

Teachers' growth mindset appears more important than warmth, research suggests

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Students tend to like friendly teachers, but they like those who believe they can improve even more, new research indicates.

Students in a study still responded positively to instructors described as

being cold but who also had a growth mindset, meaning they felt students' ability in a subject could improve by working hard and trying different strategies. The opposite was also true: more participants reacted negatively to a warm, smiling teacher when they stated a fixed mindset, which is a belief that innate abilities cannot be changed, such as someone being naturally good at math.

"It's not enough to just be nice," said lead author Makita White, a Washington State University psychology Ph.D. candidate. "If teachers can change their demeanor to be warmer, it does have a good impact, but it's a lot better to convey a growth mindset than a fixed mindset to students."

Previous research has noted that students tend to view teachers who have growth mindsets as friendly and warm, so this proof-of-concept study, published in the [journal *Motivation Science*](#), was designed to evaluate those factors separately.

The study participants still responded best to an instructor described as both friendly and having a growth mindset. However, a "cold" instructor with a growth mindset still saw a greater positive response than a "warm" one with a fixed mindset.

This indicates that teachers might consider their mindset more important than their demeanor, said Elizabeth Canning, a WSU psychology researcher.

"At a very simple level, being friendly is good, but the mindset messages that you send students are really important. They can be even more powerful than just being friendly or welcoming to students," said Canning, the senior author on the paper.

For this study, researchers presented 332 [college students](#) with one of

four vignettes describing a statistics professor with different demeanors and mindsets. The students then answered a series of questions about what they thought of the professor and the class they taught, including their comfort level taking the course and how well they thought they would perform.

In the growth mindset scenarios, the professor stated that "any student can learn the material" if they worked hard, learned from mistakes and sought help when needed. In the fixed mindset vignettes, the professor said that some students had "a natural gift in statistics" while other students might struggle if they weren't a "stats person."

Whether instructors were described as being "very warm and friendly" or staring blankly and making students nervous, the scenarios that had professors stating a [growth mindset](#) had a much more positive response from the students. They reported they would have a greater sense of belonging in the class, lower "imposter" feelings and a better chance of doing well in the course.

Growth mindset is often touted as an advantage in relation to education. However, most prior research has focused on students' motivational beliefs with only recent attention to the instructors' mindsets.

In addition to this study, Canning's lab has done work indicating that instructors with growth mindsets can narrow performance gaps for traditionally disadvantaged groups. For instance, instructors with fixed mindsets were found in [one study to undermine women's performance in STEM courses](#) and in [another created a greater racial achievement gap](#) than in courses taught by those with growth mindsets.

"When you only focus on the students' mindset, it can lead to blaming the student, so if they're not performing well, you can tell yourself that they just don't have the right mindset," she said.

"By looking at how the mindset of instructors and culture are affecting students, it may take some of the onus off the students themselves. Instead, we can focus more on how we can make the environment motivating and conducive, so that everybody can be successful in that class."

More information: Makita M. White et al, Disentangling the impact of instructor mindset and demeanor on student experiences, *Motivation Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/mot0000322](https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000322)

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