

## GREAT TEACHING

### *How Do Great Teachers Give Feedback about Poor Work?*

Virtually all students get poor grades at various points in their academic careers. Even outstanding students suffer the occasional fluke resulting in a bad grade: misunderstanding the assignment, misreading instructions, overloaded with too much due at the same time to do good work on every assignment — there are many reasons good students can get bad grades.

And there are lots of reasons bad students get bad grades.

But it is the meaning that you, the instructor, assign to a poor grade that may make the critical difference in the student's future engagement with the subject and her academic performance.

#### *Pop Quiz:*

Select the wording that most closely aligns with what you might say to a student when handing back a test or assignment on which she has performed poorly:

- 1.) This is not a good grade, Brittney. See what you can do to make sure this doesn't happen again.
- 2.) What happened, Brittney?
- 3.) Too much of this kind of performance will mean you won't pass the course, Brittney.
- 4.) You can do better than this, Brittney.
- 5.) Catch me after class, Brittney — we'll figure out how to use this feedback to get you back on track.
- 6.) Maybe you should party less and study more, Brittney.

Aside from the fact that inflection and tone of voice can create different kinds of implicit messages sent, if we focus just on the words in each of the responses above, there's clearly one that conveys hope: Number Five.

Sending the message that all is not hopeless is, in itself, beneficial and a reason to couch feedback as exhibited in Number Five, above. (And, yes, there are times when a reality check stated in unambiguous terms is just the ticket for a student.)

But there's an even bigger reason to consider *how* you give feedback to students about poor performance: their beliefs about themselves as learners are set before they get to you in college, and you can play a role in reinforcing positive beliefs as well as ameliorating negative beliefs based on how you characterize their performance.

There are many researchers who have written about student self-perception and its connection to academic performance. One of the most well-known is Carol Dweck. Her

work about the difference between fixed and growth mindsets has, in turn, fostered work in stereotype threat, reasons for underrepresentation of females and minorities in STEM disciplines, and other areas. Connected to the pop quiz above, the fifth response would be far better than any of the others for a student whose belief about herself is that her intelligence is fixed and she really can't do anything about it.

An excellent introduction to the more than 30 years of Dweck's work in this area is *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2007). As applied to students, mindset theory means students who believe their intelligence and/or academic achievement are malleable and therefore improvable are more likely to power through temporary set-backs in grades because they believe working harder will improve their understanding and their grades.

For fixed mindset students, though, a bad grade is actually a confirmation they're "dumb in math," or "not good writers," for example, and there's not really anything they can do to improve.

A fixed mindset is an academic motivation-killer.

We want to help students understand that feedback is formative — it's meant as a direction marker on their learning paths, not as confirmation of immutable abilities (or inabilities). "Growth-minded teachers tell students the truth and then give them the tools to close the gap," is how Dweck puts it (2007, p. 199).

Dweck's and others' research shows mindsets can be changed. This is drastically important information for helping students succeed in college, and giving feedback about poor performance is actually an opportunity to help change a student's fixed mindset into a growth mindset. If a fixed-mindset student repeatedly hears her teachers assign the meaning of a bad grade as being an opportunity to correct course based on feedback, thereby getting smarter, better, faster, then — with enough reinforcement of multiple meaning-making demonstrations from her teachers — the student's self-perception about her learning ability expands.

This is a truly transformative experience for students who don't believe effort can improve academic performance. Dweck tells of the emotional impact on one young student when he made the switch from a fixed to a growth mindset: "All at once Jimmy—the most hard-core turned-off low-effort kid in the group—looked up with tears in his eyes and said, 'You mean I don't have to be dumb?'" (2007, p. 59).

The cumulative effect of growth-minded feedback transforms an academic culture. For whatever reason, American high school students' performance in math lags far behind other countries' student performance even though American students at younger ages compete favorably. Some writers point to the culture of other countries as the reason: "When they do badly at something, [students in these other cultures] work harder at it" (Nisbett, 2010, as quoted by Kimball & Smith, 2013).

A culture that reinforces a growth mindset produces students who try harder when they fail. A college culture can help transform students' fixed mindsets to growth mindsets when faculty deliver feedback about poor performance with an emphasis on students' ability to improve, by sharing their own instances of academic accomplishment after initial failure as a way of modeling a growth mindset, and by then helping students frame the reasons for the poor performance as factors under their own control.

Be a culture-builder as you provide feedback to students who have performed poorly. Seeing and hearing you demonstrate your conviction that a poor grade is not an indication of failure but an opportunity to succeed with a corrected course and additional effort can produce one of the most transformative realizations about themselves your students will ever experience.

## References

- Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine.
- Kimball, M., & Smith, N. (2013, October 27). There's one key difference between kids who excel at math and those who don't. Retrieved April 4, 2014, from <http://qz.com/139453/theres-one-key-difference-between-kids-who-excel-at-math-and-those-who-don't/>
- Nisbett, R. E. (2010). *Intelligence and how to get it: Why schools and cultures count*. New York: Norton & Company.