



Cultivating a Learning Disposition:

■ KEY CONCEPTS

Developed by Noah Rachlin

Tang Institute Fellow Noah Rachlin highlights the following key concepts as important to the creation of a learning disposition, defined as a mindset that helps students prevail over the inevitable challenge and struggle of learning both in and out of the classroom.

- **Words matter:** Students arrive at school as the recipients of numerous, oft-repeated messages. Changing the hardwiring of an individual's self-identity can be difficult; the language we employ contributes to students' formation of fixed or growth mindsets. The growth opportunities inherent in each student ought to be shared within the community. While a single, negative grade could derail a student's passion for a particular topic, explicit encouragement could well keep him or her on track—or provide the impetus to pursue a new endeavor.
- **Meaning matters:** The *relevance* of student work is important. Students should be supported in determining the meaning of their activities—and be fully engaged in pursuing that higher purpose. Although activities may offer either personal reward or may aim to serve others, the value assigned to them matters in determining if goals are realized.
- **Concrete activities matter:** Taking time both in and outside of class to discuss what grades mean—and what they do not signify—can offer important perspective. Establishing regular routines to provide or gather feedback and then to process those observations can ground the learning process. Repeating and reinforcing a broad set of practical activities aligns a learning disposition with habitual activity and contributes to building a culture of healthy growth.
- **The end *and* the means matter:** The traditional “output” of student work and the metric(s) by which such output is measured deserve reconsideration. Engaging students in constant learning—and embedding an understanding of the learning process as valuable *in and of itself*—must be a pedagogical principle.
- **The community matters:** Trust represents an important component of the growth mindset. Students need to trust that others will journey with them; they must trust themselves as empowered agents. Trust takes time, of course, and emerges through well-nourished relationships. Teachers, parents, peers, and others all play significant roles in reinforcing a learning disposition.
- **Not just for students:** The benefits of a learning disposition are not just for a student population. All stand to benefit from flexible, growth mindset–focused approaches that encourage new perspectives on teaching and learning, both in the classroom and in daily life. Anyone can benefit from having a learning disposition.



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