



## Cultivating a Learning Disposition:

### CURRICULUM IN ACTION

Weekly Sessions, led by Noah Rachlin

#### WEEK 1: INTRODUCING “LEARNING DISPOSITION”

**Goal:** Explain to students what we will be talking about in these sessions and why the information should resonate and have value in their own lives.

**Narrative:** After introductions and a general opening, students view Angela Duckworth’s TED Talk on “grit.” Afterward, I provide more information about Duckworth’s research and why there is considerable value in thinking about grit when it comes to school. We also discuss why we are trying to go beyond talking only about grit in our sessions. This point focuses largely on the idea of time and on trying to help students understand the ways that regularly thinking about motivation, practice, and focus and attention in the short-term can help them achieve their long-term goals.

This exercise serves as a transition to presenting the vocabulary of a “learning disposition,” at which point I make an explicit effort to explain why we see a learning disposition as a constellation of *skills* rather than as traits (i.e., things that can be developed as opposed to things one does or does not have).

As a conclusion to the session, we discuss the ways in which the idea of working toward a goal over time and preparing for challenge and failure as we learn something new is particularly consistent with the fact that successes and struggles are a natural part of life. Here, Lauren Fleshman’s chart of her own life path is useful.

#### Session Materials

Video: Angela Duckworth, “The key to success? Grit”

Lauren Fleshman, website graphic



#### WEEK 2: MINDSET

**“I believe it is possible to improve.”**

**Goal:** Help students understand the differences between a fixed and a growth mindset and the impact that such a mindset can have.

**Narrative:** After reading an excerpt from Carol Dweck’s book *Mindset*, I facilitate a guided review of the reading to ensure that everyone understands what it means to have a fixed or growth mindset and how mindset impacts the way that individuals approach and experience challenge, mistakes, and critical feedback. We discuss the fact that most people switch back and forth between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset, but tend to lean more toward one than the other.

Once I am sure that students understand these concepts, we discuss the many ways in which there is evidence all around us that talent, ability, and intelligence are not fixed, innate traits. I have a stable of examples that I am prepared to share, but I also sometimes encourage students to think of their own examples. Students tend to respond very positively to the growth made by Betty Edwards’s drawing students after only five days, as well as to the fact that Martin Luther King Jr. was given a C+ in his public speaking class.

#### Prompts for Discussion

- What are the differences between the two mindsets?
- How does the mindset impact how individuals experience challenge and critical feedback?
- What about class/school structure and/or culture makes it difficult to have a growth mindset at present?
- What are strategies that both students and teachers can employ to cultivate a growth mindset?

#### Session Materials

Dweck, *Mindset*: pgs. 4–9

Mindset Graphic: “Two Mindsets”

Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* and “Before & After Self-Portraits”

Martin Luther King Jr.’s Report Card



### WEEK 3: MOTIVATION

#### "I have an intrinsic desire to improve."

**Goal:** Help students understand the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the dangers of extrinsic rewards.

**Narrative:** This session uses an excerpt from Daniel Pink's *Drive* to begin a conversation about motivation and the ways in which intrinsic motivation is preferable to extrinsic motivation in an educational environment. Particular attention is devoted to discussing intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation in relation to how long-lasting each tends to be, how easily corrupted each may or may not be, and the relationship between motivation and tasks that require creative thinking.

#### Prompts for Discussion

- Why might it be somewhat counterproductive to be motivated by a desire to achieve a certain grade?
- Share personal experiences of when intrinsic motivation fueled sustained effort and energy.
- What is the danger of being driven primarily by a quest for a particular grade?
- In what ways can students try to cultivate intrinsic motivation in classes that might not naturally interest them?
- How can teachers help to cultivate intrinsic motivation within their classes?
- In what ways can motivation and interests can change over time?

#### Session Materials

Daniel Pink, *Drive*: pgs. 32–45 and 75–79

### WEEK 4: TALENT AND DELIBERATE PRACTICE

#### "What should I do to improve?"

**Goal:** Help students understand the concept of deliberate practice and why making mistakes can be instrumental to growth and development. Through the use of concrete examples, demonstrate how conceptions of others' talents can be particularly inaccurate and damaging to our own sense of what we may or may not be able to achieve.

**Narrative:** Beginning with an excerpt from Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, this session is the first of two consecutive sessions devoted to the idea that mistakes are an essential part of the learning process and that effortless success, though often idealized in the minds of both young people and adults, is a less than ideal way to grow and develop.

As in the session on mindset, I try to provide a multitude of real-world examples that demonstrate the ways in which practice has been essential to the development of those who are particularly talented and capable. Additionally, I work to provide evidence of how seeing mistakes as opportunities for learning is essential to growth, and how judging one's own talent or ability relative to peers can be particularly troubling and inaccurate.

#### Prompts for Discussion

- What is an example of how deliberate practice has improved your own talent or ability in a specific area?
- What are concrete, deliberate practice strategies that you can apply to your own learning and coursework?
- What role does feedback play in deliberate practice?
- How might you be able to get necessary feedback if it isn't immediately provided by your teacher?

#### Session Materials

Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code*: pgs. 11–20

Videos: "Odell Beckham Jr. one-handed catch" in game and his practice of it beforehand, "Odell Beckham Jr. pregame catches"

Video: "Honda the Power of Dreams Failure: The Secret to Success"

Video: "critique and feedback—the story of austin's butterfly"

Betty Edwards's *Students' Drawings* (mentioned above)

Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers*: pg. 20 (Canadian Hockey Birthdays)

Malcolm Gladwell, *David & Goliath*: pgs. 79–86 (Relative Deprivation)



## WEEK 5: DELIBERATE PRACTICE *continued*

**Goal:** Provide further examples of deliberate practice while also examining what deliberate practice actually looks like when one commits to it. Have students consider what the difference is between “deliberate practice” and “working hard,” and how they can prepare themselves for the emotional and physical challenges of deliberate practice.

**Narrative:** This session uses excerpts from the film *Brooklyn Castle* to accomplish the stated goals. After the film, we discuss the difference between “deliberate practice” and “working hard” as well as strategies to help students prepare for and handle the emotional and physical challenges of deliberate practice.

### Prompts for Discussion

- What is the difference between “deliberate practice” and “working hard”?
- Why is time spent not the best measure of how helpful your studying or work has been to your learning?
- Why are mistakes invaluable opportunities for learning and growth?
- How can you prepare yourself for the physically and emotionally exhausting nature of deliberate practice?

### Session Materials

Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*: pgs. 105–112 (Brooklyn IS 318)

Excerpts from *Brooklyn Castle* film focusing on the story of Patrick



## WEEK 6: FOCUS & ATTENTION

“I know what I have to do.

How do I stay focused enough to do it?”

**Goal:** Help students identify their many daily habits and practices that impede their ability to achieve at the uppermost levels of their potential.

**Narrative:** After students read a brief excerpt from John Medina’s *Brain Rules*, we discuss their work habits, including the ways in which cell phones—and social media in particular—impede their ability to focus and why such habits make it more challenging to perform at the level at which they are capable.

### Prompts for Discussion

- Why can distractions/multitasking be so dangerous?
- What does it mean to be distracted in the moment? Over time?
- What is the difference between taking a break and losing focus?
- What short-term or long-term strategies have you successfully employed in the past to help you maintain focus?
- What strategies might be worth employing moving forward?

This session occurs in the lead-up to end-of-term exams, so we often refer to students’ upcoming workload and discuss specific strategies that can be employed,

### Session Materials

John Medina, *Brain Rules*: pgs. 84–89 (Why Multitasking is a Myth)

Video: “The Science of Procrastination—And How to Manage It”

Video: “The Science of Productivity”

## WEEK 7: CONCLUSION & FEEDBACK

**Narrative:** In this session, I show Dan Gilbert’s TED Talk “The psychology of your future self,” and we discuss the ways in which people are really bad at predicting who they will be in the future. I ask students to consider what this might mean for their conclusions in the present day about what they can and cannot do and how it might add further strength to the argument that all we can really do is focus on trying to improve, each and every day. We open the floor to feedback that students might want to share and also ask them to complete an anonymous survey before they leave.

### Session Materials

Video: “Dan Gilbert: The psychology of your future self”



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