

A few simple steps to help you make the most of your American Heritage lab experience.

“It’s not always the people who start out the smartest who end up the smartest.”¹ In other words, neurological research scientists have learned that your mind is capable of learning things you never thought possible.

Building Your Mental Super-Highway

Every time you learn something new, your brain actually forms new neuronal pathways. It’s as if every time you learn something new, your brain builds a new road. Eventually, you have a great system of interconnected roads and highways. What does this mean to you? It means that when your brain needs to make a connection between A and B, it now has many options—scenic routes, shortcuts, detours if there’s an obstacle in the road, and more. In a sense, then, you’re smarter.²

Case Studies

This knowledge about how the brain works can have a great impact on the way you think about yourself and your ability to learn. Consider the following case studies:

- Stephanie says she “can’t do econ.” She refuses to study for American Heritage because it’s “not her thing.”
- Mary is not innately good at economics but works hard at it because she relishes the challenge it presents. She believes her economics skills can improve with time and effort.

Stephanie and Mary have similar economics skills, but they differ greatly in their mindsets. People with a “fixed” mindset (like Stephanie) believe that intelligence is determined by nature rather than the product of effort and perseverance. With this assumption, they are not motivated to attain skills they don’t believe nature will allow. On the other hand, those like Mary who have a “growth” mindset assume that their capacities are expandable—something brain research has proven to be true. People with a growth mindset recognize the value of hard work. They don’t shy away from challenges because they realize that challenges provide opportunities for growth. Adopting a growth mindset improves your attitude toward learning as well as your learning performance.

Your Efforts Matter

We all have growth potential, even in areas where we think we are not “talented.” Brain research confirms this to be true. But do we all have what should be the natural offspring of that knowledge—a growth *mindset*? If not—

- Recognize when you’re using a fixed mindset, and actively remind yourself that you will not fall into the trap of thinking you are not capable.
- Constantly work to change the “fixed” mindset that may have been reinforced throughout your life. Make that effort regularly and often.
- Recognize that a person can have a fixed mindset in one area and a growth mindset in another. Reflect on areas where you have each mindset.
- Remind yourself daily to take on new challenges that you didn’t think were possible.
- Apply a growth mindset to your American Heritage experience.

Remember, because your capacities can grow, your efforts matter. Persistence can and will pay off!

¹ Carol Dweck, 2006, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, New York: Random House, 5.

² “About the Brain,” *University of Hawaii*, <http://home.honolulu.hawaii.edu/~leilani/brain.html>.