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Adopting a Growth Mindset in Times of Uncertainty

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I was flailing. I was trying to show my students the different features of the videoconferencing tool Zoom that we'd be using synchronously for the rest of the semester, but I didn't know how to share my computer screen in such a way that would show Zoom itself. Zoom kept hiding. It was our first day back, and I was feeling frustrated and flummoxed. It was not my best moment as a teacher. Or was it?

Many of you may be familiar with the work of Carol Dweck. In her book and professional talks posted online (like [this one](#) or [this one](#)), she describes two types of mindsets: fixed and growth. A fixed mindset means that students believe their qualities, like intelligence, are innate, unmalleable, carved in stone. I get this from students a lot: "I'm just not a good writer," as if writers come out of the womb good. (Anne Lamott has something to say about this in her brilliant essay, "Shitty First Drafts," which I've assigned in every course I've ever taught.) I get the impression that many of my colleagues think the same about teaching: You're either a good teacher or you aren't. But those with a growth mindset believe that abilities can be developed over time, through practice and effort; they don't shy away from challenges and failures because those are opportunities to grow, rather than revelations of unchangeable imperfections best left hidden. Covid-19, and all the uncertainty and upheaval resulting from

its spread, is giving us an opportunity to embrace a growth mindset as educators. How can we do so?

One of my approaches has been to **demonstrate a spirit of curiosity and openness** with my students. I had never used Zoom breakout rooms before three weeks ago, but I wanted to try them out with my newly online class. I thought these rooms could help students do the partner and group work they were used to doing face to face. So, I said, “Hey, I’m going to try something out here; let’s see what happens.” I didn’t know what would happen. We were going to find out, together, as co-learners.

I remember, a couple summers ago, I was reading so many books from a certain section of the bookstore that my buddy asked me, “Are you just sitting around reading quasi-philosophical self-help books and should I be concerned?” “Yes and unclear” was my reply. One author I was fortunate to come across during this time was Brené Brown. In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, she introduced me to a phrase I love: “an aspiring good-enoughist.” Many of my friends are drowning right now in self-imposed perfectionism. One spent hours editing a short recorded lecture before posting it on our LMS. If perfection is our aim, however, we may shy away from the very opportunities that would stretch us and challenge us, forcing us to grow—instead opting only into narrow situations that showcase the talents, skills, and knowledge we already possess. We don’t have to be perfect to be good teachers. We don’t have the time, energy, or bandwidth anyhow. Let us all, instead, **be good-enoughists**.

And, while we’re at it, let’s allow our students to see that’s what we’re doing; after all, they look to us as role models. When my daughter was just a baby and she would hear a loud sound—a motorcycle, a lawn mower, a fire alarm—she would look, not toward the noise itself, but up at me. She gauged how she should respond to the world by how I was responding; if I remained calm, she did too. I think it’s the same with students. If we respond to our inevitable (and they are inevitable) mistakes with histrionics or apologies, students will think something bad has happened and react accordingly. If we **take our mistakes and failures in stride**, and laugh them off, students just might too; they are generally pretty good sports. Failure, of this kind and on this scale, doesn’t have to be a big deal. (If nothing else, the global pandemic has given us all a sense of perspective.) Now is the time for us to model, good-naturedly, what life-long learning looks like.

A final key, for me, in embracing a growth mindset, has been to **show what learning after a mistake looks like**. The next class session, after the Zoom debacle, I came back and shared with my students what I had discovered. After doing some quick Google searches and consulting Zoom’s very helpful tutorials, I could share my screen in such a way that Zoom itself would show. “Look!” I excitedly said. “Look! I’m doing it!” I’m not sure they were as excited as I was, but they had gotten to see my failure . . . and then they got to see the growth that resulted from it. They saw me, their professor, gain a new skill, just as I was asking them to do over the course of our time together.

Humility is hard, and may seem altogether too rare, in the academy. Now is the time to

embrace it. We're all learning, we're all growing. This pandemic is just making it more obvious.

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