The Value of Being Confused
By Barrett Smith
2018

No one likes to feel confused, but could there actually be benefits to confusion? In this informational text, Barrett Smith explores why feeling confused is actually a good thing. As you read, take notes on how people respond to confusion.

We've all felt confused before, and it can be one of the most frustrating feelings to deal with. Students might be confused about how to do a math problem or finish a project. Young people might be confused about who they are and what to do in the future. No matter what is making us confused, the feeling of not knowing what the answers or solutions are can make us feel useless, stupid, and cause us to worry.

A lot of people are hard on themselves and others when there's a lack of understanding. People often tend to think the person who has all of the answers is smarter than the one who asks a lot of questions. Because of the negative judgment that surrounds confusion, people often try to hide their confusion in a variety of ways. Instead of admitting or accepting that they don't have the solution, people sometimes try to pretend they have the answers. At other times, people make educated guesses or create an answer even if they know it isn't right.

Students are often guilty of hiding their lack of understanding. If confused about a topic in school, they might pretend to know the answers. They can sometimes be embarrassed to ask questions. As young individuals, they can be confused about who they are, and might try harder to behave in a particular way. They can be too embarrassed to explore other groups or identities, afraid perhaps of being called a “wanna-be”. They can be afraid people will know they're confused.

But confusion might actually be a good thing. When we jump to an answer, we don't have time to explore and understand the thing we're confused about. Fighting confusion ends up making us more confused. Instead of fighting or trying to ignore your confusion, accepting it and taking the opportunity to analyze what's confusing can benefit our learning. In fact, scientific studies show that confusion actually leads to deeper understanding. A 2004 study explored six moods that people feel while learning, including frustrated, bored, and confused. They found that students who spent more of the lesson confused learned the most. In another study, published in 2014, scientists tried to confuse students by giving them contradicting information. Students who expressed confusion during the lesson did better on the final test. Based on these studies, scientists believe being confused is a step to learning. Not knowing the answer to a problem gives us space to look at different ways to solve it. The feeling of confusion also motivates us to look more deeply into the problem. In the end, this helps us understand the topic on a deeper level.

1. Contradicting (noun): something that is opposite to something else
Confusion isn't just an important step to learning in school, it's also important for learning who you are. Psychologists call that sense of who you are identity. Your identity can involve being part of groups like race, gender, subcultures. Identity is also made up of your values and goals. People figure out their identity in two steps. The first step is exploration, where you try out different groups and values and see what fits. The next step is commitment, when you decide firmly about some parts of your identity. Exploring your identity can feel very confusing. You might be afraid that people will judge you for going through different phases or not committing to a group. But phases are completely natural. A study published in the International Journal of Behavioral Development found that people who do the most exploring about who they are have better outcomes such as higher self-esteem later in life. Confusion gives us the space to try new things and be creative. Allowing ourselves to be confused and ask questions leads to deeper understanding, more learning, and higher self-confidence. So, try not to be embarrassed when you're confused about something. Instead of trying to hide or fight your confusion, try to resolve it by trying new things. Embrace the confusion and explore different solutions to your problem. Sometimes being confused is hard, not just because we judge ourselves, but because it can be frustrating. When we try over and over to understand something without making any progress, we can feel defeated and stop caring, and eventually give up. Trying a new method, asking for help, or researching different ways to approach the problem online can all be great resources to work through your confusion. Before you give up, make sure you have someone to help you and the resources you need to resolve your confusion.

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2. a cultural group within a larger culture
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central ideas of the text?
   A. Allowing yourself to feel confused is a necessary part of developing your brain and understanding yourself.
   B. Confusion is more important to intellectual growth than it is to understanding your identity.
   C. It takes a certain degree of self-confidence and maturity to admit that you don't have all the answers.
   D. Feeling confused is something that will fade with time and experience as you acquire all of the answers.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “No matter what is making us confused, the feeling of not knowing what the answers or solutions are can make us feel useless, stupid, and cause us to worry.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “Instead of admitting or accepting that they don't have the solution, people sometimes try to pretend they have the answers.” (Paragraph 2)
   C. “Students are often guilty of hiding their lack of understanding. If confused about a topic in school, they might pretend to know the answers.” (Paragraph 3)
   D. “Confusion isn't just an important step to learning in school, it's also important for learning who you are.” (Paragraph 5)

3. PART A: Which of the following describes the author's main purpose in the text?
   A. to provide readers with tools to overcome their confusion
   B. to reassure readers that it's completely normal to feel confused
   C. to encourage readers to work through their confusion, rather than avoid it
   D. to explore why teenagers are more susceptible to confusion than adults

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “We've all felt confused before, and it can be one of the most frustrating feelings to deal with.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “As young individuals they can be confused about who they are, and might try harder to behave in a particular way.” (Paragraph 3)
   C. “A 2004 study explored six moods that people feel while learning, including frustrated, bored, and confused.” (Paragraph 4)
   D. “Instead of trying to hide or fight your confusion, try to resolve it by trying new things.” (Paragraph 5)
5. Explain the relationship between confusion and growth in the text. Cite evidence from the text to support your response.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. According to the text, confusion is an important part of growth. Why do people resist it? How do you feel when you are confused?

2. Psychologists found that struggling through multiple phases in your life helps you decide who you are. What makes you who you are? Have you ever been confused by your identity or gone through a phase that didn’t seem true to yourself? Has a friend? Describe the experience.

3. Smith claims that working through confusion leads to deeper understanding. How do we understand the world around us? Describe a time when you worked through your confusion to learn something new.
Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance
By Angela Lee Duckworth
2013

Angela Lee Duckworth is a psychologist and author who studies grit and self-control at the University of Pennsylvania. In this TED Talk, Duckworth discusses the role that grit plays in success. As you read, take notes on what grit is and how it impacts an individual's ability to overcome obstacles.

[1] When I was 27 years old, I left a very demanding job in management consulting for a job that was even more demanding: teaching. I went to teach seventh graders math in the New York City public schools. And like any teacher, I made quizzes and tests. I gave out homework assignments. When the work came back, I calculated grades.

What struck me was that IQ was not the only difference between my best and my worst students. Some of my strongest performers did not have stratospheric IQ scores. Some of my smartest kids weren't doing so well. And that got me thinking. The kinds of things you need to learn in seventh grade math, sure, they're hard: ratios, decimals, the area of a parallelogram. But these concepts are not impossible, and I was firmly convinced that every one of my students could learn the material if they worked hard and long enough.

After several more years of teaching, I came to the conclusion that what we need in education is a much better understanding of students and learning from a motivational perspective, from a psychological perspective. In education, the one thing we know how to measure best is IQ. But what if doing well in school and in life depends on much more than your ability to learn quickly and easily?

So I left the classroom, and I went to graduate school to become a psychologist. I started studying kids and adults in all kinds of super challenging settings, and in every study my question was, who is successful here and why? My research team and I went to West Point Military Academy. We tried to predict which cadets would stay in military training and which would drop out. We went to the National Spelling Bee and tried to predict which children would advance farthest in competition. We studied rookie teachers working in really tough neighborhoods, asking which teachers are still going to be here in teaching by the end of the school year, and of those, who will be the most effective at improving learning outcomes for their students? We partnered with private companies, asking, which of these salespeople is going to keep their jobs? And who's going to earn the most money? In all those very different contexts, one characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success. And it wasn't social intelligence. It wasn't good looks, physical health, and it wasn't IQ. It was grit.

1. extremely high
2. a person being trained for the armed services
Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years, and working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint.

A few years ago, I started studying grit in the Chicago public schools. I asked thousands of high school juniors to take grit questionnaires, and then waited around more than a year to see who would graduate. Turns out that grittier kids were significantly more likely to graduate, even when I matched them on every characteristic I could measure, things like family income, standardized achievement test scores, even how safe kids felt when they were at school. So it's not just at West Point or the National Spelling Bee that grit matters. It's also in school, especially for kids at risk for dropping out.

To me, the most shocking thing about grit is how little we know, how little science knows, about building it. Every day, parents and teachers ask me, "How do I build grit in kids? What do I do to teach kids a solid work ethic? How do I keep them motivated for the long run?" The honest answer is, I don't know. (Laughter)

What I do know is that talent doesn't make you gritty. Our data show very clearly that there are many talented individuals who simply do not follow through on their commitments. In fact, in our data, grit is usually unrelated or even inversely related to measures of talent.

So far, the best idea I've heard about building grit in kids is something called "growth mindset." This is an idea developed at Stanford University by Carol Dweck, and it is the belief that the ability to learn is not fixed, that it can change with your effort. Dr. Dweck has shown that when kids read and learn about the brain and how it changes and grows in response to challenge, they're much more likely to persevere when they fail, because they don't believe that failure is a permanent condition.

So growth mindset is a great idea for building grit. But we need more. And that's where I'm going to end my remarks, because that's where we are. That's the work that stands before us. We need to take our best ideas, our strongest intuitions, and we need to test them. We need to measure whether we've been successful, and we have to be willing to fail, to be wrong, to start over again with lessons learned.

In other words, we need to be gritty about getting our kids grittier.

Thank you. (Applause)
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies Duckworth's claim in the speech? [RI.2]
   A. A common trait that successful people possess is grit, as it pushes them to persevere despite obstacles.
   B. Teachers are unable to help students succeed if they don't understand what drives them.
   C. Grit is not a trait that is easily developed, rather, it something that people are usually born with.
   D. People who lack talent are more likely to have grit, as they have to work harder for their success.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “I came to the conclusion that what we need in education is a much better understanding of students and learning from a motivational perspective,” (Paragraph 3)
   B. “Grit is sticking with your future, day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years, and working really hard to make that future a reality.” (Paragraph 5)
   C. “How do I build grit in kids? What do I do to teach kids a solid work ethic? How do I keep them motivated for the long run? The honest answer is, I don’t know.” (Paragraph 7)
   D. “What I do know is that talent doesn’t make you gritty. Our data show very clearly that there are many talented individuals who simply do not follow through on their commitments.” (Paragraph 8)

3. What connection does the speaker draw between “growth mindset” and “grit”? [RI.3]
   A. Both growth mindset and grit are necessary for students to succeed.
   B. Students show grit when they understand and develop a growth mindset.
   C. Students can see the effects of growth mindset once they’ve practiced grit.
   D. Students can't develop grit without understanding growth mindset.

4. How did Duckworth's experiences as a teacher contribute to the text? [RI.5]

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Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Do you agree with Duckworth's findings on grit? Why or why not?

2. In the context of the text, what should be the goal of education? How do you think Duckworth's findings can be used to promote greater academic success in students? Cite examples from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, what does it take to succeed? Do you think that grit is a necessary trait in all forms of success? Why or why not?

4. Do you think grit is an important part of an individual's identity? Why or why not? Do you think it matters whether or not you are born with grit or develop grit? Cite examples from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.