



Research USA: promoting learner persistence

Disengagement, retention and drop out are major factors for learning and skills providers of all types. They are crucial in the development of learners' life chances. Why is it that some learners quickly give up when they meet difficulties and setbacks in their work, yet others respond by tackling challenges with determination? Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University in California, has, over many years, developed a now seminal theory of what motivates learners to persevere.

The beliefs learners hold about themselves

When Professor Dweck asked learners to complete questionnaires on their beliefs about intelligence, she found that around half the learners had a 'fixed mindset'. They believed that they were born with a fixed amount of intelligence and there was very little, if anything, they could do to improve it. They believed that ability came from talent – "it's all in the genes". When faced with difficulty they gave up and blamed their intelligence for their failures, saying things like: "I never did have a good memory" and "I'm no good at things like this".

But around half the learners had a 'growth mindset'. They believed that ability and success were due to learning and that learning required time and effort. When faced with challenging work, they tried harder, saying things like: "I should slow down and try to figure this out" and "I've almost got it now".

Surprisingly, Dweck found that the decision to give up or to persevere did not depend on the learner's actual level of skill. Many accomplished learners gave up easily and questioned or blamed failure on their intelligence while many less skilled learners tackled difficulties with relish and persistence.

How can we help learners who believe intelligence is fixed?

Dweck recommended encouraging a growth mindset so that all learners view poor performance on a task as something that can be improved by effort and persistence, rather than as a personal, negative reflection on them. She recommended avoiding giving person-oriented praise such as 'you're good at this' because it assumes that success is due to personal attributes and teaches learners to interpret difficulties

in terms of their personal weaknesses. Instead, Dweck recommended process-oriented praise such as, 'you tried really hard' or 'that was a good way to do it' because this focuses on the processes required for success – making an effort and finding effective strategies. She also suggested making use of task-oriented praise, such as, 'it is clear that your assignment was thoroughly researched and it provides quality evidence to support your conclusions'.

Dweck's work on the self-talk used by learners who had a growth mindset led her to recommend that teachers could support learners' persistence by equipping them with problem-solving strategies that were specific to the particular challenge they faced. She also recommended that teachers explicitly taught learners firstly about the need to expend time and effort when learning a skill and secondly that initial failure was a healthy sign that a challenge was worth pursuing.

Carol Dweck's questionnaire

Finding out whether learners have a fixed or growth mindset

Learners were asked whether they agreed or disagreed on a six-point scale with statements such as:

- You have a certain amount of intelligence and you really can't do much to change it
- Your intelligence is something about you that you can change very much
- You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence

You can try out the questionnaire online [here](#)

Take action

Why not talk to learners about this research so they understand the potential of a growth mindset and the limitations of a fixed mindset? You could:

- use strategies such as peer and self-assessment, which show learners how they can improve
- ensure you regularly praise the process a learner used to create something or reach an answer rather than the learner as a person
- use the Dweck questionnaire to identify learners with a fixed mindset who are at risk of giving up

Evidence source

Dweck, C. (2000) *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis.

Over the course of 30 years, Carol Dweck conducted a wide variety of experiments that involved learners of all ages (from early years to adults) and socio-economic backgrounds, and from different geographical areas. She used questionnaires to measure e.g. learners' confidence, goal choices and implicit theories of intelligence and personality.