

---

March 2020

## Growth Mindset and the Gospel Community

Jillian Lederhouse

Wheaton College, [jillian.lederhouse@wheaton.edu](mailto:jillian.lederhouse@wheaton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej>



Part of the [Educational Psychology Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lederhouse, Jillian (2020) "Growth Mindset and the Gospel Community," *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej/vol15/iss1/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

---

## Growth Mindset and the Gospel Community

### Abstract

Since publication in 2006, noted Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's research on mindset has influenced P-12 curriculum and instruction, helping pre-school, elementary and secondary educators create learning environments that help children and adolescents achieve more rigorous learning outcomes. This essay poses the question of whether it should create an equal impact on higher education, and, more specifically, on Christian teacher preparation programs. The article first reviews the differences between fixed and growth mindsets, misconceptions of the two, and how the two models affect learning at all levels. The essay then gives five scripturally grounded reasons for encouraging a growth mindset in Christian higher education as well as reasons why fixed mindset often prevails. Finally, the author offers three strategies for modeling growth mindset in teacher preparation programs, using examples from Christ's own teaching that reflect characteristics of growth mindset teaching as well as specific classroom examples from one Christian teacher preparation program.

### Keywords

teacher preparation, growth mindset, faith integration

## Helping Teachers Develop a Growth Mindset

Jillian N. Lederhouse

---

### Abstract:

Since publication in 2006, noted Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's research on mindset has significantly influenced P-12 curriculum and instruction, helping pre-school, elementary and secondary educators create learning environments that help children and adolescents achieve more rigorous learning outcomes. This essay poses the question of whether it should create an equal impact on higher education, and, more specifically, on Christian teacher preparation programs. The piece first reviews the differences between fixed and growth mindsets, misconceptions of the two, and how the two models affect learning at all levels. The essay then gives five scripturally grounded reasons for encouraging a growth mindset in Christian higher education, as well as reasons why fixed mindset often prevails. Finally, the author offers three strategies for modeling growth mindset in teacher preparation programs, using examples from Christ's own teaching that reflect characteristics of growth mindset teaching as well as specific classroom examples from one Christian teacher preparation program.

### Introduction

A most puzzling paradox from my 40 years in Christian higher education became apparent when reading prominent Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's (2006) work on mindset several years ago and resonating with her finding that we tend to be either fixed mindset or growth mindset in our approach to life, at least as it applies in an academic setting. But before revealing that paradox, let me review her findings. Although I am oversimplifying her research, Dweck contends that one either views intelligence or ability as set, hence fixed mindset, or plastic, hence growth mindset.

### A Brief Review of Dweck's Findings

Dweck's (2006) research demonstrates that individuals who view their intelligence as fixed and have a record of academic success are reluctant to take on challenges for fear of failure. They perceive that being unsuccessful at completing a task or responding incorrectly to a question in class might cause others (and themselves) to think less of their ability and question if they truly are intellectually capable. They tend to worry that their mistakes will cause others to judge them as a fraud by holding these errors against their previously strong academic reputation. Therefore, fixed mindset individuals often choose the simple over the complicated or the well-structured task over the open-ended one because their identity is based on their performance. Because they see so much of their value at stake each time they perform, they are compelled to get it right the first time since others will not think they are smart enough if they make an error.

Conversely, growth mindset individuals tend to gravitate toward challenges, seeing them as opportunities to learn and seeing mistakes as a necessary means to accomplish any worthwhile goal. These individuals are not as concerned with what others think of them because they believe they are still developing their knowledge and intellect. They also see errors as instrumental to this journey. When confronted with a challenge, they are the ones who cry, "Bring it on!" These individuals are the academic "ninja warriors" who

---

Jillian N. Lederhouse is a professor of education at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, USA. She can be contacted at [jillian.lederhouse@wheaton.edu](mailto:jillian.lederhouse@wheaton.edu)

---

take on the obstacle course while others walk around it.

Dweck's (2006) landmark research has been turned into many types of educational slogans in P-12 school districts, such as, "We believe in growth mindset here," which is often displayed on banners in school hallways. How well districts apply this belief inside actual classrooms is a focus for a different article, but I mention it here to show that it has widespread acceptance, at least in principle, in elementary and secondary education contexts. But is there any evidence of its acceptance in higher education? Do we foster a growth mindset on our liberal arts campuses, particularly Christian liberal arts teacher preparation programs? If a growth mindset is to be found on any type of university, shouldn't we expect it foremost on a Christian campus? Yet on my own campus, I find it difficult to locate much evidence that our institution promotes taking risks over taking the safe choice, whether these interactions take place between students, between faculty members, or between students and faculty.

### Fixed Mindset Christians

This is the paradox I observe within my Christian college campus. If, as Christ followers, we believe that our spiritual worldview is foundational to all other aspects of life, shouldn't these beliefs apply to the concepts of fixed and growth mindset in our academic and intellectual realms? One would think that a gospel-centered community, which is made up of believers who have experienced Christ's full and complete forgiveness, should be able to embody a growth mindset for several spiritual reasons. First, we have been relieved of our huge burden of sin, resulting in a relational life with God both now and eternally. The biggest questions of life have been settled for us because of Christ's atoning work on Calvary. We know where this journey will eventually end, and it has a victorious conclusion. This frees us to take on challenges.

Secondly, we do not take this journey alone. Our Creator and Redeemer guides us throughout the way. As he left his disciples, Jesus gave the Great Commission and then reassured them that he would be with them unto the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Paul believed this when he

wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 ESV). We also have the Church, a community of believers to support and encourage us throughout life. This reality empowers us to take on challenges.

---

*If, as Christ followers, we believe that our spiritual worldview is foundational to all other aspects of life, shouldn't these beliefs apply to the concepts of fixed and growth mindset in our academic and intellectual realms?*

---

Thirdly, we are being renewed by the Spirit. Philippians 2:13 states, "For God is at work within you, helping you want to obey him and then helping you do what he wants" (TLB). The process of sanctification is the clearest example of a growth mindset. We are not now what we will become. This offers us great hope in meeting challenges.

Fourthly, we are created by a God who delights in redemption, bringing good out of difficulty and failure, as reflected in Joseph's revelation to his brothers when they were reunited in Egypt: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20 NIV). This truth is also reflected in Paul's teaching to the Christians in Rome: "We know that all things work together for good for those who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28 NIV). James also writes on the value of difficulty: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4). There is spiritual value to experiencing challenges because the lessons we learn from them help us to become more conformed to the image of Christ.

Finally, Scripture instructs us, as members of a community, not to judge others (Matthew 7:1) and reminds us that as we have received grace, we should forgive others (Colossians 3:13). It also warns us to refrain from showing favoritism to those who are hold greater status in the community (James 2:1-9). Since we are on this spiritual journey together, a Christian community should seek to be grace-filled and offer encouragement to each another through the struggles of life. A Christian community should be one of the most nurturing of a growth mindset.

### **The Complexity of Mindsets**

Dweck (2006) is careful to point out that individuals do not solely hold a fixed mindset or a growth mindset in every aspect of life. No one is completely paralyzed by all challenges, nor is one immune to self-doubt in every context since all individuals have areas of greater and lesser confidence. For example, although most people fear public speaking, I am not apprehensive when speaking in front of a large group because I just think how terrified I would be if I had been asked instead to play piano for them. Youthful memories of all those awkward recitals flash through my mind whenever I compare the two options. Despite many years of music lessons, public speaking is still much easier for me. I am a risk-taker when speaking at conferences, but I refuse to play piano in public. In these public contexts, I hold both a growth and fixed mindset.

My own piano experience helps me understand my education students who are reluctant to speak out in class. For them, every comment they make aloud is as anxiety-producing as my playing a piece in a piano recital. Yet even the most hesitant speakers in class come alive when discussing topics they care about deeply. We are not all fixed nor all growth in our mindset, but, as Dweck (2006) found in her study, we do tend to favor one over the other in most academic settings. Dweck's research also found that mindset is not determined solely by genetics or personality. Her studies showed that we can change our mindset from fixed to growth, given the right conditions. The environment is key.

### **A Competitive Environment**

So let's consider the environment of Christian college campuses. Both students and faculty can find it difficult to embrace a growth mindset when navigating the nexus of academia and Christian community, which permeates the culture of Christian college campuses. Admission criteria, scoring rubrics, grading policies, and tenure and promotion requirements all demand a standard of excellence that is specifically defined. In light of this tension, a growth mindset ethos can be especially difficult to cultivate in teacher preparation. Selectivity, and an emphasis on assessment, can lead students to equate learning how to teach with performance rather than seeing it as a process. Although many colleges do not have as selective a general admission process as mine has, teacher preparation programs at every university, regardless of enrollment criteria, are required to be selective when officially accepting candidates to licensure programs. Although these knowledge, skill, and dispositional requirements are essential for the profession, they can foster a sense of competition when applying for formal admission, seeking a good placement, and ultimately securing a well-resourced teaching position. We may have a national teacher shortage at this time, but public school districts in my community still have far more applicants than positions to fill. This competition often reinforces a fixed mindset for teacher candidates as they compare their professional skill set against others'.

This fixed mindset phenomenon was recently illustrated to me when serving on a search committee for an adjunct secondary education math supervisor. One candidate for the position, who had mentored several student teachers himself, said his greatest concern as a cooperating teacher was whether student teachers knew their math content. A search committee member quickly assured him that this would not be an issue with our student teachers since they typically know their content very well. However, she continued to say that our students' issue is that they expect to master teaching as easily as they have learned mathematics, and they are devastated when it does not go well at the start. They fail to realize that learning to teach requires a different skill set from academic learning.

Our perfectionistic students want to be excellent the first time and every time. They don't cope with failure well because they have experienced so little of it in an academic setting and therefore lack patience with themselves to hone their skills over time. They expect it to be easy, but it is not. This is especially true for students with nearly 4.0 GPAs. They are not used to struggling in academics and subsequently may lack the coping skills to move past failure and move on to improvement. Ironically, moving past failure is an essential skill for novice teachers. One cannot be held back by the mistakes of today when tomorrow's learning goals demand our full attention. A growth mindset is essential for a beginning teacher.

---

*One cannot be held back by the mistakes of today when tomorrow's learning goals demand our full attention.*

---

## Growth Mindset Obstacles

Why do Christians tend to be more fixed in our mindset than growth-oriented? Perhaps it is because we may confuse all errors with sin. We incorrectly equate all forms of mistakes as some type of moral failure, inferring that we did not work hard enough to prevent them. Although effort is essential, answering a question wrong on an exam is not necessarily because we didn't study well enough. It could be a poorly phrased question. Scoring low on a lesson simulation may be due to lack of adequate planning or rehearsal, but we also need to take into account that practicing the lesson by oneself, presenting to peers, and instructing 11 year-olds are three distinctly different contexts. What goes well in one area may not go well in the other two.

Another reason for the tendency to have a fixed mindset is that most of us work in conservative institutions. By this, I am not referring to a theological or political framework. Rather, I am describing institutional culture. The root of the word conservative is conserve, meaning to safeguard or to preserve the tradition that is in place. Such a culture has numerous advantages as well as disadvantages. In my institution, aside

from knowing that our commitment to our statement of faith will remain strong, our students know that the program and curriculum they choose as freshmen will be in place when they graduate from college. For many children of alumni, the traditions they follow on campus are often the same as those their parents and even grandparents cherished. The liberal arts themselves come from a time-tested, longstanding tradition.

Because of these same established policies and practices, however, change is difficult at any college or university. Proposing a change to a course title, graduation requirement, or teaching load is subject to several layers of approval based on designated schedules and protocols. It takes a significant amount of time before a revision is implemented. Our state board of education knows that it will take years before any change in teacher education policy can be fully enforced for licensure because of the long road to getting the change into university catalog copy. At a Christian college, change can be even slower because our conservative nature makes us thoroughly research the institutional impact of any such move before putting it in place.

Our graduates are similarly comfortable with this conservative ethos or they would not have invested four years in this type of learning environment. Although we do lose some students at my college because of a lack of fit, rarely are they students majoring in education. Because education students will enter a field that requires conformity to numerous curricular, pedagogical, and professional standards, our majors tend to be good rule followers.

A third reason we find a predisposition to fixed mindset on campus relates to the contrast between stated versus implied expectations, which reveals the difference between the given and the hidden curriculum. When first enrolled in my classes, most students choose highly structured assignments over open-ended ones because they have been penalized by previous teachers or professors who described assignments in broad terms but then graded them quite narrowly. This practice stifles taking a risk or going in a different, more creative direction. The old romantic adage, "once burned, twice shy," also

applies to academic settings. It takes time to build the trust that assures students they can meet learning outcomes in a variety of ways.

## Moving from Fixed to Growth Mindset

How then can we help our education students not only move themselves from fixed to growth mindset but also create a learning environment that helps their students achieve this as well? Here are a few strategies that I have found to be of value. You may find them helpful too.

First, meet your students where they are. Fixed mindset often surfaces in my elementary grades math methods course due to math anxiety. Several of my elementary majors can solve math problems once they know a procedure, but they don't understand it conceptually. Like 25% of all elementary teachers (Sparks, 2020), they fear that a student will ask them why a certain procedure is used, and they won't know the answer themselves.

I name this fear on the first day of class and even in my syllabus, stating that learning how to teach math requires a partnership between a student and professor. I reassure my math-anxious methods students that I will walk this journey with them the entire semester, acknowledging that it is just as much my responsibility as theirs to enable them to teach math conceptually and confidently. Naming the fear helps alleviate it. I also reference that many of my previously math-anxious students in methods found that they enjoyed teaching math more than any other subject during student teaching the following semester. This information gives them hope that they too can be successful.

This leads to the second strategy: create a safe classroom for risk-taking. At the start of the semester, I make sure I select learning activities where everyone is successful, and more importantly, activities where everyone struggles and even fails. Through solving these challenging problems, my math-anxious students come to realize that they are not the only ones who have difficulty in math. The larger purpose of the second type of activity is to remind my students that success is determined far more by the amount

of prior experience one has than the amount of ability. To demonstrate this concept, I choose introductory math activities in spatial relations where all my students wrestle with the process and solution because they generally have had little experience in this area of math.

Along with these activities designed to create a safe college-level learning environment and to model the kind of classroom ethos I want them to offer their own students, I share examples of veteran elementary cooperating teachers. One of these now-retired mentor teachers routinely asked her first grade students, "Who makes the most mistakes in this class?" To which her students always called out, "Mrs. Murphy!" She was the same teacher who posted the following statement on her wall: "Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times." Both of these examples assured her first grade students that the process of achieving success requires many errors. She encouraged a growth mindset long before Carol Dweck coined the term.

I also relate the words of another master first grade teacher, "A teacher cannot change a child's ability level, but they can change a child's experience level. In fact, I've come to realize that teaching is the business of changing children's experience levels." She also understood Dweck's (2014) research on the power of "not yet" when communicating with students about their progress in reading and math skills. Her first graders understood which tasks they had mastered and which ones were in the "not yet" category, inferring that she believed they would achieve all of them eventually.

The most powerful growth mindset our pre-service teachers can embody is the knowledge that each child is created in God's image and therefore holds enormous potential. I love the image of God the Father as a young parent watching his 12 month-old learning to walk. After observing his wobbling daughter tumble after a few steps, he doesn't pick her up and say, "Go back to crawling until you can do this perfectly." On the contrary, he is excited at her progress and assures her that she took a few more steps than yesterday. He understands that the journey to walking is fraught with falls and bruises. He affirms his baby's approximations and lovingly encourages

her to go a little farther each time. So it is in our Christian walk with our Heavenly Father. He sees us fall, but forgives us, celebrates our progress, and encourages us to deepen our relationship with him.

---

*I love the image of God the Father as a young parent watching his 12 month-old learning to walk.*

---

Similarly, my education department seeks to model growth mindset teaching through a shared vision of teacher development. One of our policies, practiced by every methods professor, is that we encourage students to resubmit all formative assessments (e.g. early lesson plans, initial classroom teaching simulations, or first submission of units) if they have not met the standard the first time. Only on our few culminating or summative assignments, are students not allowed to resubmit in order to improve a score or grade. If our goal is to enable all teacher candidates to master professional standards before they begin actual classroom practice, we believe we need to offer some students several opportunities to meet them. In this way, we have adopted our own “not yet” system.

This is the mindset Christian teachers can have with their own students, one that focuses on the progress individual students are making rather than affirming only those who have achieved the highest scores. They can invest their time drawing out the potential all students hold, accepting them as Christ accepts each one of us and they can foster a learning ethos, which promotes similarly positive relationships between students.

Finally, provide personalized feedback. Hattie (2012) emphasized that if students are to learn from their struggles and failures, they need to hear specifically what they have done well, where they need to improve, and what their next step should be in this process. This applies equally to those learning to teach. A letter grade alone or brief, critical comments are insufficient for knowing what they can do to achieve the learning

outcome. Our “not yet” system in methods is only effective if students receive detailed feedback on what they still need to do in order to achieve the goal. Although written communication and individual conferences take time, these forms of feedback are essential to helping pre-service teachers master necessary skills and understand content in depth.

## Is a Growth Mindset Always Good?

One might pose the question that if P-12 teachers are expected to work within a culture of conformity (despite a claim of embracing growth mindset), wouldn't education students be better served by having a fixed mindset than a growth mindset. Wouldn't the public or private school classroom over time become too restrictive for a professional teacher with a growth mindset? This is a question I raise since I have observed that after a few years of classroom teaching, many of our “most” growth mindset education alumni move on to more creative positions in or outside of the field because of classroom teaching's perceived confining nature.

However, we need to consider other individuals than teachers when answering this question. Although fixed mindset educators might be more comfortable working in schools, their P-12 students need the understanding, encouragement, and modeling of growth mindset teachers. While fixed mindset students need to stretch their goals and methods, imaginative growth mindset students deserve a teacher who recognizes their unique gifts and encourages their development. This is especially true as students move out of elementary school and on to middle and high school where tracking becomes more pervasive. Stanford mathematics education professor Jo Boaler (2019) stated that we need teachers in these contexts to challenge tracking structures for the growth mindset students who don't fit within them (p. 25). These growth mindset students may become the engineers, inventors and reformers of the next generation. Their out-of-the-box thinking is essential to solve today's and tomorrow's complex issues. Schools and school districts are also better served for having the creative ideas



and questions raised by growth mindset teachers and administrators.

One might also ask if these strategies for developing a growth mindset result in lowering the bar for professional preparation. Doesn't growth mindset just help everyone feel good about themselves and detract from meeting professional standards with excellence? I would have to answer yes if growth mindset was merely a self-esteem program, or if it recommended that we just praise students for their efforts. However, this is not what Dweck intended (Gross-Loh, 2016). Growth mindset does not lower the bar; it raises it by offering a rigorous curriculum and preparing students to struggle with it.

Through well-designed, difficult learning tasks that invite all students to participate no matter what their prior level of experience, also known as "low floor-high ceiling" learning activities (Boaler, 2016), growth mindset teaching first helps students embrace challenge rather than avoid it, and then offers them a strong sense of accomplishment after achieving its rigorous outcomes. In math methods, pre-service teachers work collaboratively to solve visual problems that are inquiry-based rather than dependent on procedural knowledge. Rather than writing a final paper in language arts methods, our students are required to express their language arts philosophy by creating and presenting an artifact that meets all stated learning outcomes. Instead of above average students becoming complacent in their learning, they become engaged. By showing the value of making mistakes, we help our perfectionistic students lose their defensiveness and reluctance to take on difficult, complex learning tasks.

### **Growth Mindset is Not New**

As a master teacher, Christ offers us some great examples of growth mindset teaching. He proposed that his followers take risks, such as when he asked the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give his wealth to the poor. He even invited Peter and the other disciples to walk on water. He challenged Nicodemus to expand his thinking with the statement that one had to be born again. His Sermon on the Mount dared his followers to go beyond the limits of

established protocols and offer the second cheek when struck on the first and to walk two miles rather than just the required one (Matthew 5: 38-41).

---

*As a master teacher, Christ offers us some great examples of growth mindset teaching.*

---

Yet he was also an exemplary demonstrator of patience and encouragement toward those who had experienced a life of hardship and illness. He affirmed the widow's meager offering and restored a bleeding woman to her community after she had suffered physically, socially and emotionally for 12 years. He invited into his kingdom those whom everyone had judged unworthy of consideration: a tax collector, a prostitute, and a thief on a cross. He was much more interested in his followers' future than their past.

Nevertheless, Jesus also knew his purpose was greater than just challenging his students or making them feel better about themselves. Despite the multitudes of followers demanding his time and healing power, he knew this was not his primary calling. Accomplishing his mission always took priority as evidenced in his choosing to raise Lazarus from the dead rather than heal him at an earlier time (John 11:1-44).

As teacher educators, we similarly need to keep on mission—enabling our education students to meet the highest expectations for professional preparation in order to serve Christ throughout their careers. Our role is to accept our students' levels of knowledge, skills, and dispositions at the start of our courses, create an atmosphere where struggle and errors are anticipated, and then provide specific feedback to affirm and guide their next steps. In these ways we can live out the gospel and enable our preservice teachers to embody a growth mindset first as learners and eventually as teachers of their own students.

Understanding that we can change our mindset is freeing. It empowers us to give all that we have for the things that we value, no matter how difficult

learning that process may be. As believers, we are part of a larger community that is committed to serving Christ in the Church and in society.

Growth mindset is significant in not only helping the next generation of Christian teachers believe they can take on great challenges in the field of education, but also in enabling the students they will teach to believe they can accomplish great things too.

## References

- Boaler, J. (2016). *Mathematical mindsets: Unleashing students' potential through creative math, inspiring messages, and innovative teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Boaler, J. (2019). *Limitless minds: Learn, lead and live without barriers*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Dweck, C. S. (2014, November). *The power of yet* [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/carol\\_dweck\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_believing\\_that\\_you\\_can\\_improve](https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve)
- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Gross-Loh, (2016, December). *How praise became a consolation prize*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/12/how-praise-became-a-consolation-prize/510845>
- Hattie, J. (2012) *Visible learning for teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sparks, S. D. (2020, January). You are not your math anxiety. *Education Week* 39, 17, 10-11.