

A Beautiful Mindset:
Helping Our Students and Ourselves Value Growth

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This presentation script and the accompanying Google Slides slideshow

(<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1JO-y4hk2VWvy1USRMk-h1nVrFrQTgf45Z4XeKmYJfw>

[U/present](#)) are geared toward use with secondary teachers, although the resources and presentation (and underlying plan) can be used, with some modifications, with teachers of other levels and with students.

Sections printed in [blue](#) are areas where the author has referenced his own life experience to reinforce the lesson. Readers are encouraged to modify those sections replace those slides with material relevant to their own personal experiences.

(Slide 1: Title Card)

Today we're going to talk about that thing we've all thought about.

(Slide 2: Powerball)

We think about it whenever the Powerball jackpot gets up above a certain point and people who typically don't buy tickets start saying things like "Well, I don't usually by lottery tickets, but you can't win if you don't play, right?" And then we start asking each other, "So what would you do if you won?" Today we're going to think a little harder about just that.

(Slide 3: old man on unicycle)

Your long-lost fifth cousin, fidget-spinner tycoon W.B. Blandsworth, has just tragically passed away in an unfortunate unicycle accident at the ripe old age of 117. Here he is in his younger days, well before that fateful trip down the Atlantic City Boardwalk. You are the sole heir to the vast Blandsworth fortune, which, after paying off W.B.'s taxes, medical expenses, and unicycle customization bills, comes to a grand total of \$1,000,000. In a fit of excitement, you march into your boss's office, announce that you are quitting your job, and spray Silly String all over her desk (and her). Justifiably enraged, she vows that you'll never work in this town again. And she knows people.

So, you have \$1,000,000 and no job. What are your options?

- Spend it all frivolously on Starbucks Frappuccinos (and more Silly String)
- Hide it under the mattress and pull out what you need when you need it
- Put it in an interest-bearing savings account

What does each of these choices lead to? Let's find out. Here's a spreadsheet with your inheritance, your annual income and expenses, and different options for depositing your money.

(Slide 4: <http://bit.ly/BlandsworthInheritance>) *(Depending on technology available to participants during the presentation, they can take a few moments and plug data into the spreadsheet themselves, or the presenter can take suggestions from the audience and input the data himself.)*

Spend recklessly - money runs out really fast

Hide money and withdraw funds as needed - money runs out in 20 years

Deposit in savings account - money runs out in about 25 years

Well, this won't do. You called the Psychic Hotline last year, and the psychic said you were DEFINITELY going to die at age 87 in a random shark attack during an Australian vacation.

Unless you want to spend the last half of your life destitute, you're going to need more money than that.

What are your options? *(Again, participants can do this themselves or the presenter can do it.)*

- Find a better return on your investment (for example, stock market averages about 7% annually, although it involves some risk)
- Find a job that can help you add to your nest egg (because of the way you left your last job, you might have to move to a new town or find a different career)
- Reduce your expenses

So, looking at all of this, we can see that we can take what we're given to start with and, depending on the choices we make and what kind of effort we're willing to expend, we can end up with nothing, or we can achieve way beyond what we would have ever thought possible.

(Slide 5: Changing words)

Now, I want you to look at all of this, and replace the words “One million dollars” with the word “talent.”

Replace them with the word “intelligence.” Replace them with “athletic ability.” Replace them with anything that we often think is fixed, or pre-determined.

It’s funny to consider that when you ask people, “What would you do with a million dollars?” most of them know right away that the most productive thing to do is not blowing it on Starbucks or hiding it in a mattress. They understand that to get the most out of that initial chunk of capital, there are steps that must be taken. What those steps are can depend on the person and the risk and effort they’re willing to put forth, but most people are completely aware that sitting on the money and waiting does nothing.

And yet, many of these same people are willing to jam their own talents and abilities under the mattress, as if they were a treasure to be guarded, rather than a resource to be utilized.

I’d like you to take a moment and think about a couple of things not related to inheriting a million bucks. First, what’s something you’ve always been able to do easily, without a whole lot of effort?

(Slide 6: What are you good at?) *(Encourage some sharing from the participants.)*

I've always been really good at Tetris. Spatial relations seem to be something I have a natural talent for.

That thing that you're good at--have you ever failed at it somehow? What did you think and how did you feel when you did?

I feel very dumb when I'm moving a Tetris piece around, and I move just a little too slowly, and what should have been a perfect fit ends up throwing everything off and leaving a big mess I have to clean up.

(Slide 7: Tom Lehrer)

There's a satirical songwriter named Tom Lehrer who was popular in the '50s and '60s, and I've loved his songs and been able to sing almost all of them since I was in college. 40-some songs in his catalog, and I learned almost all of them. But there's one, simply titled "The Elements," in which he runs through all of chemical elements known at the time--102 of them--at a breakneck speed, and in no real discernible or logical order. And I never learned it.

(Slide 8: YouTube video of "The Elements.")

I heard it, and immediately thought, “I’ll never be able to learn that--it’s too much.” And I never did. And I was mostly okay with that.

Fast forward to 20 years later, when I saw that a local theater was holding auditions for a musical called “Tomfoolery,” which is a revue of Tom Lehrer’s songs. I’ve worked on musicals for years as a musician and musical director, but never as a cast member, which is something I always wanted to do. And I decided that if there was ever a musical I was meant to be in, this was it, and I auditioned, and I was cast.

(Slide 9: cast photo of “Tomfoolery”)

And I got the script, and do you want to guess where this is going? Yes, one of the first songs I had to sing was “The Elements.”

A minute ago I asked you to think about something you’ve always been able to do easily. Now, what’s something you’ve always wanted to be able to do, but aren’t?

(Slide 10: What do you wish you could do?)

So now I had no choice. I had to learn 102 chemical elements and deliver them in tune, at speed, 100% correctly, in front of an audience, for 21 shows. This was going to require strategy.

So, I broke the song down. As I mentioned, there's no particular order to the way the elements are laid out--they're not listed in the order from the periodic table, they're not in alphabetical order, they're simply organized according to the best rhyme (and most of them end in "-ium," so that isn't a lot of help).

(Slide 11: Lyrics of "The Elements")

A verse of eight lines, with around four elements per line, followed by a four-line verse, a little joke to the audience, then another eight-liner and another four-liner, with a two-line tag at the end.

Right away things have become easier. 102 elements are now four verses. Break those verses into lines and learn each line as a discrete chunk of information, and soon what was 20 years of "I'll never be able to learn that--it's too much" suddenly seems attainable. And I approached the problem that way. I learned small pieces of the song, then added them together. I learned the beginning and the end, and worked my way inward. I ran through the lines to myself anytime I had a spare second.

(Slide 12: Cover of "The Disappearing Spoon")

I read a book about the periodic table so that the names of the elements had some kind of meaning in my head.

(Slide 13: Nerd sign)

And in way less time than I expected--in fact, by our first cast rehearsal....

(Slide 14: Lyrics of “The Elements”) (*Presenter sings “The Elements”*)

That thing you’ve always wanted to be able to do, but aren’t--have you ever attempted to do it?
Have you ever tried to do something, and failed, and then worked at it, and suddenly found
yourself able to do it?

There’s a footnote to my story. After learning “The Elements,” I remembered that there were still about 20 more songs I had to sing for the show. I knew a lot of them already, but one of them had a whole extra verse written just for the musical, so I had never heard it. And it was about 16 lines long, very wordy and fast and full of tricky rhymes. It was the kind of thing that would have made me nervous, suddenly adding a bunch of new lines to a song I had known for two decades. And I applied the same techniques I had used for “The Elements” and learned it in five minutes.

There was a thing I thought I’d never be able to do. I thought I lacked the ability. But I changed my approach, and I did it. That’s important--I didn’t just try hard. I analyzed what I was doing, and I developed a strategy to improve. And then, I used that strategy and that newly-acquired

ability to do even more things I couldn't do before. I took my million dollars, I got a job, and I invested in the stock market.

(Slide 15: Nigel Holmes graphic)

Dr. Carol Dweck has written and spoken extensively about this idea. In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, she outlines the concept of two different mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. This graphic, prepared by Nigel Holmes, is a great illustration of the two mindsets (Dweck, 2106, p. 263)

Someone in the fixed mindset:

- Believes intelligence (ability, talent, etc.) is basically predetermined
- Wants to prove they're smart
- Thrives in safety
- Loses interest when things get difficult--talent shouldn't require effort. (If I have to work at it, I must not be any good)

Someone in the growth mindset, on the other hand:

- Believes intelligence (ability, talent, etc.) can be substantially changed
- Wants to grow and get smarter
- Thrives on challenge

- Becomes more interested when things get difficult--setbacks are motivating. (If I work at it, I'll keep getting better at it.)

In order to get the thing I wanted--performing in a musical for the first time--I had to move away from a fixed mindset ("I can't memorize that much stuff") and into a growth mindset ("What is it that makes this difficult to memorize? Can I break it into manageable parts? What can I do to make these words easier to remember?").

What does this look like in an educational setting? A student in the fixed mindset is more likely to engage in all sorts of self-limiting, counterproductive behaviors: putting forth little effort toward schoolwork, blaming other people or other outside forces for their failure, shying away from challenging coursework in favor of easier classes where they're sure to get a higher grade. Students in this mindset are more inclined to cheat to get a higher grade (Dweck, 2016, p. 35), and as much as 40% more likely to lie to others about their scores (Dweck, 2016, p. 73). In many ways this mindset is built into our educational system. We praise students for being smart and reward students who achieve high grades. We sometimes tell students that they should take a lower-level class because the "A" in an honors class will be better for their GPA than a "B" in an Advanced Placement class. What might happen if we were to spend more time impressing on our students the need for improvement, not just achievement? What would happen if we rewarded effort and risk, and treated students' abilities not as a limited supply to be measured and hoarded, but as a seed to be watered and nourished?

Luckily, this isn't a hypothetical question. Dweck and other have seen what happens when these steps are taken. In *Mindset*, Dweck notes the work done by teachers like Jaime Escalante (one of the subjects of the film *Stand and Deliver*) and Marva Collins--teachers in urban schools with reputations for low performance (Dweck, 2016, p. 63). She describes students in inner-city Los Angeles rising from remedial math to college-level calculus, and "failing" elementary students from Chicago reading three grade levels above standard and discussing Shakespeare. Most of us in education dream of achieving something like this; most of us, when hearing the description of the fixed mindset, could probably immediately picture a dozen students we have known.

So we know what we need to do. We need to encourage our students (starting with ourselves) to embrace the growth mindset. We know why. When our students want to grow, they never stop growing. These are not earth-shaking notions; many of you are probably saying to yourselves, "Of course we want our students to know that they can improve, and to want to improve." The big remaining question, then, is how?

Dweck has an answer for this too. She outlines 4 steps to change from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. And the great thing is, you can start by using a growth mindset to get yourself and your students into a growth mindset.

(Slide 16: Step 1: Learn to recognize your fixed mindset voice.)

Step 1 is to be aware that we are constantly moving back and forth between the two mindsets.

You may have noticed earlier that I referred to people “being in” a fixed or growth mindset, not “having” one. This is intentional. The things I asked you to think about earlier--the thing you’ve always been good at, the thing you’ve always wanted to do, the thing you worked at and improved on--these are all indicative of the different mindsets we find ourselves in at various times.

Dweck emphasizes the need to learn to recognize and hear our own fixed mindset voices, and to embrace them as part of being multi-faceted human beings--as she points out, “your fixed-mindset persona was born to protect you and keep you safe” (Dweck, 2016, p. 260). She even suggests giving your fixed mindset voice a name. [Mine is Arturo.](#)

[\(Slide 17: Arturo Toscanini\)](#)

By recognizing the fixed mindset voice as a separate persona, we can understand what brings that persona to the fore and what he or she will motivate us to feel, think, and do.

(Slide 18: What happened when something easy became hard?)

How did you react when you failed at a thing you’d always found easy? What reason have you given yourself for never attempting the thing you’ve always wanted to be able to do? (*Encourage sharing from participants.*)

The great news is, even if you find yourself in a fixed mindset a lot of the time, just by being here and listening to what I'm saying, you've begun to step into the growth mindset. You believe you can change your abilities, and you want to do so. That means you're firmly on your way to...

(Slide 19: Step 2. Recognize you have a choice.)

...Step 2. "[Even] though we have to accept that some fixed mindset dwells within us, we do not have to accept how often it shows up and how much havoc it can wreak when it does" (Dweck, 2016, p. 255). Arturo is not me, he is a part of me. I can choose whether I want him to run the show or not. You can choose between dealing with criticism and challenges in a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. In a fixed mindset, your abilities are static and lacking. In a growth mindset, you need to apply strategic effort to transform your abilities into what you want them to be.

The thing you've always been good at, and the thing you've never been good at, or never even tried--what's the difference between those two things? In concrete terms, why do you think one comes easily, and one hasn't happened?

(Slide 20: Why am I good at this and not that?)

Refer back to the choices you made in the Blandsworth Inheritance game, and reflect on how

many things you could actually control in your attempt to amass more wealth.

(Slide 21: screenshot of earlier spreadsheet with variables circled)

Notice that the only thing you really couldn't change was how much you started with.

What happened when you took no actions to change your situation, but simply took what you were given? The money ran out. If you took negative action--Frappucinos and Silly String--it ran out even sooner. Talent (or intelligence, or ability, etc.) will take you to a certain point, but after that, just like your current mindset, you're fixed in place.

(Slide 22: Step 3. Talk back to your fixed mindset voice with a growth mindset voice.)

Step 3. Whatever Arturo can say, I can respond to. It's important to note that Dweck doesn't suggest giving a separate name to your growth mindset voice, because that voice is you. And because I learned to recognize Arturo back in Step 1, I can even predict when he's going to show up and be ready with what I'm going to say to him. According to Dweck, I can even educate him and invite him on the journey with me (Dweck, 2016, p. 260).

What are some things a person who took no action in the Million Dollar Game might say to explain their lack of wealth? "I should have gotten more money--this million wasn't enough."
"Why did my boss get so mad? The Silly String was just a joke." "Investing in the stock market

doesn't necessarily mean you'll make money." "This game is stupid." Shying away from risk or effort, blaming others for failure, claiming a task is worthless--these are all classic fixed mindset responses.

What about someone who took simple steps like reducing their expenses or finding a part-time job to increase their income? Or someone who did those things and invested their money in higher-risk, higher-reward ways? What might they say to the person in the fixed mindset?

(Encourage sharing from participants.)

That thing you aren't able to do yet and haven't attempted, what reasons did your fixed mindset voice give for not attempting it? What are some of the things your growth mindset voice would say in reply?

We don't have to ignore our fixed mindset voice. We can hear it what it has to say, respond, and then...

(Slide 23: Step 4. Take the growth mindset action.)

...Step 4. Take the growth mindset action. We can listen to what our growth mindset voice told our fixed mindset voice and then act on it. Even if the first action is small, it can lead to others. If you start adding to your million-dollar nest egg by getting a part time job, perhaps as your wealth accumulates, you'll feel comfortable allocating some of it toward higher-risk investments. [After I](#)

learned one “impossible” song, the next one seemed quite possible. Which meant I didn’t freak out when I discovered that my two left feet and I would have to learn choreography for the show. *(Perhaps a little dance step?)* We can apply our growth mindset to our growth mindset itself.

This is what our students need us to model for them and what they need to learn to do for themselves. Over the coming weeks we’ll talk in more detail about how the two mindsets manifest themselves in different areas of life experience and achievement, and how to spot and avoid the various pitfalls that may crop up. For the coming weeks though, we’re going to focus on Dr. Dweck’s 4 steps.

(Slide 24: animated slide of Steps 1-4)

First, each day we’re going to identify one instance where we find ourselves in a fixed mindset. Look especially for points in the day where you are coming upon a challenge, encountering a setback, or receiving criticism. What is the voice in your head saying to you at those moments? Take a moment and actually write one or two of them down. If the voice is making you doubt yourself, suggesting that you try and shield yourself from risk, or trying to shift responsibility to other people or outside forces, you’re likely in a fixed mindset.

Second, we’re going to give that fixed mindset voice a name. The voice is someone separate from the person (teacher/friend/partner) we’re trying to be. By giving it a name and its own persona, we’re acknowledging that we can choose what voices we listen to.

Third, we're going to take the things the fixed mindset voice said, the ones we wrote down, and write answers to them for our growth mindset to deliver. Conversations on TV and in movies are almost always clearer, smarter, and funnier than those in real life, because they're scripted. So we're going to give ourselves a script. Here I'm going to borrow directly from Dr. Dweck and her Mindset website (<http://mindsetonline.com/changeyourmindset/firststeps/index.html>):

FIXED MINDSET: "What if you fail—you'll be a failure"

GROWTH MINDSET: "Most successful people had failures along the way."

FIXED MINDSET: "If you don't try, you can protect yourself and keep your dignity."

GROWTH MINDSET: "If I don't try, I automatically fail. Where's the dignity in that?"

FIXED MINDSET: "This would have been a snap if you really had talent."

GROWTH MINDSET: "That is so wrong. Basketball wasn't easy for Michael Jordan and science wasn't easy for Thomas Edison. They had a passion and put in tons of effort.

FIXED MINDSET: "It's not my fault. It was something or someone else's fault."

GROWTH MINDSET: "If I don't take responsibility, I can't fix it. Let me listen—however painful it is— and learn whatever I can."

Finally, we're going to pick one suggestion from the growth mindset's list of ideas and carry it out. We'll start with one. Just like interest, they can compound. One becomes two, two becomes four, and over time what was a deliberate effort can become a habit.

(Slide 25: Mia Hamm quote)

I'll leave you with words from Mia Hamm, referenced by Dr. Dweck (Dweck, 2016, p. 96) and reproduced in full here. By any measure, she is one of the greatest soccer players in the world--a college champion, a two-time Olympic gold medalist, and the first woman inducted into the World Football Hall of Fame. And she has this to say about her accomplishments. It's the growth mindset in action.

“Many people say I'm the best women's soccer player in the world. I don't think so. And because of that, someday I just might be” (Hamm & Heifetz, 1999, p.31).

References

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<http://mindsetonline.com/changeyourmindset/firststeps/index.html>

