

My experience: Fostering a stronger growth mindset in the art room.

by Audrey Cisneros

Why I am writing this:

- Not all kids walk in the art room liking art.
- Art can be very intimidating.
- Skill levels and interests vary greatly among any group of students.
- Students have to believe they can be successful before they actually achieve any success.
- I love art and want my students to love it too.
- I want my students to be successful in my classroom and beyond.

Invaluable things I have learned:

- High expectations are a start, but not enough to get results.
- Teachers must explicitly teach students to have a growth mindset.
- There are words you simply can't say to students, like "easy."
- Grades are important but not the sole measure of student success.
- Do everything a little at a time and teach students to do the same.
- Lead by example, make art with your kids and let them see how you deal with mistakes.

What I did and Why:

1: Teaching students about growth mindset.

I teamed up with another teacher to explicitly teach the concepts of effective effort and malleable intelligence to all 12th grade students. We used a self-assessment to begin the class where they were able to confront some learning stigmas they face on a daily basis. Then they read an article (in English or Spanish) on intelligence and how to grow your brain. After reading, they discussed the article in groups and created a poster to present their findings to their peers.

We chose to do this during the first week of September, as early as we could in the school year in order to set the students up for a successful year. The self-assessment allowed them time to independently reflect on their beliefs towards intelligence. Then, we discussed the results as a group. This allowed the students to realize these feelings were common among their peers. The articles were the most explicit way to explain growth mindset to them. Reading the information themselves from a scholarly source helped them to realize it was credible and important.

2: Making assignment expectations student-friendly.

At the beginning of the year I put a lot of effort into making more student-friendly versions of the difficult to understand IB rubrics. I broke the criteria up into smaller components and wrote guiding questions for each one. Next, I created self-assessments (essentially checklists) based on the rubrics. Then, I taught students how to use the revised rubrics and to self-evaluate their work. I also created peer-assessment sheets and taught students exactly how to solicit and exchange feedback. We practiced exchanging meaningful feedback everyday until students were confident doing it on their own.

I chose to do this because since last year the students and myself struggled to understand exactly what the IB expected in their work. After analyzing the requirements even more in depth myself I felt I was able to convey them more effectively. It is essential that the students understand the requirements of any assignment if they are expected to have success. Art is a process and feedback is essential to creating better work but nobody likes to receive negative feedback. At the start, many students are shy and afraid to ask for feedback on their work. By giving them a format to follow as they exchange advice and specific things to look for, it takes some of the scariness out of critique. The process becomes a friendly exchange of advice as you create a work from start to finish making the end result better than what it would have been if you worked completely alone.

3: Creating an environment that celebrates growth

I try to create an environment that celebrates student achievement and tracks their effort over time. In my classroom I hang a variety of posters and quotes about art and creativity. We constantly change the student work that hangs on the walls so that everyone gets to see what their peers are working on. There are goal posters with large student trackers with stickers on them hanging under them so students can see their progress. Of course, the IB rubrics are printed large and hanging so they can be constantly referenced during class. The student's favorite motivational poster was an original assignment, a post-it mystery portrait of my 4 year old son.



I think it is important for the classroom environment to celebrate the students while providing a constant reminder of the big picture. I have found that the student's favorite thing about the room is the large post-it portrait of my son. We created it as an introduction to a portraiture lesson. The lesson was to practice their shading and use of the grid, but also to teach them about breaking large projects into smaller tasks. The students were very wary of the idea of drawing a self-portrait before we did that exercise. The exercise involved me cutting a picture of my son into 225 1/4inch

squares and numbering them in the back. Then I randomly gave each student 2-3 pieces and post-it where they had to copy what was on the $\frac{1}{4}$ square to the 3"x3" post-it. After all the students had drawn their post-its we used a grid system to hang each one like puzzle. It took 2 days in order for them to realize they had created a large-scale realistic portrait of my son. The end result was a 4 ft. x 4 ft. reminder of how it takes little pieces to create something great. This example of breaking large tasked into small achievable pieces resonated with them throughout the year.

4: Using the language of success

When introducing new lessons, I try to use language that focuses on effort versus innate ability. Every project is first broken down into small steps, with checklists and timelines to they do not feel overwhelmed. Before beginning, students are shown many examples of exemplar work. Viewing exemplars is important but not effective if not discussed. When looking at art students are always asked to analyze and discuss what exactly makes it "successful" or effective. Daily, as I walk through the room monitoring student work, I make certain to praise individual effort. When talking to students about their work it is important to reference their workbooks (sketchbooks) and portfolios. This allows them to reflect on how they have grown over the course.

It is important, especially with all the possibilities in visual arts for me to build awareness in the students and praise their creativity. It takes many years to develop technical skills in art and this often discourages the students. This is why I focus on their progress and incremental progress towards their big goal rather than comparing them to their peers. Each assignment is designed so the student can tailor it to their own interests and abilities and this helps them become more invested in their work.

How the students responded to my actions:

Over time I have seen much growth in the skill and technique level of the students. The students are less intimidated by open-ended problems and take more charge of their learning. Many students comment on how much more creative they feel and how it is helping them in their other classes. They appreciate the fact that I take the time to make checklist and timelines for them and eventually they even enjoy doing it themselves. When they are having discussions with their peers I frequently overhear them exchanging strategic feedback. They are able to coach each other and appraise each other's work.

Something that I have to combat constantly despite the checklists and timelines is student procrastination. However they are fully aware of the consequences. When I see them falling behind on their work, I remind them of how well

they did on a previous one because they used the guidelines to complete the work in small steps. This usually helps them re-evaluate and get back on track.

In the end, the students I taught during this experiment, went on to surpass the expectations set for them by our school. They achieved 46% higher results on the IB Visual Arts exam overall and set a new standard for the students to follow. Now, almost a year later, I still frequently speak to my 2013 students and ask about their college experience. When asked, they stated that the risk-taking attitude and growth mindset has helped them in their college courses. They feel open to new ideas and motivated to constantly improve. Some students who are not pursuing art degrees have opted to take a university art course because it helps them feel balanced. Those who are pursuing art further, regularly send me photographs of their work and ask for feedback. One student, upset after her professor and college classmates said her work was great and she had nothing to improve on during a critique, immediately messaged me asking for proper feedback. Of course, I told her she was wonderful, but I also pointed out where her perspective and light source was slightly off. She was grateful and relieved as she thanked me and explained that she knew something was off but she just couldn't figure out what was bothering her. My 2014 graduating class is predicted to break the records of 2013 by another 55%. Even if this doesn't happen, I am happy knowing that 100% of them truly believe that they are in control of their own success.

Resources that helped me:

I have always tried really hard to constantly improve on both my teaching and art making skills. Last year, my school enrolled me in a leadership course offered by Research for Better Teaching titled, *The Skillful Teacher*. This collaboration with a group of highly effective teachers was invaluable. I gained more knowledge and strategies especially on the topic of growth mindset. Below, I have listed just a few resources I found to be useful though there are many available.

Books

Jon Saphier, Mary Ann Haley-Speca, and Robert Gower. 2008. *The Skillful Teacher*, 6th ed. Action, MA: Research for Better Teaching

Chapter 12 of *The Skillful Teacher* discusses this in detail and provides strategies for most classroom situations. The examples help you understand how your actions as a teacher translate to students. Your use of language, how you deliver instructions, and how you grade have a great impact on the results you receive from students.

“Attribution Retraining means getting students to change their explanations for success and failure way from factors over which they have little control

(luck, pass difficulty, innate ability) to the factor over which they have the greatest control: effort." (The Skillful Teacher pp. 299-300)

Carol S. Dweck. 2006. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 1st ed. New York : Random House

Dr. Dweck has a wealth of research and publications available on growth mindset. She also co-founded the website Mindset Works.

Articles and Web Resources

'Growth Mindset' Gaining Traction as School Improvement Strategy

Education Week (September 2013)

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/09/11/03mindset_ep.h33.html

Studies Find 'Desirable Difficulties' Help Students Learn

Education Week (April 2011)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/04/27/29stability-2.h30.html>

Mindset Works

<http://community.mindsetworks.com>

Messages We Communicate to Students

Zachary Herrmann (March 2013)

<https://sites.google.com/site/zacharyherrmann/blog/messages-we-communicate-to-students>

Response: Classroom Strategies to Foster a Growth Mindset

Education Week Teacher (October 2012)

http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2012/10/response_classroom_strategies_to_foster_a_growth_mindset.html

Mindset Survey from Mindset Works

<http://www.brainology.us/websitemedia/youcangrowyourintelligence.pdf>

Research for Better Teaching

<http://www.rbteach.com>