

SPECIAL EDITION PRISON LITERACY

REFLECTION

GROWTH MINDSET VS. FIXED MINDSET IN CORRECTIONAL ADULT EDUCATION SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Many adult students in corrections and other adult learning centers have a fixed mindset. Helping students to learn about a growth mindset can help them to be successful in studying for the GED® exam as well as in other areas of their lives.

NOTHING BUT PLATITUDES

When I started teaching GED® and ABE classes for the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, I had many years of teaching experience, but I had a lot to learn about teaching incarcerated adults. Unlike my international high school students, who were highly motivated to study English in order to gain admission to an American university, I discovered my classes of adults did not want to study or do homework. They were reluctant to take a GED® test, even if it was clear that they had the ability to be successful. They were not motivated.

When students got a less-than-passing score on a GED® test, I heard comments such as, “I failed,” or “I’m too stupid to get this.” My heart sank each time I saw a low score. I struggled to understand the score reports and how to be an effective and motivational teacher. I heard myself uttering lame platitudes, such as, “Maybe you’ll do better next time,” or “You just need to study some more,” or even, “Well, I know you did your best.” Sometimes, I even thought to myself, “Some people are just not good at English, and you may be one of them,” though fortunately I never verbalized this.

INSPIRATION

One weekend, while listening to The TED Radio Hour on my local NPR station, I heard Carol Dweck speaking about her research on growth mindset vs. fixed mindset. The host asked Dweck, “Do you think it’s possible for

adults to . . . retrain themselves to develop more of a growth mindset?” Dweck responded that adults could absolutely retrain their thinking, by learning to “identify their fixed mindset triggers” (Raz, 2016). Because I was not familiar with the terms fixed and growth mindset, I started researching. A fixed mindset is one in which a person believes that he or she has certain strengths and weaknesses and a finite ability in any area. Because of a fixed mindset, many adolescents protect themselves by putting forth a minimum of effort for a class in which they don’t feel they can be successful (Dweck, 2006, p. 58). Upon reflection, I recognized that I, myself, had had a fixed mindset through most of my schooling. Furthermore, I realized I had a fixed mindset in regard to my students’ ability to learn, which only served to reinforce the fixed mindset they already held (Rattan, Good, & Dweck, 2012).

In contrast, a growth mindset is, “based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). A growth mindset recognizes that people are not limited in what they can accomplish. In fact, Dweck says, “I’m not saying we have unlimited capabilities. I’m saying we have no idea” (Raz, 2016). I started thinking about how I may have limited myself by saying something like, “Well, I’m just not artistic enough.” After learning about growth mindset and beginning to internalize it, I even decided to take a watercolor class because I wasn’t afraid of failing anymore!

“THE POWER OF YET”

Dweck begins her original TED Talk (2014) by referencing what she refers to as “the power of yet.” She describes a school in which students who weren’t ready to pass a course were given a grade of “not yet” instead of a failing grade. She realized that this “not yet” terminology encapsulates the growth mindset. Instead of focusing on an immediate passing or failing grade, the students would re-engage with the material until they had mastered it (Dweck, 2014).

I showed Dweck’s TED Talk (2014) to my students. We discussed the power of “not yet,” first as relating to their own children, and then as relating to themselves. I encouraged them to use “not yet” as self-talk when they were facing problems that were difficult. Simultaneously, I also found myself talking about their “failures” differently. When a student would bring me a test with a 142 score (with a passing score being 145), I would tell him, “This is good—it tells us where you are. You’re not there yet, but if you keep working like you have been, you’re well on your way.”

INCREASED MOTIVATION

Because one of the key features of adult learners is the need for internal motivation, helping students understand and apply growth mindset to their thought process aids in motivation. Teaching students about brain development makes them more likely to take on challenges and learn from errors (Yeager et al., 2016). I started helping my students to really use the feedback given on the GED® testing forms. I did this not to say, “This is what you don’t know,” but rather to say, “This is an area in which you can improve your score.”

We started hearing our students encourage each other using growth mindset viewpoint. One would be discouraged with a perceived lack of improvement in an area, and another would say, “You’ve got this, man! Let me help you understand it better.” One of our GED® graduates, who had struggled for more than a year to finish his testing, would come in to our classroom and write encouraging notes on the board in the front of the class.

We also saw students apply these principles to themselves. One of our students, who had experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI), started out in classes not able to remember material from one day to the next. He

didn't think he could be successful, and before I learned about growth mindset, I wasn't so sure myself. But as I learned about growth mindset, and as we started helping him recognize the improvement he was making and the work he was putting into learning, he gradually started being able to remember information from one day to the next. Then he could remember concepts from a month earlier. When he was down to his last test, math, he spent hours each day working on math: in class, on his own, with a tutor, or on the computer program. He told me, "Michelle, I can feel my brain working again, and I don't want it to stop." He even began dreaming about math! When he was ultimately successful in obtaining his GED® credential, he broke down in tears. He told us that continuing to study gave him the confidence he needed to learn new things. He is now living in the community and is a valued employee at a job baking pies in a local restaurant, despite having been told he would need to apply for disability after the TBI. He credits his brain recovery to his GED® study.

CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

Whether we are discussing adult education students in a community or a corrections setting, or the lifelong learners we should all be as teachers, there doesn't seem to be anything more important than having a growth mindset. In an adult education setting, that starts with us, the adult educators. If we do not have a growth mindset regarding our students and ourselves, we cannot inspire it in them. I now try to show the TED talk to my students several times a year, and when I look at below-passing scores with them, I always say, "You're not there yet, but you will get there!" ☼

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