

## **Faculty Mindsets in the Era of COVID-19**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*With the disruption caused by COVID-19, the higher education community has begun to share resources and ideas for successfully transitioning to the “new normal” of teaching. While many conversations focus on concrete strategies for adapting teaching, I focus here on ways to address the psychological burden these changes have brought. Specifically, I provide suggestions for shifting our teaching mindsets to be growth oriented so that we can successfully provide instruction to students despite the challenges imposed by COVID-19.*

**Keywords:** adversity; adjusting to change; COVID-19; mindset; theories of intelligence

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COVID-19 has created disruptions in every part of life and higher education is no exception. Faculty find themselves scrambling to adjust to this "new norm"--rapidly transitioning face to face courses to an online format, rearranging to a hybrid/flex schedule, and preparing to lecture in masks. The list goes on and on. This special issue is an example of one way that the higher education community has rallied to provide ideas, resources and support to help faculty make adjustments to this new reality. However, the discussion among faculty regarding the *emotional toll* that this change has had on them, and will continue to have, is short of concrete suggestions for addressing it. In some ways, it seems that hope for improving the negative emotional impact lies in finding the best 'fix' for adjusting to whatever the newly required teaching dynamic is without completely consuming the faculty member's time and energy. I suggest that this is a faulty approach

that only sets faculty up for failure. COVID-19 is here. Changes to our teaching are here. And it will be extra work. Faculty were already overworked before COVID-19 (Flaherty, 2019); there is no escaping the reality that it will be harder now.

While it is absolutely necessary for us to be sharing ideas and planning the best ways to adapt to change of behavior so as to adapt to this new time, it is our thoughts that will drive how we feel about making those changes. My research focuses on identifying the thoughts that students have which negatively impact their ability to perform well in college. Specifically, my and others' research has shown that students' beliefs about their ability to succeed at a task are related to their level of anxiety around that task (Blackwell et al., 2007; Boaler, 2013; Paunesku et al., 2015; Ramirez, Gunderson, Levine, & Beilock, 2013; Smith & Capuzzi, 2019), and this anxiety in turn impairs their cognitive capacity to perform well (Beilock, 2008; Park, et al., 2014). Below, I outline how to apply this to ourselves as faculty in this time of overwhelm where the ask seems impossible.

## **Background**

The main premise on which my suggestions are based is the theory of mindset in the tradition of Carol Dweck (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988;). Dweck defines mindset as the beliefs one holds about the nature of intelligence as being either fixed or growth. A fixed mindset refers to the belief that individuals are born with a specific amount of intelligence that cannot be changed. A growth mindset, however, is the belief that intelligence is not fixed and with the right guidance and practice intelligence can grow. Mindsets are domain-specific. For example, an individual may believe that they are not a math person (a fixed mindset) and be less inclined to hire a tutor to help them with math as it seems a hopeless cause; however, they may simultaneously hire a tennis coach to teach them to play believing they are capable of growth in that sport (a growth mindset).

Students' mindsets about academic ability are related to a host of factors such as goal orientation, motivation to learn, and even hopelessness (Dai & Cromley, 2014). Several large scale randomized studies (Blackwell et al., 2007; Paunesku et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2019; Yeager, Romero et al., 2016; Yeager, Walton, et al., 2016) have shown a positive effect of growth mindsets on student achievement.

While the discussion of how growth mindsets lead to improved academic outcomes is beyond the scope of this article (Dweck, 2000), understanding the role of mindsets on anxiety is important here. Research shows that when a student has a fixed mindset they are more likely to feel anxious (Cury et al., 2008; King et al., 2012). When placing this into context it is not difficult to see. For example, if a student feels incapable of achieving a task but is then required to do that task they will likely feel

anxiety about the task. This anxiety would only be heightened if the task was part of a larger goal, such as a course that needs to be passed to complete their degree. The anxiety created due to this fixed mindset can serve as a direct barrier to success at the given task. Research has shown that when individuals are anxious their ability to perform well on a task suffers (Ashcroft, 2002; Ashcraft & Krause, 2007; Beilock, 2008) as the anxiety is cognitively manifested as an interruption to our working memory. Working memory is responsible for allowing us to retain the information needed in the short term to do a task (Baddeley, 1986; Engle, 2002; MacDonald et al., 1992). For example, we store steps to complete a task in our working memory and retrieve them as we move through the task. This allows us to be organized in our actions and ensure that we complete the necessary steps. However, when feeling anxious it is often difficult to focus, and the thoughts generated by anxiety in essence “take up space” in our working memory. This limits the “space” available in our working memory to allow us to remember what needs to be done (Ashcroft, 2002; Ashcraft & Krause, 2007; Beilock, 2008). Take a math exam as an example. If a student is anxious, the tasks being held in working memory will be jeopardized by the anxiety they are experiencing and they will be more likely to make simple errors by forgetting these tasks.

### **Recommendations**

Having a growth mindset has been shown to be successful in helping individuals overcome a variety of challenging circumstances (Dweck, 200). As such, it is reasonable to believe it can help instructors overcome the challenges of teaching during COVID-19. Reflecting on what we believe can start the process of using a growth mindset to this end. Do we believe that we are capable of teaching effectively in this era, or are we set in the belief that it is not possible? The latter may be reflected in statements such as “this type of content can’t be taught online” or “there is no way to make the same connection with students online and without that I can’t help them.” Perhaps you have heard, or said yourself, something to the effect of online learning being a watered-down experience that is incapable of providing the same level of learning as face-to-face instruction. These statements are all examples of a fixed mindset around the idea of teaching online. The last statement even uses the word “incapable”, which is a key indicator of a fixed mindset.

We can shift our beliefs to be growth-oriented in these situations by following the same advice given in mindset interventions designed for students (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2007; Paunesku et al., 2015; Smith, 2017; Smith & Capuzzi, 2019; Yeager et al., 2019; Yeager, Romero et al., 2016; Yeager, Walton, et al., 2016). The first step is to carefully examine beliefs such as those reflected in the statements above. It is not that teaching online is not effective in providing quality learning and engagement for all

contexts; in fact, research suggests that it is just as effective if not more effective than face-to-face instruction (Nguyen, 2015); but it is different. This suggests that the task is not impossible and that we may need to adjust our thinking. Given the plethora of resources that has emerged from the higher education community in just a few short months since the onset of COVID-19, it seems that many people do have successful strategies for accomplishing quality online education that is engaging and effective. Knowing this, we can be open to the challenge that teaching in the COVID-19 era brings rather than believing it is an impossible task. Second, we can practice being mindful of fixed mindset thoughts and anxiety. When we hear ourselves doubting our ability to meet the changes asked of us, or when we begin to feel unfocused and overwhelmed, it is a sign that we need to check in with our thoughts. Are we thinking in a fixed or growth mindset way? What strategies or resources are there to help us overcome the current challenge? Finally, we should take note of our accomplishments. When we do something well, we need to acknowledge that and reflect on how we moved through the challenge. This allows us to build a stronger sense of ability and be more comfortable taking on future challenges. By adjusting our current beliefs to be growth mindset oriented, addressing fixed thoughts and anxiety, and reflecting our successes, we can utilize the power of growth mindset to become strong instructors in the face of COVID-19.

## **Conclusion**

Just as we would comfort a student by telling them that we have seen many students who believe they couldn't do well in a class rise to the occasion and succeed, we as instructors can comfort ourselves with this knowledge. We can teach in the COVID-19 era. This is not the first difficult task we have faced in our professions; in fact, it's probably nowhere near the most difficult. It is different; it is a challenge; and, yes it will be more work. But we are capable. Our success will lie in our willingness to embrace that belief. By believing in our ability we can rest our anxieties and be more focused on utilizing the bounty of resources before us to make this the best learning experience possible for our students. Rather than staying fixed in our traditional ways, we can grow into a new success for ourselves and our students.

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