



Cultivating a Learning Disposition:

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project by Noah Rachlin

Learning is Hard

Trying to understand a complex mathematical proof, revising a paper for a history or English class, conducting a science experiment, and learning a new language are especially difficult tasks. Furthermore, these struggles do not exist only within the four walls of a traditional classroom. Every day, students also face challenges as they practice for piano recitals, refine their jump shots, or work to further develop their abilities as budding photographers or writers or scientists. Yet, too often, a lack of immediate mastery can be perceived as a sign of weakness—or worse, inability—and their response is, “I can’t do that.”

With pervasive issues such as these in mind, Noah Rachlin, instructor in history and social science and 2014–2015 Tang Institute Fellow, is working on his project, “‘I Can’t Do That...Yet’: Cultivating a Learning Disposition.” The project—which explores the concepts of mindset, motivation, deliberate practice, and focus—aims to help cultivate in students a “learning disposition” so that they are prepared to overcome the inevitable challenges of learning both in and out of the classroom.

Rachlin is considering how educators can help students transition from thinking or saying, “I can’t do that” to “I can’t do that yet.” In doing so, Rachlin believes that educators can empower young people to be lifelong learners who are comfortable embracing difficult tasks because they have come to perceive challenges as natural and essential components of human growth and development.

In place since 2014, the curriculum and ideas associated with “I Can’t Do That...Yet” represent initial strategies aimed at helping students cultivate a learning disposition. Which strategies and interventions have proven to be most effective in your own context? How have you supported efforts aimed at encouraging students to embrace the learning process? We look forward to hearing your feedback, insights, and additional ideas related to building a learning disposition.

Student Perspectives: The Other Side of Challenge

In the first formal year of this work, the focus has been on identifying initial opportunities to engage with both students and faculty in order to lay a foundation for future work. In the broadest sense, the question driving this work has been: “How can we help students to view challenge and struggle not as impenetrable roadblocks but rather as opportunities for further growth and development?”

So far, interactions with students have centered mostly on a series of three seven-week sessions for groups of approximately 20 Andover students. The curriculum for these sessions, designed by Rachlin in summer 2014, delves into the interrelated concepts of mindset, motivation, deliberate practice, and focus. By reading a variety of literature on these topics, engaging in discussion, and taking time for reflection, students gain a more nuanced understanding of how to turn these concepts into daily practices and how to customize activities that can help them meet their academic and personal goals.

At the conclusion of the seven-week session, Rachlin gathers feedback and insight via a student survey. In their feedback,

students often note specific ways in which they have drawn value from the experience; nearly all student participants thus far have stated they would participate in similar sessions again if given the chance.

The results clearly highlight a number of opportunities associated with this approach to learning. For example, students have written:

“I particularly enjoyed the segment regarding growth mindset. Before, I was an extremely fixed-mindset person, and I frequently blamed fate for my problems. Now I try to take everything as something I can learn from.”

“I always struggled with my high expectations...but this material has helped me realize that it is less beneficial to focus on what went wrong than what I can do right in the future.”

“I liked the focus strategies and feel like they not only gave me great methods for improving my efficiency but also made me fully realize just how many people struggle with the exact same issues of distraction and procrastination. It made me feel less alone and more supported in my pursuit to improve my learning methods/behavior.”

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Faculty at Work: Helping Young People Achieve Their Potential

As Rachlin works with faculty colleagues to explore the role of learning disposition at PA, he has helped guide interactions by presenting this challenge: How can teachers best use current research and knowledge on mindset, motivation, deliberate practices, and focus in order to customize interventions inside and outside of the classroom so that students may achieve their greatest possible success at Phillips Academy and in the years after graduation?

Thus far, faculty conversations have occurred during department-specific meetings, presentations that are part of an academic department's professional-development activities, the first Tang Institute Lunch Discussion, and in one-on-one conversations with faculty members. In each of these instances, the focus has been on working collaboratively with faculty throughout the Academy to consider ways to genuinely and consistently embed this work into the practice and culture of student life and learning at Phillips Academy.

Part of a Larger Movement in Education

At the outset, Rachlin's work was inspired in part by the research of individuals such as Angela Duckworth, associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her focus on "grit" is best understood as part of a constellation of interesting scholarship and emerging research on the connections among pedagogy, neuroscience, and psychology. Within the education space, her research has initiated an opportunity for reflection and action on the content taught in classrooms and pedagogical approaches to working with young people inside and outside of the classroom.

Rachlin's own work is driven by a fundamental belief that the task of implementing and iterating on learning disposition will be most successful when done collaboratively. The quest to answer a number of important questions is ongoing and will require a variety of different perspectives, supporting research, and exploring the answers to questions such as:

- How do we best "teach" these important but often elusive skills?
- What are the possible intervention points—including curricular and programmatic adjustments, peer-to-peer engagement, new forms of mentorship, and collaborative partnership—that we might begin to develop, pilot, and implement going forward?
- How can such experiments be used not only to ensure a positive impact on our own students, but also to engage in broader conversations and collaborations that focus on the practice and teaching of these skills?

While Rachlin's first year of his project has been largely focused on building a foundation for the work at Andover, the time has come to be more outward-facing and to focus on opportunities to work with partner institutions on cocreating curriculum, a shared vocabulary, practical tools for teaching and learning, and effective methods of assessment. Underlying this effort is a belief that, in seeking to use this work as an avenue to cultivate new public and private partnerships, there is an opportunity to better support the Academy's commitment to "help young people achieve their potential, so that they may lead responsible and fulfilling lives," while also participating in a broader and ongoing conversation that extends far beyond the boundaries of the Phillips Academy campus.



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