

Build a Classroom Culture of Trust and Collaboration

Excerpt from Leaders of Their Own Learning

A classroom culture of trust, safety, challenge and joy is the cornerstone of engaged and effective learning. Culture and community building at the classroom and schoolwide levels are the foundation for every aspect of improved teaching and learning and particularly important when checking for understanding. Students must feel safe to communicate honestly about their progress. A series of actions set in motion by the leadership and faculty members of the school builds strong school and classroom culture:

- Treat students as partners in the learning process. Engage them in understanding and shaping learning targets, classroom rules and norms, project ideas, and every other aspect of learning.
- Show students the rationale for curriculum and instruction and be transparent about the standards and important decisions.
- Get to know students as individuals and continually assess and adjust practice according to their readiness for certain content or tasks, and trends in their interests and learning profiles (e.g., balance challenging all students with complex texts with supporting them to independently read texts of their choosing).
- Create school- and classwide norms that encourage everyone to persevere with challenging tasks and justify their thinking with evidence.
- Model collaboration. Students need to see the adults in the school community working together, giving feedback, and being open about their questions and mistakes.

Classroom cultures that grow from these actions enable students to understand their learning goals and teachers to be responsive to the learning needs of all students. Such classrooms need a climate of courtesy and respect, built from safety, clarity, and trust, not simply compliance and control. Implementing checking-for-understanding techniques requires that teachers are particularly intentional about creating this climate. Students must trust that if they expose their challenges and vulnerabilities, teachers and peers will treat them with respect, and their mistakes will be seen as an opportunity to learn.

One place to start is by helping students adopt a growth mindset. Described in the work of Carol Dweck (2006), a growth mindset is defined by the belief that human brains develop intelligence with study and effort. By contrast, a fixed mindset is defined by the belief that intelligence is set by native ability. Research by Dweck and her team suggests that students with a fixed mindset often feel that hard work is a sign of weakness—that skill should come easily—and are hesitant to take academic risks, because doing so might make them appear weak. These mindsets are not permanent—when students are shown, for example, that they can “grow their math brain” by struggling with hard problems, they work harder at math problems and improve their skills. A growth mindset changes the belief that some will succeed academically and some will not. Believing that intelligence can grow helps all students to be honest in sharing their questions and confusions as they work to gain skill and understanding. Dweck’s research suggests that small interventions aimed at building a growth mindset can result in profound changes in student attitude and performance. All teachers would be well served to study her work and learn more about mindsets.

Teachers can set expectations for checking for understanding by modeling and practicing different techniques with students. Teachers should talk about the purpose of each technique so that students know why it is important for them to be honest in their self-assessment. Having the opportunity to practice will help them see how the techniques affect their teacher's instruction and ultimately their understanding of the material.