JAMES ANDERSON

THE AGILE LEARNER

SECTION ONE

Where Growth Mindset, Habits of Mind and Practice Unite
James Anderson is a speaker, author and educational leader. He is passionate about supporting schools and teachers to enable students to thrive in a rapidly changing, increasingly complex and highly challenging world.

James’s learning has taken him beyond thinking skills and mindsets to the concept of the Agile Learner – someone who not only understands they are capable of learning to behave more intelligently, but who knows how to go about achieving it!

The foundation of James’s work is the Growth Mindset. He takes teachers beyond simple social media catch-phrases to create a teaching framework that develops robust, enduring Growth Mindsets in their students.

He does this by skillfully uniting Art Costa and Bena Kallick’s Habits of Mind, Anders Ericsson’s critical work on practice and Carol Dweck’s work on Growth Mindset. In doing so, James creates a powerful

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combination that achieves greater learning outcomes through the development of Learning Agility.

James knows the students of today face problems fundamentally different to those of the past: climate change, population growth and the depletion of natural resources. He firmly believes solving these problems requires students to not only be better thinkers – they need to be more agile thinkers. This means we not only need to ensure students know they are capable of improving their intelligence, we need to teach them how – through Learning Agility. James shows you how to do this!

James Anderson speaks at conferences around Australia and overseas. He has written Succeeding with Habits of Mind, The Agile Learner and numerous e-books. He has also published with Costa and Kallick Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind and Habits of Mind Across the Curriculum. He is a certified Growth Mindset trainer and affiliate director of the Institute for Habits of Mind.
CHANGE AND THE 21ST-CENTURY LEARNER

You don’t have to go far today before someone starts talking to you about the need to prepare our children for the future. Children in our schools will change not only jobs, but careers, multiple times. They will be using technologies that haven’t been invented to solve problems that don’t yet exist.

Exactly what that future will look like is anyone’s guess. Predicting the future is notoriously difficult, and all we can really be sure of is that the world is changing more rapidly now than at any other time in the past. The world is becoming more complex, more uncertain and more changeable than it has ever been before.

In the business world, people talk about these changes as “disruptions”: problems that interrupt the current way of working. Today, it’s business as usual: systems are in place, people know their roles and all is going well. But then something happens: a new technology emerges, a start-up company doesn’t play by “the rules”, the
political climate changes. Put simply, something occurs that was not expected and, as a result, the business becomes unstable and must either adapt or perish.

In response to these disruptions, many businesses have adopted “agile systems”: systems that are responsive and flexible, so that the business can respond to disruptions as they arise.

The hope is that if the business is agile enough, it can respond quickly enough to take advantage of opportunities, deal with threats and, ultimately, be successful.

Basically, businesses are trying to ensure that they are increasingly responsive and adaptable in what has become an increasingly changing and challenging environment.

Of course, as educators, it is our job to prepare our young people for this world – a world of change and disruption – and we have been grappling with this challenge for some time. We are aware of the need to
develop “21st-century learners”, and we know that it is no longer enough to teach children what they need to know for life in a predictable world. So, preparing students for a world of change and disruption means we must teach them what to do when they don’t know what to do.

In response to this, there has been a shift away from teaching the “hard facts” to teaching the “soft skills”.

Rather than teaching children what to think, we have been asked to teach students how to be better thinkers.

This is not at the expense of content. Rather, we use the content in ways that provide opportunities to help students become better thinkers. The theory is that if we can teach students to be better thinkers, they will be able to respond to challenges and thrive in the 21st century.

There have been many attempts to identify which skills an “effective thinker” possesses. In terms of teaching creativity, Edward de Bono has done great work.
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A WORLD OF CHANGE AND DISRUPTION MEANS WE MUST TEACH THEM WHAT TO DO WHEN THEY DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO.

– JAMES ANDERSON

The Visible Thinking learning routines from Harvard University likewise provide a set of specific skills that are very useful. David Hyerle and others have produced graphic organisers to help structure student thinking. And there have been many more skills, tools and strategies described that aim to help students become better thinkers.

In my view, the strongest and most complete description of the thinking necessary to succeed in the 21st century is Art Costa and Bena Kallick’s Habits of Mind.

These sixteen Habits of Mind are the dispositions Costa and Kallick identified as being skilfully and mindfully employed by characteristically successful people when they encounter challenges or disruptions. They are the way successful people behave when the solution to a problem is not immediately apparent. The Habits of Mind
capture many of the thinking skills described above, but take them beyond discrete tools to wider-ranging behaviours and dispositions.
## Habits of Mind

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Habit</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Persisting</strong></td>
<td>Stick to it! Persevering in task through to completion; remaining focused. Looking for ways to reach your goal when stuck. Not giving up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Managing impulsivity</strong></td>
<td>Take your Time! Thinking before acting; remaining calm, thoughtful and deliberative.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Listening with understanding and empathy</strong></td>
<td>Understand Others! Devoting mental energy to another person’s thoughts and ideas. Make an effort to perceive another’s point of view and emotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Thinking flexibly</strong></td>
<td>Look at it Another Way! Being able to change perspectives, generate alternatives, consider options.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5. Thinking about your thinking (Metacognition)</strong></td>
<td>Know your knowing! Being aware of your own thoughts, strategies, feelings and actions and their effects on others.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7. Questioning and problem posing</strong></td>
<td>How do you know? Having a questioning attitude; knowing what data are needed and developing questioning strategies to produce those data. Finding problems to solve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Applying past knowledge to new situations</strong></td>
<td>Use what you Learn! Accessing prior knowledge; transferring knowledge beyond the situation in which it was learned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. Thinking and communicating with clarity and precision</strong></td>
<td>Be clear! Striving for accurate communication in both written and oral form; avoiding over generalizations, distortions, deletions and exaggerations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. Gather data through all senses</strong></td>
<td>Use your natural pathways! Pay attention to the world around you. Gather data through all the senses; taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11. Creating, imagining, and innovating</strong></td>
<td>Try a different way! Generating new and novel ideas, fluency, originality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12. Responding with wonderment and awe</strong></td>
<td>Have fun figuring it out! Finding the world awesome, mysterious and being intrigued with phenomena and beauty.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>13. Taking responsible risks</strong></td>
<td>Venture out! Being adventuresome; living on the edge of one’s competence. Try new things constantly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15. Thinking interdependently</strong></td>
<td>Work together! Being able to work in and learn from others in reciprocal situations. Team work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>16. Remaining open to continuous learning</strong></td>
<td>I have so much more to learn! Having humility and pride when admitting we don’t know; resisting complacency.</td>
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However in my opinion, our attempts to teach students “thinking skills” have not been as successful as we had hoped they might be. It is not that these skills aren’t necessary – they are. Nor is it that they have been poorly defined. It is simply that being a skilful thinker, although essential, isn’t enough to thrive in the 21st century. Also, even though we tried to teach these thinking skills, many students weren’t becoming the skilful thinkers we had hoped they would become simply by being taught thinking skills.

An *important insight* into this problem was provided by Professor *Carol Dweck*, through her *work on mindsets*.

In an elegant experiment, Dweck showed that teaching “study skills” to students had the greatest impact after they were first taught about the brain’s plasticity. Teaching students how their brain changed in response to learning contributed to the development of a Growth
Mindset – an understanding that you can change your most basic characteristics including your talents, intelligence and abilities.

Part of the reason why the thinking skills movement failed to live up to expectations was because we hadn’t first considered the importance of developing a Growth Mindset in our students.

Some *students* simply weren’t getting as much out of our efforts to teach them *thinking skills* because they had a relatively *fixed view of their intelligence* and abilities.

Had the importance of Dweck’s work come to light before Costa and Kallick published their Habits of Mind, we may well be in a different situation than we are today. But that is not the case, and so we must move forward understanding that developing a Growth Mindset is fundamental to any attempt to teach students to be better thinkers.
Combining a Growth Mindset with the Habits of Mind is a potent combination. Dweck’s work highlights the importance of understanding that we are capable of developing our most basic characteristics such as our intelligence. Costa and Kallick describe the behaviours and dispositions students must develop in order to actually achieve this more intelligent behaviour. As students apply their Growth Mindset to the Habits of Mind, they learn how to behave more intelligently. This results in the development of Learning Power – a capacity to succeed at increasingly difficult tasks.

If the 21st century was simply throwing up more difficult problems for the next generation to solve, developing Learning Power might be enough, but it’s not that straightforward. The issue for the next generation is not simply that the problems they face are more difficult, it is that they are occurring in an unpredictable, changing and often volatile environment. We don’t just need people who can solve more difficult problems; we need learners who can respond to new, novel problems in a disruptive world. We don’t just need powerful thinkers, we need agile ones.
WE DON’T JUST NEED PEOPLE WHO CAN SOLVE MORE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS;

WE NEED LEARNERS WHO CAN RESPOND TO NEW, NOVEL PROBLEMS IN A DISRUPTIVE WORLD.

– JAMES ANDERSON

This is where the critical work of Anders Ericsson comes into play. Ericsson is a world leader in the field of Acquisition of Excellence, and has spent his career describing the process by which peak performers acquire and develop their talents.

In short, Ericsson describes the best way to practise to increase talents and abilities.

In his most recent book, Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), Ericsson documents several decades’ worth of research that captures the essence of the process required to respond effectively when encountering a disruption or challenge. Drawing on wider-ranging studies from doctors to fighter pilots, chess players to classical violin players, he demonstrates the common type of practice top performers engage in as they increase their talents and abilities. This sort of practice involves extending yourself just beyond your “Comfort Zone” into your “Learning Zone”. Perhaps most importantly, as we will
explore later in this book, this sort of practice results in building new abilities by changing the way your brain is wired.

Ericsson describes this practice as Deliberate or Purposeful Practice. This does not mean we are deliberately practising – although we are.

It means we are *deliberately*, or *purposefully*, practising in a way that is specifically designed to *extend our abilities*.

Unfortunately, many people do not practise this way, and as a result do not extend their abilities. Throughout this book, I refer to Deliberate and Purposeful Practice together as Virtuous Practice, as they have the virtue of leading to further growth.

The most successful people in the 21st century will be those who are the most responsive: the ones who can adapt in the face of disruption. These people will be able to constantly build new skills and abilities in the face
of change. That is what this book is about: how we, as educators, develop in our students the capacity to become increasingly effective learners in a world that is consistently disrupted. For success in the 21st century, we can’t just build agile workplaces, we must build Agile Learners.

To develop Agile Learners, we need to bring together the three powerful and complementary understandings that I have introduced above:

1. Professor Carol Dweck’s work on Growth Mindset.
2. Professor Art Costa and Dr Bena Kallick’s work on the Habits of Mind.
3. Professor Anders Ericsson’s work on practise.
THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY WILL BE THOSE WHO ARE THE MOST RESPONSIVE: THE ONES WHO CAN ADAPT IN THE FACE OF DISRUPTION.

THESE PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO CONSTANTLY BUILD NEW SKILLS AND ABILITIES IN THE FACE OF CHANGE.

– JAMES ANDERSON

Graphically, our concept of Learning Agility looks like this:

None of the three elements on their own is enough. It is not until we combine Mindset with Habits of Mind and Practice that we develop the Agile Learner.
The Agile Learner is someone who recognises that they live in an unpredictable, changeable and disruptive world. The Agile Learner understands that because of this, they can’t and don’t currently have the capacity to solve every problem they are likely to encounter. Their education has neither equipped them with all the answers, nor the full set of skills they need in order to thrive in the 21st century.

However, the Agile Learner understands that they are capable of changing themselves.

They understand that they can develop their Habits of Mind and learn to behave more intelligently.

This allows them to engage more effectively in Virtuous Practice and, in doing so, successfully address increasingly difficult problems.

The remainder of this book will unpack what it means to develop Agile Learners, but before we do this, we need to explore one of the experiences many people have when trying to learn something new: the performance plateau.
THE PERFORMANCE PLATEAU

For many people, learning looks like this: they start learning something new and find that progress initially comes easily. New things aren’t always hard. We find the right entry point, and our standards improve quickly.

Take, for example, my own experience learning to play golf. I had seen the game played often enough, so I had a vague idea of what was required. I had also played other sports, so I wasn’t entirely uncoordinated. I then got a few pointers from friends and went out to play a game of golf. It wasn’t a great game, but I managed to hit the ball most of the time.

Occasionally I hit it straight-ish and, when I eventually got to the green, I could tap it around until it fell into the hole. In an effort to improve, I started playing more. I got a few professional lessons, and eliminated the worst of my errors. I improved, for a while. Then the rate of improvement started to decline. I kept playing. I kept doing what I called practise, but I didn’t see much
improvement. I eventually got to the point where I could accurately tell you how many strokes it was going to take for me to get around the course, give or take a few, but couldn’t seem to reduce that number. I’d reached my performance plateau.

For many people, the performance plateau marks the limit of their abilities; the point at which they have discovered how good they are at something.

In terms of golf, something I’m not interested in getting much better at, that’s not a problem. I don’t play golf to be good at it, I play it to spend an afternoon with mates. It’s the 19th hole that’s my favourite.

But what if you do want to get better at something? What if you hit the performance plateau and can’t get any better at something that’s important to you? What if it was your job? What if you wanted to solve a problem in your relationship? The performance plateau becomes a real problem.
Consider the emotional response to the performance plateau for something you want or need to get better at. The early progress is fine, but when things slow down we experience a cascade of emotions. We might feel frustration, as something that was initially easy becomes hard. We struggle as we try to progress and see little result, despite increasing the time and energy we put into the task.

Eventually, we experience feelings of failure, then the resignation that this just isn’t “us”.

It’s not something we can do, not something we’re cut out for.

If we are then placed in a situation where we are asked to do this thing we’ve found difficult, this thing we “know” we can’t do, our feelings might turn to fear. Fear of being put in a position where we know we’ll fail. Fear of having our limitations laid bare for the world to see. As a result, we avoid these situations.
Performance Plateau

cascade of emotions for the performance plateau.

When we experience the performance plateau frequently enough, we come to believe that it is the reality of our life. That there are limits to our abilities. Those limits might be higher in some areas than others, but there is always a limit. More importantly, people have different limits. Some people appear to have their learning plateau
set higher than others. What I might find hard, another person finds easy.

Someone with *Learning Agility* doesn’t experience the *performance plateau*.

They understand that while the early phase of learning something new might be easy, eventually progress will become difficult. At that point, they must then develop the abilities and engage in the process that will allow them to grow and succeed. Any limit they encounter is temporary.

The cascade of feelings someone with Learning Agility experiences is different to other people. As they work not only on what they are trying to learn, but how they learn, they begin to see progress. Progress gives rise to a feeling of satisfaction and, eventually, achievement, as they accomplish the goals they set for themselves.

As more goals are reached, someone with Learning Agility builds confidence, and that confidence leads to the courage to take on new challenges.
The experience of growth, or the lack of growth, and the feelings that come with it have a powerful influence on our mindset. When we fail to experience growth, we may come to believe that we can’t experience it at all. This belief is what Dweck calls a Fixed Mindset. In fact, in many ways, a Fixed Mindset can be thought of as a Fear Mindset: it makes us fearful of trying new things.
On the other hand, someone who experiences growth, and learns that they can change their abilities, develops what Dweck calls a Growth Mindset.

A Growth Mindset can be thought of as a *Courage Mindset*: it gives us the encourage to *try new things*, and the *confidence* that we will be able to *achieve our goals*.

As we will explore in the rest of this book, there are many influences on a person’s mindset. However, the actual experience of growth, or lack of growth, is an extremely powerful one. Understanding these influences – what I call “Mindset Movers” – is a recurring theme throughout *The Agile Learner*. The reason for this is because the Growth Mindset is forms the foundation of Learning Agility.
ULTIMATELY, IT WILL BE A GROWTH MINDSET THAT OPENS THE DOORS FOR OUR CHILDREN TO PURSUE THEIR DREAMS

– JAMES ANDERSON

MINDSET: THE FOUNDATION OF THE AGILE LEARNER

In our exploration of the Agile Learner, Mindset forms the base of our diagram. This is not because it is the least-important aspect, but because Mindset forms the foundation of Learning Agility.

We begin our exploration of Learning Agility in Section 2 by concentrating on Mindset. We do this because without the understanding that we are capable of growth, we tend not to engage in the actions that would lead us to grow. If we are trapped by a fear of failure, and are unwilling to attempt something difficult, our inaction becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our abilities won’t, and don’t, change.

As you will discover, a Growth Mindset is not growth. It is not even necessary for growth to take place.
A *Growth Mindset* is simply the understanding that you are capable of growth.

To develop our abilities, we must take the right sort of actions, and our Mindset determines if we are willing to take these actions or not. In Section 3, we’ll explore the Four Rules about Talent that describe the actions we must take to develop our abilities.

The point of developing Learning Agility is so that students can experience more success in their lives. We want students to be able to successfully overcome the challenges they are confronted with in the disruptive world we live in. We want them to have choice in their lives, and to be able to pursue and achieve their goals. And this, of course, raises an interesting question: what do we mean by success?
SUCCESS IS ABOUT BEING BETTER THAN YOURSELF

— JAMES ANDERSON
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SUCCESS?

Success is one of those words people like to argue about. Do you have to be rich to be successful? Do you have to be famous? Do you have to be the best at something?

I often ask people to name someone they consider characteristically successful, and tell me why they consider that person successful.

Try that now. Before reading on, think of someone you consider characteristically successful. Ask yourself why you consider them so successful.

Have you done that?

The responses I receive are remarkably similar, no matter who I ask. The people we consider successful tend to have these characteristics:

- They have overcome challenges. They haven’t done easy things, they’ve done hard things.
The challenges they’ve overcome have been ones that many people struggle with. We admire people for doing what we haven’t or couldn’t.

They have continued to grow throughout their lives. Sometimes they have continued to grow in one domain, which has made them “the best” at something. Often, they have grown in different aspects of their lives, e.g. their relationship, career(s), contribution to the community, parenting. We admire these people because they are more “rounded”.

They have overcome unique or significant challenges. Perhaps they have started from a place of disadvantage, or they have had a setback (or two), but they haven’t been defeated. They have persisted and overcome their setbacks.

They are not necessarily rich or famous, although they can be. And they’re not necessarily the best. Sometimes they aren’t even people we like, but we still recognise that what they’ve done is impressive.

Two things strike me every time I have this conversation. First, there is remarkably little disagreement. We have no trouble identifying the basic characteristics that define success. Secondly, it is almost always other people we consider to be characteristically successful.
We recognise and admire characteristically successful people. We buy books about them. We talk about them with our friends and colleagues. But we tend to admire them from a distance.

Sure, we have our own successes, yet we rarely consider ourselves successful. Our challenges haven’t been as great, or we haven’t overcome them as consistently. We feel that we haven’t experienced as much growth as the other people we consider characteristically successful.

What most people tend to do when they talk about *characteristically successful* people is put them on the other side of the “*greatness gap*”.

And this idea of the greatness gap, one that is repeated constantly in our society, is a recurring theme in this book, because it is at the heart of the Fixed Mindset.
THE GREATNESS GAP

Professor Dweck expresses the idea of the greatness gap like this:

We like to think of our champions and idols as *superheroes* who were born *different from us*. We don’t like to think of them as relatively *ordinary people* who *made themselves extraordinary*. Why not? To me that is so much more *amazing*.

When we think of successful people as champions or idols, we attribute their success to who they are, rather than what they’ve done. This is what creates the greatness gap. We are on one side, and they are on the other. In thinking this way, we excuse ourselves not only of the responsibility, but the mere possibility, of ever achieving what they have done. We tell ourselves, “That’s great for them, but I’m not like them, so you can’t expect that of me.”
EVERY DOOR IS OPEN TO THEM.

– JAMES ANDERSON
The **greatness gap** is at the heart of the **Fixed Mindset**.

People with a Fixed Mindset believe that what others achieve is a result of who they are, not what they have done.

The greatness gap takes away your choice. When you believe that certain goals, achievements and abilities are fundamentally beyond your reach, you lose the choice to pursue them. Doors close to you. You’re left searching for where you fit in the world, and working out what you can and can’t do, rather than making yourself into the type of person you want to be.

The **Growth Mindset** understands that there is **no greatness gap**.

What one person has achieved, another person can achieve – if they learn to behave in the same way*. For the person with a Growth Mindset, the world is full of choice. Every door is open to them. The person with a
Growth Mindset understands they can make themselves into the sort of person they want to become.

The behaviours we see Fixed Mindset people engage in are symptoms of their belief in the greatness gap. They don’t see that they have the power to choose the course of their life. If we want to make enduring differences to the way students see the world, we must change this underlying belief.

But before we talk about how we change beliefs and build an understanding of how we achieve growth, we need to delve deeper into Mindsets.

*As we will discuss, circumstance and opportunity also play a role. This work does not purport that anyone can be anything. It demonstrates that there’s nothing about who you are that stops you improving. More on this in section 4.*
REFERENCES


The Agile Learner combines three powerful ideas: Growth Mindset, Habits of Mind and Virtuous Practice. It shows teachers not only how to create the Growth Mindset, but how to translate that Mindset into actual growth in their students’ abilities.

In the rest of The Agile Learner you will:

• Go beyond social media hype to a deep understanding of Mindsets.
• Stop treating the symptoms of a Fixed Mindset and learn how to address the underlying causes.
• Explore the Mindset Continuum and its importance to making practical changes to students’ Mindsets.
• Create powerful Mindset Movers that will shift students’ Mindsets.
• Discover the Four Rules About Talent and how to apply them.
• Develop Learning Power with Habits of Mind.
• Learn how to encourage Virtuous Practice.
• Help students grow by showing them how to engage in Effective Effort.
• Much more …

“Anderson weaves together a rich tapestry of possibilities for increasing the power and potential for all of our students. He does away with the myths that limit growth, and so opens the door for unlimited learning.”
– Art Costa and Bena Kallick, co-authors Habits of Mind

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