

Book Review ...

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Teaching Ourselves and Our Students to Embrace Challenge: A Review of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

By Tracy Turner

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In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, developmental psychologist Carol Dweck brings years of scientific research to the masses. Her research links success to attitudes toward challenge and, ultimately, to our underlying beliefs about how intelligence and skill are acquired.

Can intelligence and skill be acquired through effort? Prior to reading Dweck's book, I would have thought the answer was obvious. Certainly, I would have claimed to believe in the value of effort. And I also would have assumed that most others do too. Dweck's research, however, shows that the belief in the power of effort is not so prevalent. In fact, even those of us who would outwardly claim that effort matters might not fully connect with this belief psychologically. Dweck illustrates a true belief in the power of effort and proves its incredible results.

In one experiment, Dweck presented preschool-age children with an array of puzzles of varying degrees of difficulty. Children could choose which puzzle they wanted to tackle. Many children chose to redo the same puzzle over and over again. Other children, however, kept moving on to new and more difficult puzzles. One such child remarked, "I'm dying to figure them out!" Dweck interviewed the children and found that those who chose to redo the same puzzle generally believed that intelligence was a fixed trait, whereas the children who kept tackling new puzzles believed that intelligence was attained through effort.

After years of similar research, Dweck identifies and explores the dichotomy that her study of the preschoolers revealed: the fixed mindset versus the

growth mindset. As I read her book, I was struck by the elusiveness of the growth mindset. As I read about the true challenge-lovers, I realized I was not in their ranks. My first reaction when faced with a difficult task at work was to moan rather than celebrate. And when I read about the failure-accepters, I realized I was not really with them either. I viewed my failures as something to mourn rather than as an opportunity to learn. Finally, I had to confess my secret belief that I could do little to help the student or two at the bottom of the class. By the time I closed the book, I knew I was not as growth oriented as I could be.

Dweck's book was nothing less than life altering for me. I began to see new opportunities for my students and myself. The growth mindset has become my guiding principle in all aspects of my life—my work, my family, and my teaching. Here I will focus on how it has changed my teaching.

Identifying the Fixed Mindset in Our Students

If you have ever heard any of the following statements by a student, you have encountered the fixed mindset at its worst:

- I am a bad writer. There's not much hope for me in this course.
- I will never be as smart as my classmates, so why try?
- What do I have to do to pass this course?
- Can you tell me whether this is what you want?
- I did the best I could, so there is no reason for me to review my exam/my paper after the fact.
- I wish my professor would stop trying to hide the ball. If only she would just tell me what she wants!
- Nothing I do is ever good enough.
- I can't do this! I am going to fail.

If any of these sound somewhat familiar, you should read on.

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Understanding the Consequences of the Fixed Mindset

Dweck's research reveals the following ill effects of a fixed mindset: (1) a tendency to blame the teacher for bad grades; (2) an inability to learn from feedback; (3) a desire to cheat; (4) continued failure; and (5) depression. Not only were the fixed mindset subjects she studied more often depressed than the growth mindset subjects, but they were also more likely to do nothing to address their condition. Whereas growth mindset students met increasing depression with increasing resolve, fixed mindset students became less likely to turn in assignments as their depression deepened.

Fighting the Fixed Mindset

If I were to list the top five problems I would like to fix in my students, the list would closely match Dweck's list of the ill effects of the fixed mindset. Thankfully, *Mindset* does not merely bemoan the fixed mindset; it inspires change. Dweck proves that just as intelligence and skill are not necessarily fixed, so too with mindsets. We can teach the growth mindset to our students and ourselves. Dweck's book has prompted me to systematically instill and reinforce a growth mindset in my students. I will share some examples below. While none of these ideas are particularly revolutionary, together they represent a pedagogy that has made my teaching simultaneously more successful and more fulfilling.

The First Battle: Embracing the Growth Mindset

The first step in teaching my students the growth mindset was to embrace the growth mindset myself. As I closed the Dweck book, I placed myself somewhere in the middle of the fixed-to-growth spectrum. I confessed to myself that I needed to shed the belief that I could not help my bottom students succeed. Dweck's book helped me. She shares stories of exceptional teachers who motivated the most negatively labeled children to achieve truly phenomenal accomplishments primarily by believing in their ability to learn. For example, a grammar school teacher taught underprivileged second graders who had been labeled "learning-disabled," even "retarded," by their former teachers to read Shakespeare by year's end. After reading this teacher's story, I knew that I could not continue to view *any*

of my law school students as unteachable. So, the first step for me was to drop the excuses. I now fully believe in my students' ability to learn and accept their failures as failures in my teaching. And I try to approach these failures true to the growth mindset by using them as learning opportunities. I strive to understand the impediments my students face and to reflect more on my teaching techniques.

Teaching Students About Dweck's Research

Dweck's research proved that a small dose of the growth mindset can go a long way. Dweck developed a workshop that used eight sessions to teach students that the brain is not fixed but grows in response to learning. Workshop teachers showed students images of brain cell growth. Discussions reinforced the images by encouraging students to recognize their ability to learn. Dweck tested her workshop by measuring its effect on student learning and found that students who participated in the workshop showed greater improvement in learning objectives than those in a control group, who took only a more traditional study-skills workshop.

After recognizing that signs of the fixed mindset were prevalent in my students, I decided that I needed to develop my own version of Dweck's workshop. I now recommend Dweck's book to my students and devote a short amount of class time to talking about it. I time this discussion with my return of their first graded assignment. I suspect that many students dismiss the discussion as too touchy-feely, but others have told me that they valued the discussion. Moreover, even if I cannot convince students to adopt the growth mindset, my devotion of class time to the topic demonstrates my commitment to their personal development—an equally valuable result.

Convincing Students That They Can Succeed

Realistically, I have to accept that I will not change student mindsets overnight. So, my more modest goal is to at least influence their belief in their ability to succeed in my class. After reading Dweck's book, I have committed myself to incorporating motivation into my class planning. Here are some of the ideas I have implemented:

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- I share a few of my personal experiences with failure in legal writing and how I overcame them.
- I preview their stages of learning throughout the course so that they will understand that learning is more of a process than a result.
- I reassure them that every year I have students who move from below the mean to above the mean.
- I comment on their progress at various stages throughout the course, both as a group and individually (e.g., I tell them that even just understanding how to read and understand cases is a huge victory).
- I invite students who have shown progress to share the methods that worked for them, anonymously at their option.

Teaching Students How to Succeed (The Magic Mix of Challenge and Nurture)

A section of Dweck's book examines exceptional teachers. She offers a mantra: challenge and nurture. Students need to have early opportunities to fail and then to learn from their mistakes. Challenge, therefore, is a necessary component of good teaching. Equally important, however, is a commitment to teaching students how to meet the challenge. As I began to strive to understand the impediments to my students' learning, I began to understand that I was too focused on teaching the “what” and not sufficiently focused on teaching the “how.” I now know that teaching the attributes of good writing is meaningless unless I also instruct students on the methods they can use to attain the high bar I set for them. I have challenged myself to identify a process for every task, from reading a fact file to checking for typos. Here are some examples:

- When presenting a sample of a written product, I talk to them about my thought process as I wrote the sample—why I chose one case over another, how I found the quotes I wanted to include, my outlining process, and so on.
- I repeatedly model how to read and dissect a case. We read some cases together line by line, with highlighters and case charts at hand.
- I advise them to read a fact file once before beginning research to guide their case

selection and again when writing a memo or brief to find helpful quotations and details.

- My syllabus provides weekly suggestions on the specific tasks they should complete on long-term projects.
- I talk to them about how to use my teaching materials. For example, I do not just provide a checklist but I talk to them about when and how they should use the checklist. I give them some examples to demonstrate how they can personalize the checklist to reflect their own strengths and weaknesses.
- I talk to them about the process of writing, including how to organize their research before outlining or drafting, when and why to refer back to cases as they draft different portions of their memo or brief, and how to allocate their time.
- I have TA workshops to present students with practical tips for keeping themselves organized and on task.
- I maximize opportunities for feedback by breaking down assignments into smaller tasks. For example, before a complete draft of a memo or brief is due, I require students to turn in an analysis of a key case, a research-organization chart, one rule paragraph and one application paragraph, an outline, a personalized self-editing checklist, written answers to important questions, and similar small assignments. I provide some form of feedback on all of these assignments, even if it is only group-wide feedback or feedback on a few samples.
- I keep folders on each student with their prior work so that I can refer to their prior work during office hours when necessary. I also use the folders to comment on their progress in my feedback on assignments.
- At the end of many class sessions, I review the key points I hoped they would learn from the exercise or discussion we engaged in.
- If I notice a student engaging in self-defeating behavior, such as declining to participate in class discussion or exercises, handing in assignments late, or coming to class late repeatedly, I force myself to approach the student and discuss my observations.

Refocusing Feedback on Process Rather Than Result

Dweck's book also prompted me to take a close look at my commenting. I had already been moving toward more instruction in my commenting and away from merely identifying problems or attaching labels. However, after reading Dweck's book, I started asking myself if my comments were reinforcing a growth mindset in my students. I quickly realized that even detailed, instructive comments could send the wrong message. Feedback that focuses on the result (e.g., "inadequate explanation of this case" or "this topic sentence is not helpful because it does not state a lesson about the law") reinforces the fixed mindset's belief that failure is unchangeable. I now aim for comments that identify what the student can do to improve (e.g., "reread this case and try to incorporate more of the court's logic in your explanation" or "try to craft a new topic sentence that pulls an important lesson from the cases you discuss in the paragraph") rather than phrasing comments in terms of what is wrong with their current draft. Of course, in the time crunch of reviewing drafts, it is easy to revert back to results-oriented feedback. Even after three years of consciously thinking about making my comments more process oriented, I still slip occasionally, but at least I am fighting the good fight. And, slowly, I am finding the process-oriented comments are becoming more natural and easy.

I also aim to comment on any progress, no matter how small, and to include an action plan for the student. For example, I might write, "Try rereading these cases and incorporating more of the courts' reasoning in your explanations. Then come see me with at least one redrafted paragraph so that we can make sure you are understanding the level of detail that is needed." Or, "I think you need to spend some more time thinking about how all of these cases fit together. Take some time to reread and rethink. Then come see me with a research-organization chart or outline so that we can discuss your new insights."

The Wrap-Up

I mentioned earlier in this review that Dweck's book has made my teaching both more effective and more fulfilling. Here's my evidence.

First, I am reaching students in new and exciting ways. I have always worked hard for my students, and most have shown appreciation in their evaluations of me. However, I am moved to tears by some of the comments I now receive: "Professor Turner has taught me not just how to be a better writer, but how to be a better person," "she pushed us to do our best," and "it has been an amazing year of growth toward becoming stellar and ethical lawyers."

Second, I enjoy teaching more now than ever before. I find it enormously fulfilling to focus on underperforming students and help diagnose and correct what is going wrong in their learning process. I love the creative process of developing solutions that work.

Third, I have seen more progress in my students' performance. My curve has been affected—I cannot justify as many low grades at the end of the year as I could in the past. And, since working the growth mindset into my teaching, I have seen at least one student each year move from C-range or lower in the fall to a B+ or higher in the spring. Oh, I still have a student or two each year that stays right at the grade she started with. But, instead of bemoaning the lack of foundational skills among entering students or feeling defeated, I now see these challenges as exciting opportunities to learn and am reinvigorated by them.

So, my thanks to Carol Dweck, should this article ever pass her way, and my hearty recommendation to all teachers to pick up the book and change your mindset.

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