

Achieving Grit through the Growth Mindset

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ABSTRACT

Many students are choosing the hollow promise of a trophy at the expense of learning. At a time when students are expecting the grade of “A” for simply “checking the boxes” required of them, there is a need for an explanation for why this is not a mindset for best-practice in the professional arena. This paper describes an experiential learning module to prime students for achieving grit through growth mindset.

Keywords: Business Education, Growth Mindset, Perseverance, Grit, and Student Success

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INTRODUCTION

How many students scan through the pages of a class syllabus only to focus on the requirements needed to obtain their desired grade? Little do they know while searching for the easiest way to achieve an A, students are choosing the hollow promise of a trophy at the expense of learning. Students need to understand why this is not a best practice mindset for achieving success in their careers. What happens when a student fails or does not achieve the results desired? Whose fault is this?

Conventional wisdom and political correctness have for almost a century blamed the teachers, the schools, the classroom size, the textbooks, the funding, the politicians, and the parents for the failure of the students—putting the blame on anything or anyone but the students themselves (Seligman, 2011, p. 103).

Drawing from the research of Carol Dweck (2006, 2012), the ability to harness the power of the word “Yet” (the time between now and the future) to compensate for the negative associations with immediate failure, is one of the first steps we can take to help us develop our sense of personal growth and achievement potential. Being able to disassociate oneself from the “tyranny of now” is a learned skill that manifests itself through one’s own mindset. She has demonstrated through her research that increased learning can be achieved through one’s ability to develop a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset. Focusing on a growth mindset results in the positive inclusion of failure in the larger picture of learning rather than the immediate need for instant academic success. The second step in transforming students for best-practice success is encouraging students to have stamina in order to achieve the long-term goals that lay ahead.

Walter Mischel (1965) inspired the mindset theories of Dweck by bringing to life the complexities of delayed gratification through his classic marshmallow study. Stating the positive benefits of waiting longer for rewards, Mischel’s subjects demonstrated how perseverance could be enhanced by presenting the material in a variety of ways to students depending on their own personal mindsets. Once the goal of the subject was determined (to either eat one marshmallow now or wait longer for two) the study showed the mental and emotional turmoil one might experience while trying to achieve success. Getting students to become passionate about achieving their goals through grit is the final step to positioning students for further success.

In her book, *GRIT* (2017), Angela Duckwork places part of the blame on students for their failure to learn. In fact, she stresses that “what really drives success is not “genius” but a unique combination of passion and long-term perseverance,” which she terms grit. students might possess all of the resources and mental capacity needed to achieve their goals, but if they are unable to stay the course throughout the length of the challenge, the sacrifice of an easy “A” will be substituted for the more rewarding promise of long-term retention and development. As we grow into adulthood, we may realize that grit may be enhanced by the rewards given to us through advances in our professional and/or personal lives. Martin E. P. Seligman alluded to the notion that grit can increase over time by stating that those over 65 have more grit than those younger than them (2011). This paper introduces one learning module in which we can prime students to jumpstart the process of increasing grit in college students so that they can achieve more over their lifetime.

PRIMING STUDENTS FOR INCREASING THEIR GRIT

This program has worked well with undergraduate, graduate students, and professionals. Participants were introduced to the concepts of growth mindset, perseverance, and grit in an interactive workshop with reflections and guided conversations. Probing questions allowed students to build upon emotional experiences acting as a foundation for each main focus area. Further group discussion as well as videos enhanced the learning. Participants were challenged to increase their awareness of their personal mindset and how it impacted personal learning and possible professional success. The agenda of the 70-minute module included:

- Introduction of activity and learning objectives (5 minutes)
- Individual activity (10 minutes)
 - See Appendix A
- Guided discussion with reflection questions (15 minutes total – 5 each section)
 - See Appendix B
- Facilitator led discussion (30 minutes total)
- Discussion/Conclusion (10 minutes)
 - See Appendix C

The module can be broken down into 5 sections including: 1) introduction; 2) growth mindset; 3) perseverance; 4) grit and; 5) conclusion.

Phase One: Introduction

At the beginning of the presentation, participants were invited to complete a grit assessment which was adapted from Seligman (2011). Those who completed the assessment discovered how they compared and placed with others who had previously completed the survey (see Appendix A for handout). Learning outcomes for enhancing their success in this module included: 1) Develop self-awareness in preparation for future personal and professional development, 2) Describe the “equation” for success, and 3) Identify ways to increase personal productivity. Participants were then introduced to the concept of success via “moving in the right direction” through redefining personal mindset, perseverance, and grit.

Phase Two: Growth Mindset

Before introducing students to ways in which they could engage in growth mindset, participants were encouraged to reflect on growth challenges. Their charge included the following prompts:

- 1) Write about a recent situation where you overcame a difficult challenge. What internal characteristics helped you to overcome the obstacle?
- 2) Write about a similar situation when you failed to overcome the challenge. What internal characteristics hindered your success?

Discussion on the findings helped to generate common bonds and like-experiences for those participating.

After discussion of the growth challenges, participants watched a brief video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-swZaKN2Ic) featuring Carol Dweck titled “The power of yet:

Believing you can improve.” Conversations comparing ways in which we respond to failure showcased learning from the video and focused on Dweck’s concepts of fixed and growth mindset. Further discussion compared abilities associated with and the consequences of praising others in ways that reinforce either fixed or growth mindsets. Concluding the section on mindset was a listing of the benefits (derived from Dweck’s video) of a growth mindset. According to Dweck’s study, those with a growth mindset: 1) experienced greater achievement, 2) held a more accurate sense of strengths/weaknesses, and 3) had lower levels of depression. Participants were challenged to apply the growth mindset when learning was more difficult in personal relationships as well as professional challenges. The transition from growth mindset to perseverance was then established, changing the conversation from personal challenges to goal achievement.

Phase Three: Perseverance

Prior to introducing students to the concepts of perseverance and the benefits of delayed gratification, participants were encouraged to self-reflect on the following prompts:

- 1) Write about a recent situation where you achieved your goal quickly but felt unrewarded in the end.
- 2) Write about a similar situation when you took longer to achieve your goal but felt as if the reward was greater in the long run.

Discussion on the findings strengthened the concept that harder to achieve goals that required more effort over a longer period of time where more valuable in the long run.

Participants then watched a video based on the Mischel & Staub (1965) research highlighting the marshmallow test (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLtQaRrDsC4>). In this study children were offered the chance to eat one marshmallow immediately. However, if they waited a length of time they would be allowed to eat two marshmallows. This informative, and often comical, account of the actual experiments conducted concluded that children who delayed gratification by waiting longer for greater rewards tended to have better life outcomes (higher SAT scores, greater educational attainment, better body mass index, and less drug abuse). One of the most interesting findings from this study was that delayed gratification could be enhanced with training. In other words, some four-year olds who could not originally wait two minutes were able to persevere for over twenty minutes to achieve the greater reward. Discussion focused on the importance of perseverance was a natural transition to the topic of grit.

Phase Four: Grit

Before discussing grit, participants were asked to again self-reflect on past experiences. Their writing included prompts such as:

- 1) Write about a goal or dream in which you were passionate about but did not accomplish.
- 2) What held you back from achieving this goal?

Discussions focused on these past experiences included topics which ranged from a variety of unreached goals including: 1) athletic activities, 2) creative endeavors, 3) failed relationships,

and 4) unachieved academic milestones. Participants then watched a video by Duckworth (2017) (https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance). In this video, she presents the theory of grit and how it was developed.

Seligman defined achievement as “skill times effort” (2012), Duckworth (2017) describes grit as the passion and perseverance for long-term goals. Further discussion of what grit was not included the notion that grit was not: 1) talent, 2) luck, or 3) desire. However, grit does include having what some researchers call an ‘ultimate concern’ – a goal you care about so much that it organizes and gives meaning to almost everything you do. In addition, grit is holding steadfast to that goal...even when you fall down...even when you screw up... and even when progress toward that goal is halting or slow.

In an effort to encourage participants to bring grit to life within their own professional development, we reviewed how they could increase their own levels of grit. They were encouraged to:

- 1) **Pursue what interests you:** You're not going to stick it out if you don't care.
- 2) **Practice, practice, practice:** It's not just how you get to Carnegie Hall. We love doing things we're good at.
- 3) **Find purpose:** How does what you do help others? That's what makes a job into a calling.
- 4) **Have hope:** No "wishing on a star" here, pal. Have hope because you are going to make it happen.
- 5) **Join a gritty group:** Mom was right; spend time with slackers and you'll be a slacker.

Participants in the course then discussed ways in which they currently were increasing their levels of grit but were unaware of their actions. This led to a final wrap-up conversation where the ideals of growth mindset, perseverance, and grit were combined to create the “equation for success”.

Phase Five: Discussion

In completing this module, the equation for success, as defined by this research, was communicated to all participants as **Growth Mindset + Perseverance = Grit**. Participants were reminded of how success correlated with:

- 1) Growth Mindset (vs Fixed Mindset)
- 2) Patience and Perseverance (Delayed Gratification vs Instant Reward)
- 3) Grit (Passion and Determination)

Participants were then asked how they would assess and/or apply this information. Open ended questions included:

- 1) How will you be able to choose to respond to challenges with a **fixed** or **growth** mindset?
- 2) How will you be able to apply your assessment to new contexts, using a **growth mindset**.
- 3) How will you be able to try new approaches when faced with challenges?

They were then shown ways in which they could start TODAY to increase their future success. These action items included:

- 1) **Journal** about challenges: do you think you responded with a fixed or growth mindset, perseverance, and grit?
- 2) **Ask** close friends & mentors for honest feedback about whether you have these attributes.
- 3) **Try** new approaches using the growth mindset when you encounter challenges. Draw from your internal character strengths.

For their final reflection, participants were asked to elaborate on what they had learned throughout the module. They were then asked to predict the impact that increasing their growth mindset, perseverance, and grit would have on their future success. Writing prompts included:

- 1) Write about ways in which you can apply what you learned today to your life in regards to:
 - a. Growth Mindset (vs Fixed Mindset)
 - b. Patience and Perseverance (Delayed Gratification vs Instant Reward)
 - c. Grit (Passion and Determination)
- 2) What results do you think it will have on your future success?

Participants then competed via an online Kahoot, using their phone or computer, to reinforce what they had learned. This activity concluded this session on grit and growth mindset.

CONCLUSION

In order to enhance participants' success, this module included the previous work of Dweck (2012), Mischel & Staub (1965), and Duckworth (2017) by focusing on growth mindset, perseverance, and grit. By introducing participants to these concepts through an experiential learning module, they became more aware of the ability they possess to personally achieve grit. Through presenting this module to a wide variety of audiences (undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals) the universalism of the subjects discussed may have positive impact on the personal, academic, and/or professional success of the participants. It is imperative that we instill the notion in our students that "Our potential is one thing. What we do with it is quite another" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 14). If this can be achieved, students can then begin to take responsibility for their own personal and professional success and development.

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Appendix A: GRIT ASSESSMENT -- A reflection of how you see yourself right now.

Please respond to the following eight items using the following scale:

- 1 = Not like me at all
- 2= Not much like me
- 3= Somewhat like me
- 4= Mostly like me
- 5= Very much like me

- _____ 1) New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from old ones.*
- _____ 2) Wolters Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily
- _____ 3) I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
- _____ 4) I am a hard worker.
- _____ 5) I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
- _____ 6) I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*
- _____ 7) I finish whatever I begin.
- _____ 8) I am diligent.

To get your score:

- 1. Add your score on statements 2, 4, 7, and 8.
- 2. Then, add items 1, 3, 5, and 6. Subtract that total from 24.
- 3. Then, add the two steps together and divide by 8. **Your Score:** _____

Here are the norms by sex:

DOCILE (Tenths)	MALE (N=4,169)	FEMALE (N=6,972)
1 st	2.50	2.50
2 nd	2.83	2.88
3 rd	3.06	3.13
4 th	3.25	3.25
5 th	3.38	3.50
6 th	3.54	3.63
7 th	3.75	3.79
8 th	3.92	4.00
9 th	4.21	4.25
10 th	5.00	5.00
Mean, SD (Standard Deviation)	3.37, 0.66	3.43, 0.68

Source: Adapted from Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish*. New York, NY: Atria Books, pp. 121-122.

APPENDIX B: Reflection

1. Write about a recent situation where you overcame a difficult challenge:

- What internal characteristics helped you to overcome the obstacle?

2. Compare this to a similar situation when you failed to overcome the challenge:

- What internal characteristics hindered your success?

APPENDIX C: Online Kahoot

The answers to the questions are in **bold**. The participant with the highest score at the end received a gift. Questions and answers were as follows:

- 1) This session was about:
Growth Mindset
Grit, Perseverance
All of these!
- 2) Examples of Fixed Mindset when responding to failure are:
Staying in Bed
Getting Drunk
Thinking you are a failure
All of the above!
- 3) Growth Mindset ABILITY is developed by:
Seeing effort as necessary and Learning from criticism
Embracing challenges
Answers 1 and 2
None of the Above
- 4) The BENEFITS of Growth Mindset are:
Answers 3 and 4
More Marshmallows
Displaying perseverance and delayed gratification
Developing Grit and Experiencing greater achievement
- 5) The Marshmallow Test showed us:
How cute kids are
The need for SMORE studies on waiting
How delaying gratification can have benefits
None of the above
- 6) What is an equation for SUCCESS?
Fixed Mindset + Perseverance = Grit
Growth Mindset + Perseverance = Grit
Vodka + Tonic = Great Dancing
- 7) How can you increase your GRIT?
Pursue what interests you
Practice, practice, practice
Join a "gritty" group
All of the above!
- 8) In what ways can YOU grow your success?
Journal writing about challenges
Seeking honest feedback about actions
Trying new approaches - bringing Growth Mindset to LIFE!
All of the above!