

## Growing the Growth Mindset: Best Practices for College Instructors

---

Originally authored by Theresa Iker. Modified by Melissa E. Ko (mesako@stanford.edu). This is a product of VPTL's Identity in the Classroom Learning Community (ICLC) 2017.

### What is a Growth Mindset?

The growth mindset, pioneered by Stanford professor Carol Dweck, has received both widespread praise and criticism since it was introduced in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* in 2006. Growth mindset, simply stated, is a learner's belief that their intelligence could expand and develop. In contrast, fixed mindset is a learner's belief that their intelligence is a fixed, immutable trait. Dweck's [studies](#) show that students with a growth mindset consistently outperform students with a fixed mindset.

### Pitfalls of the Growth Mindset

[Proponents](#) of the growth mindset approach say that adopting it and teaching it to students helps them take risks and dramatically improves their learning. Critics worry about an oversimplification of the growth mindset concept, alongside Dr. Angela Duckworth's work on [grit](#), i.e. students' persistence and determination. Some [opponents](#) write that teaching these approaches has placed too much focus on the student's effort and not enough on the instructor and institution.

Dr. Dweck has revisited the growth mindset since its widespread adoption and expressed concerns about oversimplifications. "A growth mindset isn't just about effort," she [warns](#), reminding teachers that effort and even grit are only the first steps to the final goal of learning and development. For Dr. Dweck, over-rewarding students for their effort can reinforce other problems. She stresses that students need positive reinforcement and constructive feedback to meaningfully improve. Finally, Dr. Dweck worries that teachers might blame a student's underperformance on a fixed mindset. Teachers, she says, should support students on their journey to a growth mindset, and adopt it themselves in their own teaching.

### Tips and Takeaways:

What can teachers do to spread the growth mindset on college campuses? How can we help "grow" our students' mindsets and our own?

- **As teachers, be aware that you and your students have a combination of growth and fixed mindsets** depending on the situation. Be mindful and aware of how you react

to setbacks: observe your thoughts and try to work with them before doing the same with your students.

- **Praise and reinforce students for their hard work**, especially if they take extra steps like coming to see you in office hours or submitting revisions on tests or papers. Avoid phrases like “gifted” and “smart” that describe intelligence rather than effort.
- **Regardless of your discipline, remind students that the skills they are using are not innate and can be refined.** Try talking about skillsets, in class or on your syllabus, with an emphasis on growth mindset, like “There is no such thing as a ‘math person,’ we are all here to improve at math” or “Being a ‘fast reader’ or a ‘good writer’ aren’t automatic, we are learning these skills in class this quarter.”
- **Help your students with their learning strategies and approaches**, not just the content your class is teaching. For example, consider giving out a handout on best practices for test-taking or methods to help students better skim or speed-read.
- **Structure your teaching time with practices that help students absorb information**, like writing questions on the board and checking in as a class after difficult exams or papers.
- **If possible, build flexible grading strategies into your course** that support a growth mindset. Allow your students to revise their first exam for a set amount of extra credit, or give them a “slash grade” like an A-/B+ that allows students to either accept the lower grade or submit the revised assignment for a chance at the higher grade.
- **Be transparent about the growth mindset with your class.** Put together a handout on what the mindset is, major takeaways from the research, and why you think it is important in your field. Students might not even be aware that they think in a fixed mindset in academic settings, or that they can consciously adopt growth mindset thinking with practice.
- **Model a growth mindset to your students.** If you assigned a hard reading, acknowledge it. If you struggled with this topic as a student, tell your students about your experience and how you improved.

---

## Resources:

[Understanding and Using Growth Mindset](#)

[Growth Mindset Interventions](#)

[The Limitations of Teaching “Grit” in the Classroom](#)

[Does Teaching Kids to Get “Gritty” Help Them Get Ahead?](#)

[Carol Dweck Revisits the “Growth Mindset”](#)