A reflection on CFG work and Growth Mindset  
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In early March, the Stanford University PERTS Lab teamed up with NSRF to lead a growth mindset-infused CFG training. The goal of the training was to provide educators with strategies and protocols to support and strengthen their own growth mindset professional development using the free online resources developed by PERTS (http://www.mindsetkit.org). The training started with a presentation on growth mindset research from the PERTS Team, and then followed with the traditional CFG protocol training. We were amazed to find that we didn’t have to do much work to incorporate the two, because growth mindset is in many ways at the heart of NSRF protocols and CFG work. This article is a reflection on that week.

What is a Growth Mindset?

A growth mindset is the belief that abilities can be developed. While the definition is simple, this belief can have a significant impact on how we approach learning. When people have a growth mindset, their goal is really to learn and grow. This means that they are more likely to:

› Put effort into their work
› Take on challenges
› Stay resilient in the face of the setbacks
› See mistakes as a valuable part of the learning process

A growth mindset is contrasted with a fixed mindset, the belief that abilities are fixed and innate. When people have a fixed mindset, their goal is to look smart. This means that they are often afraid to make mistakes, get critical feedback, and take on challenges. When people who have a fixed mindset fail, they often respond by putting in less effort, or even by giving up because they think, “What’s the point of trying if I can’t really get better?”

We’re all a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, but we’re especially likely to have a fixed mindset in learning environments where we don’t feel safe to make mistakes or struggle. As Dr. Carol Dweck, a leading researcher on growth mindset, recently said, “There are so many things in the environment that trigger a fixed mindset, that make us feel judged.”

Mindsets are shaped by the messages, explicit or subtle, that we receive from our environment. These messages tell us what types of learning goals we should have, what beliefs are reinforced, and what is valued. For example, environments that value mistakes and allow revisions send the message that we can improve and grow over time, thus supporting a growth mindset. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we tend to do better in environments that support a growth mindset - but what does a growth mindset environment really look like?

The CFG training and protocols are about creating contexts where peers--students or adults--can feel safe giving each other honest, supportive feedback, with the ultimate goal of learning and growth. As the training progressed, we were amazed by how directly aligned many of the protocols were with growth mindset research. Every time our NSRF facilitator walked us through a new protocol, we were practically jumping out of our seats with excitement. And sure enough, even though we had only completed the first three days of the training, our group felt safe and excited to share out ideas, give feedback, and learn from each other.

CFG coaches’ training and Growth Mindset

In our own work, we encourage educators to focus on three main things when they are first learning about growth mindset classroom strategies.

› Praise the Process
› Teach students about the malleable brain
› Celebrate mistakes in the classroom

Below is a list of some of our favorite growth mindset protocols from the training we just completed that can be used to support the above growth mindset strategies either via professional learning communities or in the classroom.

**OM Zones of Comfort, Risk, and Danger**

This activity asks participants to reflect on various types of situations that put them into their comfort, risk, or danger zone.

**Growth Mindset Connection:** We learn the most when we are stretching ourselves--when we are a little uncomfortable. But to stretch ourselves, we must be willing to challenge ourselves, to make mistakes, and to maybe look like we aren’t very good at something while we learn. This protocol shows students that it is good to be in the risk zone and to make mistakes, because that is how we learn. It also helps students see that challenging yourself can feel a little risky at times, and that’s normal for many students.

Our facilitator also pointed out that being in your risk zone is a time when you might want to ask for help, seek out new strategies, and engage in deliberate practice to reach your goal. These are the same suggestions we recommend teachers convey when they are teaching students about developing a growth mindset.

**Tip:** When using this protocol in the classroom, help students make the connection between being in the risk
zone and neuroscience evidence that supports the idea that we learn the most when we challenge ourselves and make mistakes.

**Feedback Nightmares**

This activity helps a group set norms around giving helpful feedback. It starts by having participants reflect on a personal feedback nightmare, after which participants generate a list of do’s and don’ts for feedback.

**Growth Mindset Connection:** Getting feedback on work is one of the most helpful ways to learn and grow. But receiving feedback can feel very threatening, especially if it focuses on traits commonly thought of as stable (like talent or smartness), or if it’s insensitively delivered. Poorly delivered feedback can lead people to respond in fixed mindset ways. For example, they may become fearful of making mistakes or taking risks, and they may be less likely to take feedback to heart. This activity helps participants reflect on their own experiences with feedback, and it highlights the value of good feedback. Creating a group norm around the do’s and don’ts of feedback also serves to further create a safe space for giving and receiving feedback.

**Tip:** Connect good feedback to process focused praise, i.e. praise that focuses on the strategies that led to success (ex. You’ve been studying and I can see it’s really paying off), or on the specific work that has been done (ex. Your topic sentence here provides a great set-up for the rest of this paragraph). This protocol can also be used with students, and may be especially helpful with middle and high school students.

**Summary**

Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger and Feedback Nightmares are two activities that are explicitly linked to growth mindset. However, it was exciting to see that the CFG training as a whole works to promote a growth mindset by creating environments where participants feel safe to take risks and push themselves to grow. We’re so excited to finish the last two days of the training!

For more information about growth mindset and strategies that promote it, please visit the Mindset Kit (www.mindsetkit.org) — a set of free resources for educators and parents to learn how to help students develop adaptive learning mindsets.

For more information

PERTS, or the Project for Education Research That Scales, is an applied research center at Stanford University. They partner with educators and researchers to improve student motivation and achievement on a large scale. In the process, they develop, test, and disseminate learning mindset resources for educators and parents. Learn more at www.perts.net.

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