

Not all effort is created equal

By James Anderson

I am increasingly of the belief that we should ban the word “**effort**” from the classroom.

Praising effort has become all the rage in education—all in the name of Growth Mindsets.

The argument goes something like this: If we praise students for their ability or achievements we detract from the importance of their efforts. So “Great Work!” is out. So are “You’re so clever!” and “You’re a natural at this”. By focusing on who they are and what they did, rather than how they did it, we contribute to the development of a Fixed Mindset.

The alternative, we are told, is to praise “effort”. “Great effort!” is supposed to be a way of praising students for how they go about learning. The trouble is that not all effort is great effort. Some of it is very ordinary, and in some cases it’s completely ineffective.

When Professor Carol Dweck advocated praising effort, what she was trying to do was

focus attention on the *behaviours that lead to growth*.

It’s essential that we don’t lose sight of the fact that at the end of the day it is the growth, which education is all about. Dweck was simply pointing out that we should attribute that growth to what the student does, rather than who they are.

Not all effort is created equal. The sort of effort we should be praising is effort that leads to growth. Where effort does not result in growth, we need to direct students towards the type of effort that does.

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To explore this idea I have created the Effective Effort Matrix. The matrix considers both the skillfulness of the student’s learning behaviours as well as the process those behaviours are being applied to, in order to achieve growth.

EFFECTIVE EFFORT MATRIX



Let's take a moment to consider the axis before considering the four types of effort.

The Behaviours axis describes the actions students take in learning situations. Costa and Kallick describe these as Habits of Mind. Highly effective learners have very well developed Habits of Mind, which they apply skillfully and mindfully when confronted with challenging tasks. The more difficult and complex a task, the more highly developed the Habit of Mind needs to be in order to succeed at it.

The Process axis describes the effectiveness of the learning process—how we practice while we're learning. Naïve Practice, so called because people often engage in it with the incorrect belief that it will result in growth,

typically does not involve any intellectual stretch, is unfocused and undirected. Rehearsal is an example of Naïve Practice. Simply repeating or rehearsing something you've already mastered, is not likely to result in growth.

On the other hand Virtuous Practice has the effect of producing growth. It occurs slightly beyond one's current level of competence, in the Zone of Proximal Development. It is highly focused, on small incremental learning outcomes. It is called "virtuous" because it results in development of new learning schema, which are then built upon to contribute to further growth and development—a virtuous cycle. (See *Peak*, by Anders Ericsson)

Four Different Types of Effort

1 Low Effort: Taking the Easy Road

When we see students working on tasks that are too easy for them, often in ways that require only basic skills, we are seeing Low Effort. Because the work is easy, the quality is likely to be high, with few errors. The student might be “concentrating” or otherwise “busy”, but they aren’t learning anything new, and they aren’t being challenged in any way—either in the content or the process of learning.

Answering the easiest questions, where the answer is already known or easily produced, is an example of Low Effort.

Low effort can also be seen when learning new things that are simply well within the student’s current capacities. For example asking an adult to learn their 13 times tables would be an “easy thing they haven’t done yet”, and would require low effort. While students engaging in low effort might be “on task” they are not likely to be experiencing growth. Mistakes made when applying Low Effort are likely to be “sloppy mistakes” and therefore have low learning potential. Praise of this sort of effort will simply lead to further under performance.

2 Performance Effort: Doing Your Best

Students applying Performance Effort are doing their best, reliable, reproducible work, and are inside their comfort zone. Energy and skill levels are high. This is the sort of effort that is appropriate in performance situations (e.g. exams and exhibitions).

Students engaged in Performance Effort are not in their Zone of Proximal Development, so are not experiencing the stretch required to grow. Mistakes in this context are generally avoided. As a result,

Performance Effort tends not to lead to growth.

The problem with praising this sort of effort is that it is a de facto way of praising the product. Students only receive praise for performance effort if the performance or product is of a high standard. So if a teacher is frequently praising this sort of effort, the student focuses on the standard, not growth and learning.

While there are times when we want students to demonstrate mastery, in most classroom situations growth is the goal. So when we see students retreating to the safety of Performance Effort our response generally has three components:

- Recognize the prior effective effort that has led to the current mastery. Value the back-story of hard work and effective learning and ensure they associate this effective effort with their current achievements.
- Recognize that while mastery or standard achieved is a good thing, it is just one more step in their ongoing learning and growth. Now it's time to look to "What's next?" in their learning.

- Help them identify where future learning might take place by setting appropriate learning goals.

For example: "It's great to see that all that hard work has paid off and you've mastered this level of work. Now it's time to work on something harder so you can learn and grow. School is about learning, not simply demonstrating what you know."

3 Ineffective Effort: Working Hard, But Getting Nowhere

Students applying this sort of effort are being challenged, spending lots of energy, but lack the skills to meet that challenge. Students are "working hard", but to little effect.

Students applying this sort of effort can become frustrated with their learning. If they have been surrounded with Growth Mindset messages in the classroom they may start saying things like "I can't do this yet".

However, if teachers aren't helping students develop more effective learning

strategies and Habits of Mind, "I can't do this, yet" may become "I STILL can't do this yet!"

Unfortunately this sort of effort is often praised as a "consolation

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prize". When we can't praise students for achievement, at least we can be tempted to praise them for "trying their best". Teachers need to resist praising this sort of effort, and instead direct students to more effective effort.

When we recognize students applying ineffective effort the type of praise we give should have the following qualities:

- Recognize the energy the student is expending and the fact that they are challenging themselves. These are aspects of their effort that should be encouraged.
- Help them identify where future learning might take place by setting appropriate learning goals.

For example: “It’s great to see you working so hard on that task. That’s a really difficult task and you’ll need to work hard at it! I can see you’ve tried several

strategies to help you solve it, which is great, but they don’t seem to be working for you. What other strategies do you think you could try? We want to see you progressing, not just working hard.”

It’s possible that a student engaged in this sort of effort is too far outside their Zone of Proximal Development and needs to come back a few steps to master prior learning before moving on. In this case the skill that needs to be developed or supported is identifying the Zone of Proximal Development—problems that are just slightly beyond their current ability. There are no short cuts.

4

Effective Effort: Growth and Learning

This is the sort of effort that Dweck was referring to when she encouraged teachers to praise effort. Effective Effort is the sort of effort that is targeted just beyond a student’s current level of performance in both behaviour and understanding. It is designed to lead to the growth that underpins the Growth Mindset.

Mistakes made when engaged in Effective Effort are “stretch mistakes” so have high learning potential. They help identify learning needs at a point where we are capable of making the small adjustments required for incremental growth—they act

as a signpost on a pathway towards future growth.

Students engaged in this sort of effort are seeing regular, incremental growth in learning. They are able to recognize that their behaviours (efforts) lead to growth, and as a result, are more likely to develop the understanding that they are capable of change and responsible for their own growth—a Growth Mindset.

Effective Effort is the sort of effort that is truly worthy of the praise “Great Effort!”

How Do We Praise “Effort”

The problem is that just saying “great effort” is too vague and too easily confused with Low Effort, Performance Effort and Ineffective Effort. On the other hand, saying “Great effective effort!” just doesn’t fit with our vernacular.

We can, however, ensure that students understand the different sorts of effort, by teaching

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them about this matrix. This would help them identify the sort of effort that they are engaging in, and what’s expected in the classroom.

A word of warning: The term “effort” is so pervasive and used so frequently in non-learning contexts that we are unlikely to ever get to a point where we can say “great effort” to a student and be sure they are clear that we are praising them for being slightly outside their previous best, developing both their behaviors and understandings while engaged in virtuous practice. Realistically, and whether you like it or not, when we use the word “effort” in the classroom, there are few school communities that would have a strong shared understanding of what effort means.

That’s why I’m increasingly of the belief it

should be banned—or at least used more sparingly—in the classroom.

What can we say instead?

As an alternative to praising “effort”, praise should be directed at the specific actions that led to the growth. **For example:**

- Praise the student for attempting problems that were slightly too difficult for them.
- Praise the fact that the challenge led to mistakes they can learn from.
- Praise the strategies they used to respond successfully to those mistakes.
- Praise how they developed new skills and Habits of Mind and how they applied them to new learning situations.

In short, do what Carol Dweck has advocated and praise the *behaviors that lead to growth*. We just need to be clearer and more specific about the way we do it if we want students to consistently associate the right sort of effort with growth, and therefore develop a Growth Mindset.

¹*Mistakes are Not All Created Equal*, Eduardo Briceno <http://community.mindsetworks.com/blog-page/home-blogs/entry/mistakes-are-not-all-created-equal>