Fixed vs Growth: Two ends of a Mindset continuum

One of the biggest social media myths about Mindsets is that there are only two: the Fixed Mindset and the Growth Mindset. This is simply not true. The reality is that our Mindset lies somewhere along the Mindset Continuum.

This confusion has led to many misapplications of psychologist Carol Dweck’s work. While Dweck herself typically talks about Mindsets as being either Fixed or Growth, this juxtaposition is simply to help contrast the difference between the two extremes. Throughout her research, she recognises that we fall along a continuum.

When we see Mindsets as a dichotomy, we misjudge the subtlety and complexity of Dweck’s work. We may also misunderstand what we must do to change our Mindsets. Students can’t instantly “have” a Growth Mindset. We can’t expect our teaching strategies to suddenly result in students taking on challenges, embracing effort and learning from their mistakes.

Rather, our goal is to help students become increasingly growth oriented. It is more realistic and helpful to expect that as students become more growth oriented, they will persist a bit longer. They will take on a bit more of a challenge, put in a little more effort, and respond more positively to mistakes. Their progress towards a Growth Mindset is gradual.

Furthermore, if we view Mindsets as a dichotomy, we run the significant risk of adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Students at different stages along the continuum have different worldviews – therefore, they require different teaching strategies. A student with a Fixed Mindset will respond and act differently to a student with a Low Growth Mindset, so we must adapt our teaching methods accordingly.

In other words, a Growth Mindset is not a declaration, it’s a journey – one that involves small, progressive shifts in thinking, rather than huge leaps. Most people aren’t Fixed or Growth, but somewhere in between.

As Dweck says, “Nobody has a Growth Mindset in everything all the time. Everyone is a mixture of Fixed and Growth Mindsets. You could have a predominant Growth Mindset in an area but there can still be things that trigger you into a Fixed Mindset trait.”[1]“How Praise Became a Consolation Prize”, The Atlantic, December 16, 2016.
The Mindset Continuum

Going beyond “Fixed V’s Growth” to a deeper understanding of Mindsets

By James Anderson
Certified Growth Mindset Trainer

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If we are to help our students move along the continuum towards an increasingly growth-oriented Mindset, we must recognise that the journey will be a long one. That’s why I have developed the Mindset Continuum. This continuum helps us understand what it means to be somewhere between the two extremes of Fixed and Growth.

As our understanding of the nature of our abilities changes, we travel along the continuum. We become increasingly aware of our capacity for growth. As a result, our responses to challenges, feedback, mistakes and effort slowly shift.

Take some time to study and reflect on the Mindset Continuum. Can you recognise these responses in your students? In yourself? Can you see how the Mindset Continuum more accurately reflects the Mindsets of your students and yourself than a Mindset dichotomy?

A Growth Mindset requires careful nurturing over time. It’s about taking small, targeted steps to ensure that gradual and effective progress along the continuum is made. Understanding the Mindset Continuum is the first step in developing a deeper understanding of Dweck’s work. Ultimately, it’s what will empower you to more effectively shift your students’ Mindsets.

References


James Anderson is a speaker, author and educator who is passionate about helping fellow educators develop students as better learners. James’ work combines Growth Mindset with Habits of Mind and Practice to create Learning Agility. He puts the growth back into Growth Mindset. And through creating and describing the Mindset Continuum, he provides the cornerstone for effective Growth Mindset interventions.