

Try This Now

How to start learning and teaching the ways the brain learns music best

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Mindset

- **Scientist Carol Dweck** has spent 30 plus years researching why most humans can't get out of their own way when it comes to learning. She identifies two types of mindsets. I recommend her book of the same name.
- **Fixed Mindset** is the belief that intelligence and capabilities are fixed. If one has ability they will progress rapidly and with less effort than others. When this doesn't happen these people chalk it up to the cards they've been dealt and find no reason to continue trying to learn something they believe they will never be any good at.
- **Growth Mindset** is the belief that one's intelligence and capabilities can be developed, and that with the right methods just about anything can be learned. Other research in skill development tells us this is true.
- **Growth mindset is not about false encouragement**, or getting students to believe in themselves in the absence of good practice. They have good reason to not believe in themselves if their practice consistently yields performance in which they are disappointed. When they practice well they have reason to be confident. The results speak for themselves, and if it worked before it will work again for other things.
- **Mindset is transparency about the learning process.** Knowing what to expect when learning is sometimes the difference between success and failure, and is always useful. Sometimes learning will feel discouraging, spacing will take days, we will struggle with contextual interference, we will make mistakes during deliberate practice, and these things are OK. Struggle and failure are not indications we are not talented, gifted, competent, or smart enough. They are normal parts of the process. When we expect it, it is easier to work through it. This creates the "buy in" necessary to work with these learning techniques genuinely and for long enough to allow them to work.
- **This is not a one and done** and should become part of regular teaching and learning vocabulary. It can be addressed in the ongoing growth of learning when necessary. Below are some suggestions of ways they might come up and be addressed. As we use them we'll notice the fixed mindset more and more and find that by simply being realistic and truthful about the situation the we will recognize that it does not serve us.

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First, teach/learn mindset as a concept. Go over the areas presented here and add information from life experience that demonstrate these principles. Then, whenever one or the other mindset appears, stop and take the time to address what is happening. Address these things enough times and it will strengthen a growth mindset in all areas of learning.

Devise exercises to teach this. I'll give a suggestion in the next section.

- **Challenges/obstacles** If the learning objective is appropriate it will produce some struggle/failure in the process of figuring it out. When a student complains, or we or want to quit out of frustration, simply point out/recognize this is a fixed mindset. We know from experience and research that not only will we get it, but that this discomfort is a normal part of the process. As such it is an indicator of learning and should be embraced instead.
- **Obstacles** Everyone struggles in the early stages of learning anything. It is nothing to get upset about, and is most certainly not an indication of lack of ability. Keep going, you'll see.
- **Effort** If we are using the other learning tools presented here we will quickly experience achievement beyond what we thought possible. Whenever effort *seems* like it isn't worth it, or fruitless, remember the initial struggles, and how this has worked previously. It was worth it before, and it will be worth it again.
- **Criticism** No improvement comes without reflection on one's own errors. Getting it from others can be even more beneficial. The Dunning-Kruger effect illustrates that the less skilled one is the less they will know about what they are not doing correctly. This means that in the early stages some type of instruction is usually involved to point out what the learner does not want to do, and guides them to the results they do want. Reflection and correction are indispensable to learning, and are not an insult to be taken personally. Doing so only causes frustration and anger, and will not get results. It is not reasonable to think that being "wrong" about something means there is something wrong with us. This is simply an emotional reaction without reason, and in one's own worst interest. Constructive criticism is a wonderful opportunity to improve.
- **Success of others** can be seen as threatening. An online video of a younger person doing a skill better than oneself frequently leads to feelings of inadequacy. "I give up!" The other person simply has put more hours (and in some cases better methods) than we have. That is how all skill is developed. When we have that many hours we will be that good as well. If we don't like how that feels don't quit and get to work. The other person is a great example of what we can do. Wouldn't we want to do that?

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Training a growth mindset

One significant aspect of a growth mindset is the ability to take constructive criticism. Too many have learned to take this as an insult. This is just a learned behavior and has no real use in our learning. It can be retrained, and we can use this for ourselves and for any students we may have.

Imagine a world in which every musician felt comfortable giving every other musician constructive criticism and they loved receiving it!

Consider, at least, teaching deliberate practice first so that it can be referenced in this lesson.

1. Explain the role and use of constructive criticism. Contrast that with personal insult (ad hominem attack) i.e., “You’re stupid and you smell,” is an insult but, “Your bow hold is all wrong,” is useful information. Note how the “reflect” piece of deliberate practice is criticism of oneself and is the most important part of the process.
2. Play something in which there are likely to be noticeable areas in need of improvement. It can be anything that is in the developmental stage of learning.
3. Accept critique and incorporate it. Anyone who plays music can do this for us, and they do not have to be better, or know more, than the we do. This is one of the great fallacies of critique – that someone who plays at a lower level than someone else cannot/should not critique that person. Why not? They can see and hear mistakes too.
 - A. **Individual:** If we are beginning to learn this on our own find someone to critique us. We can get a few music friends together online or in person. Tell them we don’t want them to be “nice” we want them to tell us what isn’t good.
 - B. **Groups:** Have other members of the group critique each other with everyone else observing. The idea is, through repetition and reflection, to make welcoming constructive criticism part of the group dynamic. Don’t be surprised, once this takes hold, if they start discussing critiques outside of the rehearsal room now that they welcome them. Think about what that might do for performing groups.
4. Stop after each criticism and analyze not the critique, but how it feels to take it and if that feeling is reasonable. Did it hurt to hear it? Why? Is there any logical or factual reason to feel that way? Was there any aspect that was an insult instead of helpful information? It may be particularly hard for those who play better than those who give the critique. Is there any reason to resent the comment? Does this reaction make any sense?
5. What we will find is this becomes like a game. People begin to laugh at themselves when they make a mistake, and the critique can be a funny event. Here are a couple of small suggestions to make it a bit more fun.
 - Keep track of how many mistakes are found and see who gets the record, or just try and break our own personal best. Keep track for days or a week. It will likely become pretty funny pretty quickly.
 - Have players purposely do something wrong and see if others can find it. Let each player come up with their own ideas. We could give a point to anyone who is not “caught” or whomever “catches” the error.

In these ways we take the sting, which has no logical place in this, out of constructive criticism.

References

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