

Author:
George Couros

The Innovator's Mindset

**Executive Book
Summary**

November 23, 2018

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

What is Innovation?	1
Fixed and Growth Mindsets	2
Characteristics of an Innovator's Mindset	3
Relationships	4
Innovative Leaders	5
Innovative Classrooms	6
Strength-Based Leadership	7
Technology and Innovation	8
Reflection	9
Summary	10

“Designing solutions with both the individuals’ interests and the end goal in mind is crucial for any innovation to be successful” (p.26).

What to Expect

George Couros, the author, of *The Innovator's Mindset* explains innovation as a “way of thinking that creates something new and better.” Much of his viewpoint focuses on technological innovation but the heart of his thoughts is the mindset to look for ways to advance our thinking and use available tools to do this. Couros discusses the need for education to be innovative to build a relevant group of students. Although innovation is not always successful, it is important for educators and leaders to view failure as a way of learning.

Couros believes that the leader's role is to unleash the talent of those on staff. The relationships



with staff will foster a culture of taking chances and will push teachers to explore their interests in depth. The innovation shown by teachers will inherently be transferred to the students, creating more success.

Innovation—What is it?

Innovation is “a way of thinking that creates something new and better (p.19). Often we think of innovation as a technologically based idea when actually it is a way of thinking. At the forefront of innovation is student learning, asking the question “What is the

best for this student?” Thinking of ways to support students in their learning or providing ways for students to exhibit their learning in different ways is innovative.

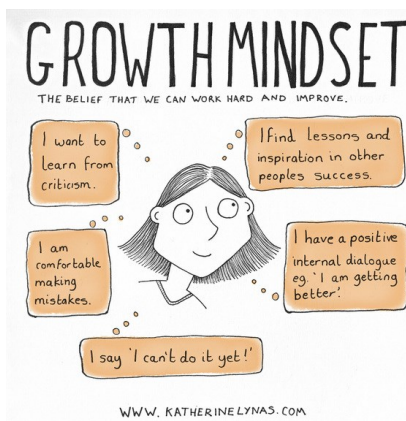
Fixed Mindset

People with a fixed mindset believe:

- They are limited in knowledge
- They cannot try new things because they will fail.
- They are not capable of acquiring new skills.
- They work diligently on not appearing “dumb”.



Growth Mindset or Innovator's Mindset



People with a growth mindset believe:

- Their talents can be developed over time with practice and persistence.
- Their “abilities, intelligence, and talents are developed so that they lead to the creation of new and better ideas” (p. 33).
- They can be smarter if they put the work into it.

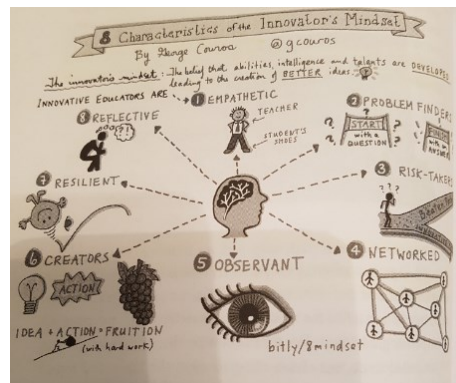
Educators as Innovators

Innovation is often associated with money and with budget constraints, sometimes innovation is disregarded. Because innovation is a way of thinking, educators can work within budget constraints with materials they have access to. Couros refers to this as innovation within the box. One example is a teacher of a student who stuttered. The teacher watched “The King’s Speech”, took the idea of listening to music while speaking and a phone and headphones, and created a way for his student to speak to a group.

Failure is sometimes a necessary part of innovation. The most important part of this process is the resiliency and grit. “Resiliency is the ability to come back after a defeat or unsuccessful attempt. Grit is resolve or strength of character” (p. 37) Educators need to be as resilient as they expect students to be. When trying different methods with students that prove to not be successful, it is important to continue to try others to find what works for that student.

Questions to Ponder:

1. Would I want to be a student in my own classroom?
2. What is best for this particular student?
3. What is this student passionate about?
4. What can I implement in my classroom to create an effective learning community?
5. How did my innovation work for my student?
6. How can I change it to make it even better?



Eight Characteristics of an Innovator's Mindset

1. Empathetic - determining the needs of the students and developing meaningful relationships will help to create an innovative learning space.
2. Problem Finders/Solvers - Often teachers teach students to be problem solvers but Couros suggests that educators should teach students to be problem finders. Acting as facilitators to learning, teachers will help students to find their own solutions which is more engaging.
3. Risk-Takers - "Risk is necessary to ensure that we are meeting the needs of each unique student" (p. 51) Some techniques work with some students but educators know that students learn in different ways. Presenting different ways to learn concepts involves risk taking but is necessary to meet the students' needs. Finding a balance between "tried and true" techniques along with innovative ideas will help students become more effective learners. Teachers must accept the uncertainty of risk taking.
4. Networking - Innovative teachers need to seek out other professionals where they can share ideas. Although speaking face-to-face is important, there are many platforms where educators are sharing their ideas. Blogging helps educators think through ideas and present them on a public platform. When thoughts are analyzed in isolation, they are not always thought through thoroughly.
5. Observant - There are many opportuni-
6. ties to access online if educators are open to exploring. The online phenomenon of video talks such as TED talks creates a space where vast learning is taking place.
6. Creation - The art of creation helps students grasp concepts thoroughly. When they are given opportunities to represent their learning in ways they understand, their comprehension is significantly more than teacher-directed instruction.
7. Resilience - Having resilience is a life skill. Teaching students to bounce back from hardship is essential in guiding young people because they will experience adversity throughout their lives. Innovation sometimes causes others to ask questions as it is not the norm and is then opened up to speculation. Innovators need to remain steadfast in their dedication and persevere through the skeptics.
8. Reflective - Taking the time to be reflective about innovative ideas helps to understand what went well and what needs to improve next time. "Looking back is crucial to moving forward" (p. 58). Educators need to review the processes and progress made to move towards the next step.

Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

The relationships between the school leaders and the teachers effects innovation levels. Unleashing the talent of teachers, creating an innovative working atmosphere and developing strong relationships will motivate teachers to create the same kind of space in their classrooms.

There is often a fear that when innovative ideas become successful, others will hear and there will be an expectation that all teachers are doing the same. Examples such as teachers blogging to share information with parents or creating a digital space where students share their work with their parents are examples.

When leaders crush innovative ideas, it is quickly learned that creative ideas are not encouraged and teachers will continue to teach the

same ways they always have in the past. “If leaders spend the majority of time trying to manage and protect people from their own mistakes, not only are they wasting time, but they are losing the confidence of those they serve” (p. 72). Allowing teachers to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes shows trust in ability to be reflective on the process.

The leader needs to provide opportunities where teachers share their ideas with each other and create schools with “competitive collaboration” (p. 73) among teachers. Raising the bar will push teachers to push themselves.

Classroom vs. School Teachers

A classroom teacher is a teacher who is concerned about the students in her classroom, differentiating instruction, and meeting the individual students in the classroom. These teachers are reluctant to share their ideas because they are only concerned with their own students.

A school teacher is one who considers all of the students in the school as her students. This person associates with all students on supervision and in the hallways and sees this time as a chance to get to know other students. These teachers are also willing to share their ideas because they are working for the greater good of the school, not just their students.

Changing Mindsets

School leaders have expectations for their staff to differentiate the learning for their students. There should be the same approach to the professional development provided to staff. Providing choice allows teachers to learn in the areas they need to improve in but this approach requires the leader to know their staff well. Not only do the leaders need to know what the teachers interests are for professional development but they should also understand them as humans. The relationships created between staff members sets the tone for the learning. Allowing the teachers autonomy in choosing their own professional development shows they are trusted and respected in their learning journey.



Innovative Leaders

Having the ability to be an innovative leader is impossible if the leader does not understand what the teachers are experiencing day-to-day in their classrooms. Leaders need to make themselves present in classrooms, not to evaluate teachers, but to see the celebrations and barriers experienced by teachers. Being an innovative leader means immersing oneself into the environment in order to make well informed decisions on how to propel staff forward. Serving the teachers by removing barriers and providing necessary tools will add to the innovative culture.

Innovative leaders must also be master learners. Experiencing what is expected of the teachers or students and when one can teach from experience, there is a deeper understanding for the learner.

Empowering

Often, student engagement is discussed as a goal for educators, but would it not be more beneficial for students to be empowered? Empowering students raises the bar by giving them ways to pursue their own interests. When students are given the control of their education, they make deeper connections to the topic. "Our job as educators and leaders is not to control others but to bring out the best in them (p.99).

From experience, Couros has had significant success in building relationships through learning opportunities such as a day where students share info about themselves to the entire school. Relationships are built when students can make connections to their peers.

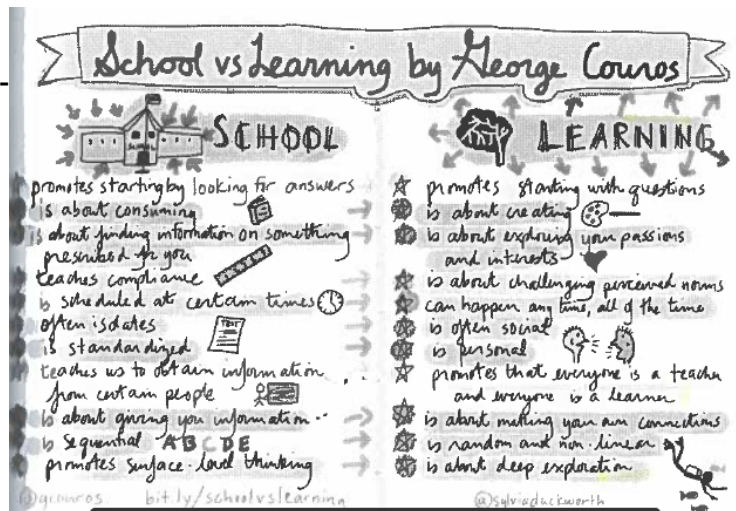
Couros' comparison between school and learning points out discrepancies or deficiencies in schools. The point of this comparison is to show how schools are prescriptive, with defined ways on how information is delivered to students.

Innovative leaders must:

1. Break the vision up into achievable steps.
2. Put themselves in the shoes of those they serve.
3. Immerse themselves in the learning.
4. Model risk-taking.
5. Create a network.
6. Be open to ideas from other industries.
7. Challenge thinking by surrounding themselves by people who think differently.
8. Involve staff in planning the mission.

"Would I want to be a learner in my own classroom?" (p. 83)

Learning teaches students resiliency, exploration, and connections; all characteristics which create strong learners.



Innovative Classrooms: What Do They Look Like?

“It is important that “innovation” does not become an event for our students but the norm” (p. 113). Innovative classrooms possess certain qualities where innovation is at the forefront of every day activities.

Voice - empowering students means providing them with the voice to shape their classroom and their learning.

Choice - When students have options with what they are learning, they care more about the topic and are then more engaged.

Time for Reflection - purposeful practice in reflecting should be a regular part of the students' day and not an optional activity. Reflecting on what or how a topic is learned is an essential part of the learning.

Opportunities for Innovation - provide time for students to investigate problems and find

their own innovative ideas

Critical Thinkers - with the amount of information available to students, they need to be taught how to sift through the information to ensure they are using accurate facts.

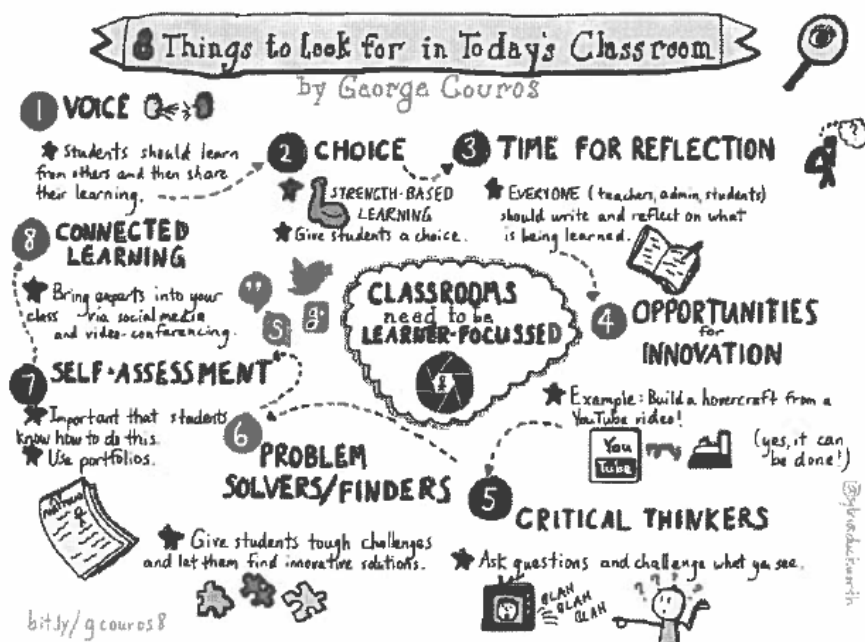
Problem Solvers/Finders - create dialogue with students about finding problems and then design solutions for the problems.

Self-Assessment - provide time to reflect on their learning which aids in the documentation of their learning process and helps them set goals.

Connected Learning - students need to access experts when necessary or to agencies that can assist them.

Creating an Innovative Vision Statement

- Needs to connect to all stakeholders.
- Involve all stakeholders because those who create the vision are more invested in the vision.
- Explain how the vision will be executed
- Be direct and easy to memorize
- Broken into achievable parts that can be measured
- Be purposeful in choice of words to ensure innovation is a focus



Strength-Based Leadership

Often, we submerge staff and teachers in areas in which they need to improve but wouldn't it be better if leaders focused on strengths instead? A strength-based approach will actually improve areas of weakness because of the increased engagement and change in mindset. "Remember: success builds competence and confidence" (p. 124).

As leaders, it is necessary to balance trust and teacher autonomy but continuing to mentor. A study by Tom Rath (2008) gathered data on managers and the frequency

of staff disengagement. Leaders who ignored staff had 40% disengagement, focused on weaknesses had 22% and focused on strengths had 1%.

Asking teachers about their dream job allows for conversations about their strengths. Although their dream job may be out of scope, there is no way leaders would know unless they asked. At the very least, there is a strength-based conversation where leaders have a deeper understanding of their staff.

Leaders must also trust in their staff to make sound deci-

sions as they are competent professionals. Leaders must also show they are willing to take risks in their own practice and work alongside the staff, not as a supervisor but as a participant.

"Sometimes, people are afraid to share what they want because they don't know that getting it is even a possibility" (p. 132)

Less is More

Less is more is an important phrase for leaders to follow. This is true especially when starting new initiatives and when communicating. Leaders need to be conscious of what their teachers are able to manage so they feel as though the expectations are achievable. When new initiatives begin, there are times where teachers feel as though it is more work added to their already "full plate". When initiatives are structured and focused, they are more achievable and the learning is deeper. "Instead of trying to do everything, let's focus on what we want learners to know and do and select and master resources to create learning experiences with the vision that has been co-created with the community" (p. 157).



Creativity

Creativity within the learning is where staff and students start to make sense of what they have learned. This moves the learning from surface level to a much deeper understanding. Not only should the learning be targeted but the learners should have autonomy within the learning. This autonomy makes the learning meaningful and targeted for what the learner needs.

Creativity also requires the use of technological tools that push learners in their thinking while also being applicable to the community. Each community is unique and understanding what the community needs is "necessary for innovation to flourish" (p. 163).



Technology and Innovation

Advances in technology have allowed for numerous new opportunities for learners. What is most important about these advances is the ability to share the learning with others. When learners have a sharing platform, they need to be intentional and thoughtful with what they are sharing. Self-reflection is a result of this process.

As an example, Couros discussed the ability for others to remake artist's songs, put their own flair to them and share. In the case of music, more attention is brought to the song than the artist's original advertisement. Instead of interpreting this as though someone has used the song for their own benefit, an innovator will see the increased exposure of the song.

This is also the case when educators share their work on digital spaces such as Twitter. There is a significant amount of ideas on social media but it is important for educators to take

part to maintain their relevance. Year ago, teachers only had access to the teacher's ideas within their own school, but now have access to ideas across the globe. Why wouldn't educators access this vast resource?

Leaders must also model this innovation by sharing what is happening within their own schools. Imagine the conversations generated if all the teachers in one school tweeted one idea each day and the teachers accessed these ideas on a daily basis.

Competitive collaboration can accelerate learners with the right intent. If one group shares their idea and another group takes that idea and modifies it to make it work for them, the students are the benefactors.

Professional Learning

Couros uses the same list for professional learning as he does for effective classrooms:

1. Voice - sharing their knowledge with colleagues will challenge teachers to be cognizant of the ideas they are publishing.
2. Choice - owning one's own learning needs will lead teachers into deep learning as opposed to learning what they are told to.
3. Reflection - learning is a personal journey which requires reflection time in order to grow and deepen knowledge.
4. Innovation opportunities - taking time to develop professionally will improve teachers' practice.
5. Critical thinking - through questions and critical thinking, educators need to push each other as well as question current practices.
6. Problem finders/solvers - finding problems and searching for the solutions promotes collaboration, invention and reflection.
7. Self-reflection - educators use of self-reflection will indicate their strengths and weaknesses and will move them forward in their own learning.
8. Connected learning - accessing ideas from others around the globe provides educators with a vast repertoire of strategies and philosophies.



Reflection Tool

Unleashing Talent	Driving Question(s)?	Your Answers
Strengths-Based Leadership	Do I know and build upon the strengths of those I serve?	
Powerful Learning First, Technology Second	Are we embracing new (and better) opportunities for learning, and making decisions based on supporting these new realities?	
Less is More	What are the few purposeful areas that we are focused on? How might we align our resources to support ongoing learning and development in these areas?	
Embracing an Open Culture	How do we share openly and regularly to further our own learning and development?	
Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences for Educators	Do our professional learning opportunities mirror the learning we want to create for our students?	

Reflection Questions

1. What innovative ideas have you seen in your career?
2. If you were to open a school, what are the key components needed for an innovative school?
3. What is necessary to create an atmosphere that promotes risk-taking?
4. Describe a time where you empowered others. What made it successful?
5. How can personal professional development be embedded within the school year?
6. What strategies do you use to understand the staff's needs?
7. Within your own personal vision, are the learning opportunities of today reflected?
8. What are the strengths of those you serve?
9. How do you model innovation in your own career?
10. How can you streamline the focus for your staff?

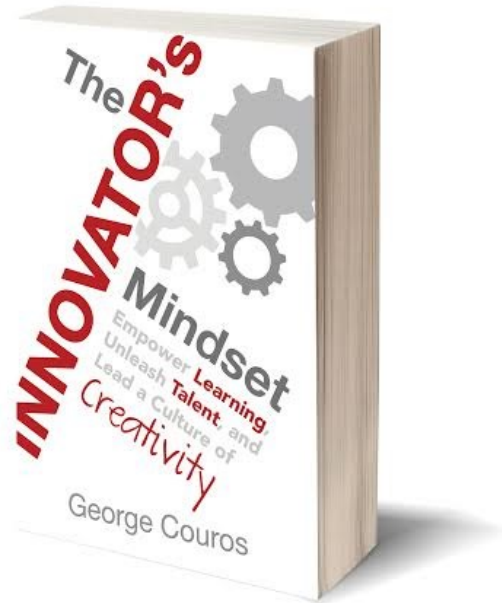
Review

The Innovator's Mindset is a reflective tool for administrators to evaluate their current practices. Couros poses questions and innovation ideas that push leaders to think "outside of the box" in order to create better learning spaces for students.

Couros is a servant leader who states the importance of ensuring teachers and students receive the education they require. There is a high level of differentiation required for his model which can be daunting to educators. Educators reading this book need to enter into the pages with a growth mindset to hear the message.

When Couros speaks of innovation, he often mentions technology. Technology is often a trigger word for teachers as they feel there is a lack of adequate technology in schools. What Couros is expecting educators to hear is that innovation does not require advanced technology but is a different way of thinking about education.

There are themes throughout that are repetitive but the repetition provides an opportunity to revisit his suggestions and solidify the intent of this book.



About the Author

George Couros has worked in the K-12 school system and has held positions such as teacher, facilitator, district administrator and now is consulted on innovation and engagement in schools. He speaks around the world with the themes of leadership development with students at the center of this development. He created the site ConnectedPrincipals.com to create a learning network for administrators. George is passionate about innovation and it resonates in his speeches to leaders.



Couros, George. (2015). *The Innovator's Mindset*. San Diego: Dave Burgess Consulting Inc.