



Introduction

A few years ago, I came across a book that changed my life. The concepts it dealt with resonated so deeply with me, I feel like it was a textbook for my life!

The book was 'Mindset' by Dr Carol S Dweck.

As a lecturer, my second thought is ALWAYS "How can this help my students?". I gave this more thought and started bringing these concepts into my teaching. Unsurprisingly, my students related to a lot of the concepts as much as I did.

I focus on online Study Coaching for Accounting students. I thought it was a good idea to write more about this concept, so that students could understand and interrogate their mindset and habits, especially in relation to their studies.

For each concept, I'll start by relating my personal experience and how it affected me. From there I'll discuss how it impacts my students. I feel this is a good way to have an open discussion of how these things practically and emotionally impact all of us, as opposed to listing items in a textbook, theoretical approach.

This makes this book fairly personal. I'm prepared to do this because I believe it will benefit my students.

You're welcome.

Mindset – The Basics

Growth vs Fixed Mindsets

The super-basic concept: People have one of two mindsets. Either “Growth” or Fixed”. These shape our narratives, feelings, decisions and thus, our lives.

Growth Mindset: “You can become smarter and more talented”

- Ie: Intelligence, ability and personality can be developed
I refer to these as “Growth-ers”

Fixed Mindset: “You’re either smart and talented, or you’re not”

- Ie: Intelligence, ability and personality can’t really be changed
I refer to these as “Fixed-er’s”

It’s a very simple premise, but has deep, complex impacts on almost everything we do. Your mindset determines their approach to challenges, relationships, business, parenting, learning and life in general.

As I explore it more, I realise how far our mindset affects us, how nuanced and subtle the different narratives are.

I definitely fall into the Fixed Mindset category, and in my experience, most of my students do too.

Symptoms of each Mindset

Here’s a basic set of narrative comparisons that illustrate the different mindsets (I’m focussing a little more on the narratives that are study-related)

Fixed	Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “What I can do now is about the most I’ll be able to do” ● “There’s nothing I can really do to change my intelligence” ● “I’m not clever in this area” ● “If I fail this now, it means that I can’t pass it.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “If I spend some time on this, I can do more” ● “My intelligence changes with everything I learn” ● “I’m not great in this area... YET” ● “If I fail this now, it means that I need to work at it a bit more”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “There’s no point for me to try that, I can’t do that stuff” • “I failed that attempt, so I’m not as smart as I thought” • “I failed another attempt, I know NOTHING” • “I’m struggling to get this right, I must be stupid” • “I should get it right first time” • “If I don’t get this right, it’s the end of my career / qualification” (ie: I’ll either be a highly qualified CA(SA), or a street sweeper) • “I got 80%, but xxx got 85%, I wish I was them. THEY really know their stuff. I’m not as good as them” • “I don’t want to try it, what if I can’t do it and I look stupid?” • “It’s about getting it RIGHT” • “If I ask a question, people will know that I don’t know, and they’ll think less of me” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Let me try that, I might be able to work it out” • “I failed that attempt, so I need to learn a little more” • I failed again, but there IS an improvement, I need to keep trying” • “I’m struggling to get this right, I’ll keep working at it” • “I might not get it right first time, but I will get there!” • “If I don’t get this right, I’ll need to find other options” • “I got 80%, I’m really happy with my effort and result” • “Sure, I’ll try it! I don’t mind what other people think. It can add value to me, that’s what counts.” • “It’s about LEARNING” • “If I ask a question, someone will give me an answer, and then I’ll know more than I did before”
---	--

Which do you relate to?

Note: I often find that people select options based on what they feel they ‘should’ pick, but often it doesn’t match what they ACTUALLY DO.

We hear a lot about this stuff, so our instinct is to agree, and we possibly do agree. Logically. But, our actions in situations that challenge us, these are what really indicate our deep-seated beliefs. When you look at these, think about your actions in challenging situations, rather than an instinctive “Of course not!”.

Links to online quizzes

- [Fixed vs Growth quiz \(YouTube video\)](#) (2 minutes)
- [Multiple choice quiz \(16 short questions\)](#)

Note: This is a start to the discussion. I realise nobody is 100% Growth or Fixed, but starting with that helps understand the differences. This should not be seen as stereotyping people, rather to provoke thoughts about how we approach our lives

'Quick links':

Videos

- [Basic Intro: Growth vs Fixed Mindset](#) (5 minutes)
- [Basic Intro: Fixed vs Growth mindset](#) (2 minutes)
- [Carol Dweck: "Developing a Growth Mindset"](#) (9 minutes)
- [Talks at Google: Carol Dweck "The Growth Mindset"](#) (47 minutes)

Articles

- <https://www.developgoodhabits.com/fixed-mindset-vs-growth-mindset/>
- <https://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/>
- <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/29/carol-dweck-mindset/>

Why is this so important to me?

CRUCIAL NOTE - I didn't 'know' I had this

It was not an 'answer' to a conscious problem

This may be the most important concept about these principles that I want people to know. This didn't impact me because I was looking for help with anything, or because it answered a question I had.

It impacted me because it was stuff that never even occurred to me. It was a light-bulb for a room I didn't know existed.

Think of someone giving you a pill that would make, and keep you perfectly healthy, in every way, for the rest of your life.

It absolutely never occurred to you that this existed or was possible. Sure, you struggle with health issues and wish you didn't. Sure, you worry about getting sick in the future, but you face each 'sickness' one at a time, and you deal with them. You don't see them as ONE overall 'thing'. It doesn't occur to you that ONE thing

could be at the root of or possible 'solution' to it ALL. You're not LOOKING for a cure-all, you're not thinking of it, not actively wishing you had it. You just want to get through whatever health issue you have right now... and hope that you don't have another one soon!

I stumbled across the Mindset concept in 2014, and instantly recognised myself as having a Fixed mindset. It affected me at a deep and emotional level. I realised that many challenges, struggles, fears and traumas I had gone through, (and continued to face) had been made so much tougher, purely as a result of how I viewed them, myself and how I approached them.

When I thought about it, I WANTED to have a Growth mindset. I could instantly see the value of it, and it felt like the 'right' thing to be. But in the deep, honest part of my heart and soul, I knew that this wasn't the case. I didn't behave like a Growth'er when things got down to the wire. When I was challenged, or in a new situation, I was absolutely Fixed.

I wish I had found it earlier. I could've lightened the mental burden of so many challenges, and changed the outcome of so many opportunities, by thinking of them as 'learning' rather than 'ultimate judgement' and questioning my entire definition of myself. It would've been hilarious how well it represented my journey, if it wasn't so tragic!

It also meant that I avoided so many opportunities, in all aspects of life (and still do!), because I'm more worried about 'looking stupid', or 'getting it wrong', than the potential of the opportunity.

It continues to impact me

I now see myself as a 'Fixd'er-upper'. I'm a natural Fixed-er. However, I now have the choice to BEHAVE and think as a Growth-er.

I feel like a slow learner where this is concerned. 'Undoing' a lifetime of behaviour, thinking and choices does take time. Every new situation and challenge I find myself in requires thinking and an active choice between my instinctive response, and the one I'd like to 'choose' to have.

I now try to ask myself a 'simple' question when faced with *any* challenge:

“What would this look like if I had a Growth mindset?”

It's a really simple, quick internal question... it forces me to consider the alternatives, to compare what it COULD be, versus what my instinctive approach would be. Actively envisioning the two (growth vs fixed) side-by-side doesn't necessarily make the choice *easier*, but it make me mentally 'roll my eyes' at myself when I think of the opportunity I am ONCE AGAIN declining, because I'm so worried that I'll 'look stupid', or 'get it wrong'

(Note: My 'Fixed' approach still often wins the war!)

Why is this so important for my Accounting students?

I help my students pass Auditing... without teaching them any Auditing topics! I help them pass all their other subjects too, without touching the technical contents.

I work with my study coaching students on their mindset, and how it affects them on a daily basis. More than anything else I teach, this impacts their studies. Changing the WAY they study, their approaches and habits is really tough, but has a significant and marked impact on their performance.

My students are absolutely smart enough to work out the technical concepts for themselves. Given enough time and space, they'll happily figure it out themselves. Most of them try to do this. The challenge is that their study schedules don't allow them the time they need to do this. So we have to speed up the learning process.

I can teach, explain, illustrate and help students visualise any concept, but I can't control what happens when they sit at their desk on their own. As great as any lecture may be, if they're not going back and consolidating, working with it, learning to apply it, failing it and working at it, all my effort is for nothing.

Who's making your daily study decisions?

For most students I know, what they study, and the way they study it, would be quite different if their lecturer was standing behind them! And they KNOW this. If you know your lecturer would tell you to do something else, and you trust them, and you agree with them, but you find yourself doing something else, then who's really making the decisions?

We underestimate the impact that our thoughts and mindset have over our lives on a daily basis. For most of their study time, my students are at their desks, on their own. Their study habits, actions and decisions are governed by their thoughts. Every day, every moment of every day, our choices and decisions are made IN OUR OWN HEADS!

This means that if we're not paying close attention to our mindset, we're not paying attention to one of the things that's quietly making our decisions for us.

My experience with my students

I've lectured Accounting and Auditing to students studying towards professional Accounting qualification routes for over a decade. I have spent most of this time trying to improve my teaching skills, find and develop teaching tools, processes, explanations and study advice that will help them pass their exams.

I've always been open about my qualification journey and the challenges I faced along the way. Perhaps because of this, students often speak to me about their struggles. I ended up spending a lot more student support sessions helping them through non-subject issues than explaining the Auditing process or Accounting concepts!

As I explored the Mindset concepts for myself, I saw it mirrored in so many of my students. I started discussing it with them, with some very emotional responses. I started bringing the thoughts and ideas into my teaching and found over time that I could confidently walk into a classroom, or talk to a student and almost predict how they responded to, felt about, or approached certain challenges. Often, these were challenges that they hadn't identified themselves, nor would've been happy to admit to. I've found Accounting students are notoriously wary of emotional outbursts, or ascribing importance to emotions. It makes us feel weaker, and we like to think of ourselves as rational, logical and objective

If I believe their mindset is affecting the way my students study, then this is as important for me to address with them, as their understanding of debits and credits.



Fears

I'm going to run through the concepts that I feel are important for my students, some of which I address in my study coaching (depending on the relevance for that student).

My Fixed-er fears

In this context, I'm talking about fear as a result or outworking of our mindsets (the relationship between these will be more clear as you read further). Our mindset sits at the very heart of who we are. This means that it's a really well-entrenched, almost genetic part of us. (I'm not saying it IS genetic, I'm just illustrating the depth and subtlety of the impact it has on our thinking).

Every decision, emotion, choice we make and have, is based in our mind. If our minds are built a certain way, that will shape every decision we make.

These were some of the fears that I struggled with, that are directly related to a Fixed Mindset:

Fear of looking stupid

Fear of not feeling / being smart

You can (and should!) see the amount of energy these fears have been given in my life, and the impact they've had on me.

What these fears meant in my life

I made decisions based on my need to protect myself from these fears being realised

I unconsciously chose the path of whatever protected myself from those fears in so many aspects of my life, career, studies; most things. It wasn't an active choice. I didn't 'see' other choices. I didn't know there WAS a choice!

I made a lot of my life a lot harder. I spent SO much energy protecting myself, that I had very little mental room to spare!

When I was studying and working, I didn't want to ask for help, because it meant admitting that I didn't know something and people would probably think I was stupid. I'd far rather have spent HOURS on my own trying to figure it out, and tie myself in mental knots in the process. I MUST figure it out myself!

I rejected opportunities because of these fears

I avoided, declined, didn't take advantage of, stepped back from so many opportunities in life. From work to studies, even hobbies or activities that I actually wanted to do! ANYTHING that had the potential to make me look like I didn't know what I was doing, or that might make people (or myself!) feel I was stupid, I avoided like the plague!

If it was new, it would be a given that I couldn't do it, so why make a fool of myself? I avoided new situations, new activities, or anything that challenged what I felt I was capable of doing. I wanted to be absolutely sure I could do something, so I wouldn't try anything until I felt I was ready. This didn't feel like a limitation, it felt like it was common sense.

Things that didn't work out MEANT that I'd be a failure

I had such a strong definition of who I was, or thought I was. If anything didn't go according to plan, it put my entire definition of myself in doubt. If I was 'smart', then I wouldn't have failed that. So, if I failed it, I must not be smart. I've always thought I was smart, have I been wrong all this time?

Although I didn't consciously acknowledge or articulate it, I felt that if something went wrong, it meant that it would NEVER be right. If I failed a test, it meant that I'd never be

able to pass it. Which would mean that I would never get my degree, never qualify, and I'd never reach my goals. (All this because I failed a practice question during my studies!) So, everything that went wrong had catastrophic, almost apocalyptic implications. I just couldn't even think about the possibility of not getting it right, it was too horrifying.

I was essentially self-centred

I didn't want everything to revolve around, or be about, me. But when you spend all your energy on protecting yourself, and thinking about how people see you and what they must be thinking of you, you are basically thinking mainly of yourself and how anything affects you and your fears. Thus, most of your thoughts and decisions 'centre around yourself' = Self-centred.

When you spend SO much energy on protecting yourself, how much energy can you POSSIBLY have for anything else, anyone else, any other type of thinking?

Yes. It's exhausting!

What I've learnt

I was so busy unconsciously deciding how other people thought of me, stressing that I wasn't good enough, and trying desperately to avoid any situation that might show me up, that it left no space for a few obvious realities:

People don't care about, or think about you as much as you think they do!

By this, I mean that I mentally ascribed thoughts and opinions to other people for everything I did, or would do, and this impacted my decisions. It was as though I thought I had an audience constantly watching and rating me. I would NOT do something because of what I had mentally decided someone might think of me. In truth, people don't have a lot of time to consider everyone around them and all their actions, because they're busy with their own lives. They have their own concerns and interests, and you might be a passing impression along the way, but by and large, they have their own stuff to deal with.

Other people have issues too

I think I felt that I was ESPECIALLY stupid. Other people clearly had it all together. I seemed to be the only one who was struggling, therefore I should keep really quiet and

not let on. In reality, most people struggle with similar stuff, and we all share the human condition! If I'd really realised this, I wouldn't have felt so alone and isolated in all these worries. I could've balanced out their impact to me a lot more rationally.

No one is an expert when they begin

One of the traits of a Fixed'er is the idea that you should be able to do something well, and fast, after learning it once. Get it right, first time, every time. This means that if you're not an expert on Day 1, you're a failure. It really never consciously occurred to me that for anyone to do anything new, requires a learning curve, and a journey from not knowing, to knowing.

My students fears

I care about how your fears affect your studies on a daily basis. This is not a warm / fuzzy discussion to make you sleep better at night (Although sleep is a really important part of your study success too!). I care about this because these fears unconsciously shape your decisions and actions every time you sit down to study.

What you decide to study, not study, how you decide to study it, how long it takes you to sit down at your desk, is often based on these fears. Consciously or not, these can affect every study session, and our study habits.

The fears I see in my students:

Fear of failure

Fear of looking stupid to lecturers and fellow students

Fear of not being smart enough to pass

What these fears mean for my students

My students are mostly terrified of failure. The 'F' word has the same effect as an apocalyptic event might. It really feels like the be-all and end-all. AVOID AT ALL COSTS!

In reality, the fear is not about failure in and of itself, it's about the CONSEQUENCE of failure, what failure will MEAN, and the results thereof. When I dig into this with my study coaching students, the same narratives appear:

- *"I'm scared that I'll disappoint myself / family / work / others"*
- *"I'm scared that it means I'm not as smart as I thought I was"*
- *"I'm scared that it means I'm not smart enough to get this qualification"*

The practical impact of this on their studies:

- Deferring exams / tests if they don't 'feel' ready or smart enough yet
- Avoiding attempting practice questions on their own
- Not asking their lecturers for help when they need it. They'll struggle on their own for ages before going to someone for help.

Each of these things can be, and indeed ARE justified in different ways. Very few students make any of the above choices actively, consciously knowing that fear lies at the bottom of it. The reasoning is as follows:

- *"There's no point in writing an exam when I know that I don't have enough knowledge to pass it"*
- *"I need to try this on my own before I take it to someone else, I can't just take it to my lecturer and say I don't know!"*
- *"It doesn't make sense to waste good questions when I'm not finished studying yet"*
- *"I'm not going to learn anything by failing questions, if I'm not ready to pass them, there's no point in doing them."*

When I challenge these with logical, teaching rationale, we start getting to the real story. Fear of failure.

These are not active, conscious, articulated thoughts

When I start talking to students, a lot of them will tell me that they don't fear failure. We all know that we need to fail some stuff in order to learn. "Fall down 8 times, pick yourself up 9 times". We've all seen the motivational posters. It's not trendy to fear failure these days! We don't move through our lives thinking about our fears. We don't sit and ponder them for hours on end every day. They're just 'there', in the background.

However, when we interrogate their daily actions, what they do and don't do, the results of their actions point to the same behaviours that fear creates. That's generally not a co-incidence!

I'm not saying that my students are lying, or fooling themselves, I'm saying that our fears are sometimes very deep-seated, and unconscious. We haven't necessarily given active thought to articulating them. They don't seem to govern us. We don't have to constantly be in tears or on sedatives to be susceptible to the affects of fear and anxiety! Our subconscious quietly makes a million decisions every day to keep us going. We don't have active mental debates about everything we do and don't do. What are those decisions based on? Survival? Protection? Furthering goals?

I come across a LOT of resistance when I give advice that challenges behaviours created by fear. I call it the 'wriggle'. We will find any excuse to avoid doing something we don't want to, and we are good at coming up with loads of reasons that seem perfectly valid!

If students are desperate to pass, if they tell me they'll do ANYTHING to pass, but they resist logical, simple advice from someone they trust, what's at the heart of that?