Chapter 4
Why Our Words Matter:
Promoting a Growth Mindset in Online Graduate Courses

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ABSTRACT

Research concerning the growth mindset utilized when evaluating academic persistence, Yeager states, "... to achieve, we need more than inborn ability—we need the right mindset. He [Yeager] studies how students and adults feel they belong and are respected, that their work is relevant and purposeful, and that they can overcome setbacks and continue to improve" (Mills). Through Yeager's combined research with other growth mindsets researchers such as Carol Dweck and Angela Duckworth, their findings point to the idea that students must be allowed to explore, reflect, and create a level of self-awareness in their abilities to flourish while confronted by challenges to feed the growth mindset. How does one create this environment within an online graduate course? How can graduate students be pushed for rigor but allowed to be learners and explorers through rigorous graduate coursework?

INTRODUCTION

Why do Words Matter?

Do an instructor's written words make a difference in a learner's experience in online graduate courses? How might small changes potentially affect students' overall experience, embolden autonomy, and encourage a growth mindset? Theoretically, asynchronous online graduate courses are technical instructions reciprocated with student input, output, instructor feedback, and varied assessment. However, research and first-hand experience(s) promote the idea that highly impact practices, such as creating an open, positive, respectful, trusting, collaborative learning environment, are most impactful for student learning and engagement in online formats (Darling-Hammond, 2000a; Glenn, 2018).

In their research concerning the overall growth mindset utilized when evaluating academic persistence, Yeager states, "... to achieve, we need more than inborn ability—we need the right mindset. He [Yeager] studies how students and adults feel they belong and are respected, that their work is relevant and purposeful, and that they can overcome setbacks and continue to improve" (Mills, 2021). Through Yeager's combined research with other growth mindsets researchers such as Dweck and Duckworth, findings indicate that students must be allowed to explore, reflect, and create a level of self-awareness in their abilities to flourish while confronted by challenges to feed growth mindset (Dweck, 2014; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Furthermore, Yeager, Dweck, Duckworth, and colleagues (2022) concluded that a teacher's growth mindset affords students a potential growth mindset as teachers lead the classroom and facilitate classroom culture. For example, teachers create the norms for instruction and classroom behavior, set the parameters for student participation, and control grading and assessments, thus influencing student motivation and engagement (Kraft, 2019). Much of the work regarding mindset has been conducted within traditional P12 face-to-face classrooms as researchers continue to build on and further the theoretical basis of teachers' roles concerning effects on student mindset (Mesler et al., 2021; Yeager et al., 2022; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Therefore, how does an online instructor act as a mediator and promote an autonomous, growth-oriented environment within an online graduate course? How might graduate students be encouraged with high expectations and rigor and, in turn, embrace a position as neophyte learners and explorers through rigorous graduate coursework? Moreover, do changes to instructors' words and their shift in mindset for encouraging students make a difference in student experiences in an online graduate setting?

As a professor who has worked with hundreds of online adult learners, who also happen to be P12 educators, I have witnessed the effect in student reflective responses and email correspondence after altering my courses to encompass more of a growth-oriented mindset and autonomy-supportive teaching (Cheon et al., 2020; Reeve, 2006; Reeve, 2016). My reflective practices regarding students' support, as they face their own classroom challenges post-Covid, opened my eyes to students' need for understanding, support, and incubation as learners aligning with Reeve's (2016) definition of autonomy-supportive classrooms. The intentional and mindful use of language that supports and aligns with autonomy-based practices has opened a window to a budding area concerning the world of andragogy or adult learning theory (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Changes in my practice of mindfully and purposefully responding to student inquiries and coursework, creating opportunities for students autonomously, and praising "progress over perfection" have potentially encouraged learner autonomy and a growth mindset in my courses (Cheon et al., 2020; Reeves, 2006). Although initial efforts in my approach were to support online graduate students while knowing they were struggling in their own P12 settings as educators, the profound effect on my students' learning experiences was not planned or predicted until I began to see changes in their communication and final course reflections.

Data Collection

Grounded theory was utilized as the instructor collected anonymous online graduate student narratives through a structured reflection process, coded for key themes, and analyzed content after final course grades were submitted via IRB approval (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A second instructor was utilized to validate potential themes with a supposition of two key areas - growth mindset and learner autonomy. Student responses were selected via final course reflections that aligned with potential themes. Initially, the structured reflection captures any potential bias and initial feelings about themselves as a learner

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