughout the course to give students opportunities to see how they are doing and so that they can identify places they need to apply more effort or new strategies along the way, seek help if they are struggling and improve throughout the semester. My hope is that all students will develop the knowledge they need to do well in this course and that all students—even those who perform well early in the semester—will improve and develop greater knowledge and skills through practice on the quizzes and exams

Portions adapted from the Student Experience Project: "Your Syllabus as a Tool to Promote Student, Equity, Belonging, and Growth"



Promoting a Growth Mindset in Your Course

Embrace the Learning Process:

- Emphasize that intelligence and abilities can be developed over time with effort, perseverance, and help from others.
- Encourage students to see mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning. Reinforce that effort and persistence are key to success, not innate talent.
- Praise students for their effort, problem-solving strategies, focus, and improvement. Acknowledge and celebrate students' progress and achievements, no matter how small.
- Encourage help-seeking, working through struggles, and learning from mistakes.

Assessment Design:

- Convert large assessment into incremental stages or goals to foster a sense of progress for students.
- Consider creating assessments that contain many paths to success and allowing each student options to demonstrate learning.
- Offer feedback that focuses on strategies, processes, and effort and avoid a focus of just achievement and ability.
- Allow opportunities to improve scores on assessments through retakes, redoes, or extra credit where you are able.

Communications:

- Promote the idea that learning is a lifelong journey and that it is never too late to acquire new knowledge and skills.
- Foster a classroom environment where asking questions is seen as a sign of curiosity and a desire to learn.
- Use the word “yet” to emphasize growth potential, “You have not mastered this concept yet.”
- Model your own growth mindset as an instructor. Admit mistakes and share stories of personal improvement.