

# What Does a Writing Pedagogy Designed to Increase Equity and Inclusion Look Like?

## It Begins with a Growth Mindset

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**Author Bio:** Caroline Pari has been teaching at BMCC since 1996 and continues to be a vibrant, enthusiastic, and innovative professor. Her publications are in the fields of Composition and Rhetoric and Italian American Studies. She co-edited three volumes of essays on Freirean critical liberatory pedagogy with Ira Shor and contributed chapters to several volumes on her working-class pedagogy at BMCC. In Italian American Studies, she published essays on working-class Italian American women's writings and on Pascal D'Angelo, an immigrant laborer who wrote the first autobiography of an Italian immigrant. She is currently working on applying translingual theories and practices to writing courses and to Italian American literature. She is also working on pedagogical interventions that support students' growth mindsets, increase equity, and reduce withdrawals and failures. At BMCC, she co-created ENG 100.5, one of the first co-requisite courses at BMCC and helped provide professional faculty development for the course. She served as Coordinator of Intensive Writing courses (1999-2002; 2014-2018) and as Deputy Chair of the English Department (2018-2020). Pari's faculty page: <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/faculty/caroline-pari-pfister/>

### **Introduction**

It is well-known by now that a student's mindset affects their performance, as the work of Carol S. Dweck and many others have shown us. In fact, with a growth mindset, students understand that they have the ability to learn and succeed in school and that learning takes practice, hard work and effort. Students learn to face challenges in learning and to view them as opportunities for further growth, developing both tenacity and perseverance. When students feel like they

cannot learn, their motivation to persist and learn decreases. According to Farrington et al, “Strong, positive mindsets make students much more likely to engage with academic work, demonstrate positive academic behaviors, and persist despite setbacks. Mindsets are shaped by school and classroom contexts, but they also are malleable at an individual level through experimental interventions” (38). Research shows that a pedagogy designed to foster a growth mindset can change students’ beliefs about their intelligence, promote social belonging, reduce gender and racial/ethnic achievement gaps, help students to connect academic achievement to future goals and set them up to become successful lifelong learners (Dweck et al 5). With this in mind, I created essay assignments and designed a pedagogy that support a growth mindset in an accelerated freshman composition course at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC). BMCC is a large, urban community college under the aegis of the City University of New York that boasts a diverse student population of 24,000 that speaks over 100 languages and represents over 100 countries. A Fall 2019 breakdown by race and ethnicity shows a student population of 44% Hispanic/Latino, 26% African-American or Black, 12% Asian and 10% White students with 90% receiving financial aid, as reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (BMCC Office of Institutional Effectiveness). Further, at a time when CUNY transitioned to the ALP, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) model of replacing zero-credit remedial courses with co-requisite, credit-bearing courses, which the BMCC administration supported, it was important to create a pedagogy that fostered a growth mindset in accordance with these efforts. The changes addressed the racial and social class inequities in remediation that had been documented for over two decades that led to high attrition rates and low graduation rates among minorities. However, attention to noncognitive factors such

as growth mindset is not the only solution. Our community college students are often beset by difficulties beyond their mindsets. They are often juggling long work hours, long commutes, family responsibilities, a lack of health insurance, and food and housing insecurity. Support for these noncognitive factors is built into the acceleration model, as seen in both the CCBC and California's models, and now BMCC's (Coleman).

According to Camille Farrington et al in their comprehensive report, *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners. The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance*, the noncognitive factors that have the most significant impact on successful academic performance are academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies and social skills. These include “study skills, attendance, work habits, time management, help-seeking behaviors, metacognitive strategies, and social and academic problem-solving skills that allow students to successfully manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands” (Farrington, et al). Most importantly, research has shown that support for the development of these noncognitive factors can improve educational outcomes and reduce racial/ethnic disparities in academic performance and degree completion (Farrington, et al). In addition, “some short-term interventions that target students’ psycho-social beliefs—such as interventions that work to change students’ beliefs about their intelligence, that promote social belonging, or that connect performance to future goals” have positive impacts on academic performance that endure over time (Farrington et al). When designing my accelerated freshman composition course, I focused mainly on developing positive academic mindsets since they impact both academic behaviors and academic performance. I designed several essay

assignments to affirm and value student identity and experience, to promote student belonging and community, and to support a growth mindset.

Further, I embedded techniques and methods that promote a growth mindset including an emphasis on effort and hard work. I encouraged students to revise their work more than once so they could see that with effort, an “A” was quite attainable. In addition, I used the term “yet” in evaluations. “Yet” refers to a method of evaluating students by their progress, not performance. When a student is evaluated as having “not yet” mastered certain material, they are on a trajectory of success. The positive message of “keep working at it and you’ll get there” stands in sharp contrast to the unmotivating, fixed-mindset F. The “not yet” evaluation method and many other methods have led to the success of Dweck’s teachers who have brought predominantly Native American and African-American elementary school children from the bottom of the state rankings to the very top (Dweck 06:08-07:15). Dweck asserts that “yet” levels the playing field for all students (Dweck 06:03).

### **Specific Interventions**

The Hero’s Journey Introduction: I created an essay assignment that serves as a way for students to introduce themselves to me and to improve their academic mindset by affirming their values and the challenges they face. Students describe their personal “hero’s journey” after we read about and discuss Joseph Campbell’s stages of the hero’s journey. Students listen to a TED talk by Pat Soloman, read how the hero’s journey connects to their lives, and use a hero’s journey graphic organizer. As a result, students often pour their hearts out and write three, four and even five pages of writing about their struggles, journeys, and obstacles they’ve overcome; the

quantity of writing alone helps them gain confidence in writing. But more importantly, students begin to see themselves as “heroes” of their own educational journey and increase their sense of belonging. Farrington, et al. conclude that “when students feel a sense of belonging in a classroom community, believe that their efforts will increase their ability and competence, believe that success is possible and within their control, and see work as interesting or relevant to their lives, they are much more likely to persist at academic tasks despite setbacks” (31). This assignment gives students a positive view on writing. One student, Dianne, explains that the essay, “helped me realize my struggles and how I overcame them. . . [and] reminded me of who I am.” The essays also serve as an introduction to a growth mindset since so many of the stories show growth or learning from challenges or failures.

Research BMCC: Another essay I designed is for students to research a club or program at BMCC to share with their peers. With most students being new to college, particularly as first-generation college students, this is not only beneficial, but helps them discover their place at BMCC, and gives them a sense of belonging, which is crucial to academic mindsets. In addition, they learn to do first hand research and write for a particular audience. With this essay, students became more determined to be involved at the college and to take advantage of many programs such as study abroad, summer at Vassar, scholarship programs, clubs and sports teams, all of which they learned from each other. This assignment was designed to improve academic mindsets, specifically the sense of belonging, which more greatly affects our minority students.

The “How Your Brain Works” Project. Studies show that when students understand that their brain never stops growing and is malleable (neuroplasticity), that it grows when challenges and difficult material are confronted, that there is no such thing as being “smart” or “dumb,” that their effort will matter, students persevere and confront failure in a healthier way (by learning from it rather than making it personal). I adapted this project from a study that showed that African-American students made the greatest gains in GPA and retention when they did the Brain Project (Dweck et al ). For about three weeks in the semester, my class becomes a neuroscience course. Students learn about neuroplasticity, fixed and growth mindsets, and how brains grow through struggle and learning. They embark on a research project of their own interest, usually connected to their majors or experiences. For example, some Criminal Justice majors researched the criminal mind and serial killers’ brains; one student examined the impact of music on the brain; another examined gender differences. Students reported that this project motivated them to do better in school and gave them a more positive view of themselves as learners. Thomas wrote “learning about growth mindset and neuroplasticity changed my attitude towards learning. Before I thought I wasn’t getting it . . . now I think I can learn and that I’m not getting it *yet.*”

### Conclusion

My growth mindset pedagogy and the essay assignments achieved their intended effects of valuing student identity, promoting a sense of belonging and community, and supporting a growth mindset, according to my students. One student documented her changed attitude: “Instead of belittling myself and telling myself I can’t do it, I tell myself to work hard and try to

find the solution to my problems instead of giving up where I failed. Now I'm more motivated and determined to push through any obstacle." Another felt "it showed me that with practice, my brain and I can learn anything." And Tammy shared: "I am extremely proud of myself for . . . pushing myself to reach my full potential quite often when I felt like giving up."

During these two semesters, as part of a BMCC initiative to support faculty in creating interventions that reduce racial/ethnic inequities, I also quantified and measured my students' growth mindset by adapting Carol Dweck's [survey on mindsets](#). I discovered that, for the most part, students arrive to BMCC with a growth mindset. They seem to know through their experience that if they work hard, they would improve and that they could grow their intelligence. But on closer examination, the surveys demonstrate a quantifiable shift toward a stronger growth mindset by the end of the semester. The idea that "truly smart people do not need to try hard" reflects a strong fixed mindset. During both semesters, by the final week, 100% of the students disagreed with that statement whereas in the first week only 84% and 82% expressed some form of disagreement.

In addition, this growth mindset pedagogy seemed to improve withdrawal rates which are usually quite high for this course ([Upshot](#)). In the first semester with this pedagogy, 24 out of 25 students remained enrolled in the class. During the second semester, four students had to withdraw due to personal health issues. It's clear that when students withdraw, it is most likely due to circumstances out of everyone's control. But I am now convinced that when we foster a growth

mindset, it encourages students to persevere and to take ownership of their progress during their educational journeys.



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