

Helping Students “Think Hard”

From September 2017 to June 2018, one or more members of the Knowles Teacher Initiative community will write a blog post each month exploring the role of small victories, mistakes and failures in their growth and learning. In this post, Knowles Fellow Heidi Park shares the importance of reflection for students and teachers alike.

“Ms. Park, do you really think anyone takes this seriously?”

At the end of first semester, I asked my students to answer some reflection questions based on the feedback that their groupmates had given them throughout the year. I’m sure many more of my students were thinking the same thing—*why do we have to do this?*

Most of my students have seen/heard something about growth mindset in their other classes and many of them also believe that they need to “work hard.” However, as Eduardo Briceno **explains**, “students often haven’t learned that working hard involves thinking hard, which involves reflecting on and changing our strategies so we become more and more effective learners over time, and we need to guide them to come to understand this.”

That last part—guiding students to understand that learning involves reflecting and changing strategies—is something I’m still working out.

I ask my students to reflect at various points during the school year. At the end of every unit, they fill out a peer feedback form where they pick the strongest skill for each of their groupmates and themselves (I’ve been **trying this** in some form or another for about a year). At the end of class, I often post a quick reflection question (an idea I got from *Mathematical Mindsets* by Jo Boaler).

I think just the process of having them stop and think about these questions can be helpful as they may have never considered these questions before:

“What is the strongest skill in chemistry/physics for you/your groupmate?”

“When your groups worked well, why? When they did not work well, why not?”

“What questions do you have on the work that we did today?”

“What misconceptions did you or a classmate have today, and how did discussing this misconception help your understanding?”

Still, it can be a struggle to get students to reflect. I always get a mixed bag of responses to these reflections. Peer feedback comments can range from “N/A” (nevermind that it’s a required question to explain why you chose a particular skill for a particular student) to “She’s really smart” to “She would ask questions about something she did not understand, and that would make us all realize something.” End-of-class reflections can be perfunctory “I don’t have any questions” or genuine wonderings about what we’re doing in class at that moment. There are always students who take the time to respond thoughtfully and also always students who treat it like another hoop to jump through (which, let’s be honest, it kind of is). I’m still wondering how to help students go a bit deeper with their reflections.

It can also be a struggle to find the time and the space for scaffolding this kind of reflection either in my classroom or just for myself as a teacher—there is always so much to do. Sometimes the end-of-class reflections get dropped because we’re out of time. And let’s be real, genuine reflection can be risky— as I’ve written about before, genuine reflection requires that **we be willing to be disturbed**. As a teacher, I need to be willing to examine what I’m doing and **unlearn old habits**, if necessary. (And yes, even as “only” a fifth-year teacher, I have plenty of old habits that I should examine). Reflecting might mean acknowledging that my assumptions about what works best are wrong, and I need to change something. But I want to improve as a teacher, and this is an essential part of that process. And I want my students to be able to do that for themselves also, as learners.

I’m fairly certain that I flubbed my response to the student who posed the question, “Do you think anyone takes this seriously?” I wasn’t expecting it at that moment, even though I probably should have since it comes up at least once every year. I think I said something along the lines of “Well, I know that not everyone takes it seriously but I hope that you do because I think it’s useful for your learning.” I probably need to do more work in explicitly making it clear to students why I ask them to go through this process, why I feel that reflection is so important to learning. I could be more transparent in how I use reflection in improving my own teaching practice—I don’t need to present myself as a perfect teacher in front of my students (and I make plenty of mistakes—from typos to miscommunications to “oh, that lesson totally did not work, let’s try something

else"). And in the meantime, I hope that just taking the time to stop and reflect will slowly help my students (and myself) develop into better learners.

References

Briceno, Eduardo (2015, November 16). *Growth mindset: Clearing up some common confusions*. Retrieved from <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/42769/growth-mindset-clearing-up-some-common-confusions>