Beyond the Final Grades:
Celebrating Remote Learning Experiences to Develop a Growth Mindset

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On March 15, 2020, I kissed my college independence and friendships goodbye as I frantically drove back home in a car filled with clothes, school supplies, and half-eaten food from my fridge. Here, I would spend the next months completing sixteen credits of engineering and math in isolation, confined by the four walls of my badly painted childhood bedroom.

Our lives have radically and rapidly changed, and we are continuing to learn how to live through the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. COVID-19 affects everyone, but it does not affect everyone equally, with those who are in vulnerable situations and social groups experiencing the greatest impact. While COVID-19 has changed my life, I cannot speak on behalf of other people’s experiences. My perspective is one of an undergraduate student who has had the privilege of continuing her education remotely.

At this point, those of us who are learning remotely are all too familiar with the struggle – bad Wi-Fi, eye strain, and burnout are words that have become part of our everyday vocabulary. Remote learning feels slow, long, and old, and I for one am tired of attending Zoomiversity.

It is almost hilariously easy to see everything the pandemic has taken and made more difficult for us. This loss becomes clearer and clearer as I continue to have conversations with people and listen as they describe how COVID-19 has turned their own unique worlds upside down. Conversations in which we share our hearts, fears, and struggles are essential to form community, generate empathy, and help one another navigate this new type of life. For many of us, these conversations have become routine – “I’m not able to”, “I was going to,” and “I wish I could” are phrases that I have heard every day for the past eleven months because of the pandemic.
Understandably so, it is easy to become stuck in grieving the past and wishing for a different present. For many of us, these conversations are easy and relatable; the harder conversations become those that are fighting to grasp the silver lining.

I have reflected on my experience of learning remotely as an undergraduate student, and I have tried to do so without allowing a mindset of loss to creep in. In other words, I asked myself, “What have I gained from my remote learning experience?” and waited to see what my mind had to offer (crossing my fingers that at least something would come to mind). Surprisingly, through this challenging reflection I was able to come to new realizations, ones that made me feel like a warrior as opposed to a sufferer. I would like to share these realizations in hopes that I can help illuminate the silver lining for students and professors who have, currently are, or will be, learning remotely.

I want to share these insights in light of a recent research article that was published by Limeri et al. in the International Journal of STEM Education, titled, “Growing a growth mindset: characterizing how and why undergraduate student’s mindsets change” (Limeri et al., 2020). In the article, researchers study undergraduate students as they take a notoriously difficult, mid-level STEM course – Organic Chemistry – to determine how their mindsets change over time, and what factors are responsible for driving these changes. They define two types of mindsets that students may adopt: a “fixed mindset” (intelligence is believed to be an unchangeable trait) and a “growth mindset” (intelligence is believed to be a changeable trait). Their findings explore the interconnectedness between academic experiences, struggles, mindset shifts, and other factors, and they provide recommendations for how mindset interventions can be improved to inspire growth mindsets in undergraduate students.

Learning remotely has given us an extremely unique opportunity to study ourselves in response to a challenge, including our minds, academic performance, habits, behaviors, and coping mechanisms. While students complete a significant portion of work individually in their undergraduate studies, they are also usually surrounded by classmates and professors who are studying the same content, at the same pace, often in the same shared space. When students are
physically and mentally separated from these key players, separation can louden students’ inner dialogue and make them more aware of their own study tendencies and habits. For example, throughout my experience in classes with asynchronous lectures, I was able to study my mind enough to find a “hack” that translated to academic success. I learned that when I took notes as soon as possible after the lecture was posted, as opposed to waiting until later throughout the week, it made me feel like I was ahead in the class. This feeling of being ahead gave me a sense of confidence in myself, made me more likely to participate during live sessions, and ultimately deepened my understanding of the content. More straightforwardly, I learned that if I exercise in the middle of the day, it boosts my energy levels enough to allow me to focus in the second half of the day, when I usually lose motivation. Learning remotely has allowed me to discover these “hacks” and others which have saved me hours of time and mental energy. I can apply these “hacks” as I continue to learn for the rest of my life.

Secondly, remote learning has opened a new form of communication between many students and professors – one of vulnerability, honesty, and transparency. COVID-19 has exposed inequities and challenges unique to each student’s situation. Students and professors have had to learn how to communicate about these difficult and often personal challenges. While these conversations can be daunting, anxiety-inducing, and uncomfortable, they are conversations we will all need to have throughout the rest of our lives. We will continue to have to advocate for ourselves and our mental health throughout our professional lives, especially in times of struggle. Limeri et al. (2020) encourages peers to discuss their experiences seeking help, because it “may inspire students to believe they are also capable of overcoming their own struggles.”

Lastly, all students and professors have had to practice learning through an overwhelming state of uncertainty. Although unnatural for many of us, we have had to learn to be flexible with plans; plans as serious as our living situations. We hear it all the time – you never know what life is going to throw at you – and studying through the coronavirus pandemic can be viewed as preparation for the unexpected challenges that we will face throughout our lifetimes. I have watched many of my friends completely pivot directions and create new opportunities for themselves that fit this new type of life. I’ve seen friends start podcasts, create their own
businesses, and move out of the state on a whim to pursue opportunities. I continue to be inspired by the entrepreneurship and adaptability I have seen from my friends and communities around the world.

Perhaps as you are reading this, some of the struggles you have faced in the past year are coming to mind. As encouraged by Limeri et al. (2020), we should acknowledge how we have worked, or are working, through these struggles so that we can tap into the “positive feedback loop between mindset beliefs and academic performance” and develop a mindset that allows for growth. Those in the academic realm can start by reflecting on what traits that they have gained since remote learning first began. Many of us have gotten to know ourselves on a deeper level,
learned to communicate in times of struggle, and become more familiar with living in uncertainty. As students reflect especially, we should keep in mind that our learning extends well beyond whatever letter we see on our transcripts during the academic year of 2020-2021. Our academic learning has become lifelong lessons of perseverance and adaptability. Living and learning through this pandemic will leave us stronger than we were before, and more prepared for other struggles that we will undoubtedly face throughout our lives. We are warriors, and we should celebrate our strength!

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Reference