

Growth Mindset

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Introduction

How can we teach self-motivation and provide learners with the strategies necessary for success? Psychologist Carol Dweck proposes that challenging our own belief systems is the key to growth. Fixed mindsets make students afraid of challenges. When we value risk-taking, effort, and practise problem-solving, we adopt the kind of mindset that can change failure into a gift. By exploring mindset theory, we provide practical strategies for creating a growth environment that engages and energises.

Who is Carol Dweck?

Dweck, a Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, has always been fascinated by the impact of personality on self-development. Her initial studies explored 'learned helplessness' in animals, and Weiner and Kukla's attribution theory (1970) - the link between perception and cause and effect. Dweck's findings were key to her work on achievement motivation. She began to question why some children focused only on "validating their abilities" while others, more productively, focused on "the goal of growing their abilities" (Dweck, 2017, 140). It was from this research that the now-famous mindsets theory was created by Dweck.

What is mindset?

A mindset is an established set of attitudes and assumptions that one or more people have. There are many contributing factors to a mindset, for example, a person's behaviour, choices, and life philosophy. In her seminal text *Mindset: the new psychology of success*, Dweck explores this concept of self and its impact on every area of life. So, why do some learners reach their potential but others fail to do so? Dweck says it is related to how we cope with failure. In short, when we face challenges, we proactively improve our situation. This makes us move from stagnation to growth.

The Fixed Mindset

A *fixed mindset* is based on the fixedness of human qualities in many areas, such as intellectual, social, or emotional. This is what Dweck calls *entity theory*. When a learner adopts a fixed mindset, they seek re-validation of their abilities to avoid criticism. Research conducted on academic and social resilience in students with fixed mindsets has revealed they are "very afraid of looking dumb" (Yeager and Dweck 2012), and even some high achievers feel this way. These beliefs compromise resilience, cause feelings of worthlessness, and encourage mediocrity. Similarly, seeing social traits as unchangeable can lead to ostracization in adolescent groups, producing feelings of shame and aggression - an issue in many urban secondary schools (Yeager and Dweck 2012). "

Fixed traits in younger children

We can observe fixed mindset characteristics even at preschool level. Dweck (2000) describes how children as young as three proved vulnerable to the negative effects of failure, for example, when they had to do a series of difficult jigsaw puzzles. Those who failed to complete the puzzles and demonstrated non-persistence, not only used dolls to role-play expectations of punishment, but also self-identified as bad.

Real life examples

Dweck shows similarities in industry, for example, the very public collapse of business giant Enron as proof of "the harm a culture of arrogance can cause" (2012). Another example is the tennis legend John McEnroe. His natural talent could not protect him from the damaging pressures of a fixed mindset. He is better known for his on-court temper tantrums and excuses than his game. McEnroe himself admits that he "did not fulfil his potential" (2012).

The Growth Mindset

A *growth mindset* is characterised by a “mastery-oriented reaction to difficulty” (Dweck 2017, 141), which results in positive and improved performance. Here, individuals recognise a person’s qualities are dynamic and can change. Therefore, we can change these personal qualities through purposeful, directed engagement. It is crucial that the person likes a challenge. They have to believe that, with practise, one can get smarter.

Dweck explains how repetition can restructure the brain, also known as neuroplasticity. She encourages students to imagine “increased neural connectivity when learning” - hence the term *incremental theory*. With *incremental theory*, learners can reject society’s flawed understanding of intelligence and embrace the *effort effect*. She compares it to the famous Aesop’s *Hare and The Tortoise* fable.

Belief that we can substantially change what has defined us allows us to survive difficult times and develop the resilience needed to thrive. Dweck (2012) describes, *Superman* actor, Christopher Reeve’s remarkable journey following a devastating and life-changing accident in 1995. Despite an injury that paralysed him from the shoulders down, Reeve worked hard and regained partial movement. His mindset, Dweck asserts, enabled him to go “beyond the possible” (2012).

Teaching the growth mindset

The good news is anyone can shift mindsets given the right conditions.

Lead by example

In educational settings, teacher practice matters. Teacher perceptions of intelligence and performance can strongly shape students’ views of their own abilities. Equally, if we model vulnerability and challenge-seeking behaviour, we can provide learners with the sense of security that they need to develop.

Above all, Dweck cautions against the dangers of the self-esteem movement. She claims it bolsters feelings of superiority and is a “fixed-mindset trap”. Instead, she urges educators to consider their language choices carefully and avoid product praise. Telling a student “You learned that so quickly. Good job!” or “You’re so smart!” defines them by their performance. Phrases such as “You really studied for your test and your improvement shows it!” or “You tried all sorts of strategies to solve that problem” are examples of process praise. Teachers should actively value growth-oriented processes that rely on strategies, effort, and choices. They should empower learners through honest and constructive feedback.

Change your inner dialogue

Since our mindset determines how we engage with the world, monitoring and adapting our internal dialogue removes judgement and motivates us to go on. Dweck demonstrates the power of *yet* and *not yet* (Dweck 2014) - simple phrases that show errors as learning opportunities. Likewise, visual aids and inspirational quotes act as an important encouragement to pupils fighting a fixed mindset. When learning can be visualised as a journey, students’ negative self-image reduces, learner engagement increases, and results improve.

Activate a love of learning

The *fixed* mindset focuses exclusively on outcomes. In contrast, a *growth* mindset values the process, not the outcome. Curiosity and enthusiasm quickly follow. Providing students with meaningful material and allowing them to pursue their interests stimulates an authentic involvement with and powerful passion for learning.

Cultivate self-awareness

The key to improvement is self-recognition. Once students have established a positive inner dialogue, taking time to reflect on their experiences leads to better learning. But meaningful reflection requires effort and training. Students need the skills to remember, describe, and analyse their practise. They must also learn to form connections and re-think their next steps. Effective evaluation activities include: chances to revise and re-draft work, collaborative activities such as peer-mentoring, and dividing challenges into small, attainable steps.

Potential Pitfalls

Of greater concern to Dweck is the widespread misinterpretation of a complex concept promoted too fast – what she terms “false growth mindset” (Dweck 2016). Here, a teacher may overemphasise effort by lavishing students with insincere praise without effective improvement strategies. Another potential error is blaming students' mindsets for poor performance without any analysis of all underlying reasons. When growth mindset is seen as an outcome, the learner is no longer in control. It is important to remember that a growth mindset is a tool, not the end goal.

Conclusion

A good understanding of mindset theory and a holistic approach to teaching enable significantly better learning. Teachers should lead by example and promote self-awareness. In this way, they can make effective improvements in their students' development. However, recognising the dangers is essential. Teachers must avoid insincere praise. They should not reduce all the reasons behind failure to the mindset. When the process of learning is valued, a genuine growth mindset can emerge. As U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt said, “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly” (1910).

References and Further Reading

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