

FOSTERING AN INNOVATOR'S MINDSET WITH GEORGE COUROS

An influential educator shares his vision for inspiring creativity in students.

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GEORGE COUROS

is a leading educator in the area of innovative leadership, teaching, and learning. He has worked with all levels of school—from K-12 as a teacher and technology facilitator, school and district administrator, and is the author of the book "The Innovator's Mindset: Empower Learning, Unleash Talent, and Lead a Culture of Creativity."

Today's educators are tasked with preparing students for an uncertain future, where prospects in unskilled labor are shrinking and automated services are booming. How can leaders prepare students for a future in which change is the only constant? Educator and author George Couros says students could learn a lot by adopting an innovator's mindset.

Couros, a leading educator in the area of innovative leadership, teaching, and learning, published "The Innovator's Mindset" in 2016. In this interview, Couros shares how his method of fostering students' innate creativity can generate new, better opportunities in the classroom and beyond.

Couros is the keynote speaker at Discovery Education's two upcoming Powerful Practices instructional leadership events.

Q: As the keynote speaker at Powerful Practices this year, what can audience members expect to hear?

COUROS: The focus of the work is to take Carol Dweck's "Mindset" further. I think it's really an important work that we're examining in education, and what I'm trying to do is go a step further, by going past the concept of knowing by creating

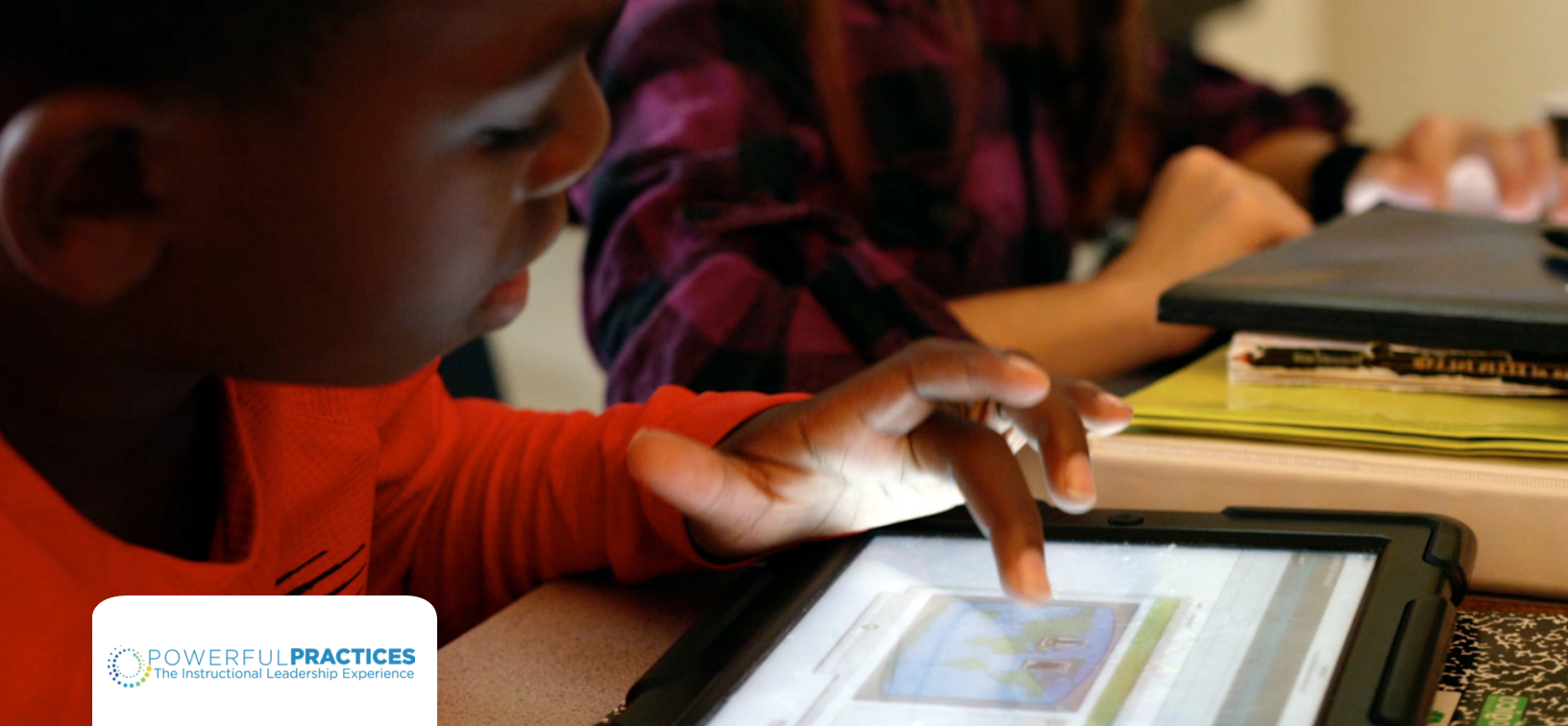
what you know. I think this is an essential mindset, especially in education, where we often feel that we're surrounded by limitations. I think that the notion of the innovator's mindset is about taking our knowledge and using that to create new ideas and new opportunities for students, and then teaching them how to develop that notion as well.

Q: What does it mean to have an innovator's mindset in education?

COUROS: Well, I think innovation is in danger of becoming a buzzword, because a lot of people aren't using it correctly. I think we often tend to equate innovation with how we use technology. But it's about what we create. It's about how we shape our minds and the way that we learn so that we're constantly seeking newer and better things, not just simply using technology in school.

Q: What can adopting this philosophy of innovation do for student achievement?

COUROS: If you examine the three mindsets, fixed mindset, growth mindset, and innovator's mindset, in the context of playing the piano — in fixed mindset, you would never be able to learn to play; growth mindset, you would believe that with hard work, time, and effort you



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would actually be able to learn; but with innovator’s mindset, not only will I be able to learn how to play, I will be able to compose and play music. One of my big beliefs is that if you are able to get to a point where you’re actually creating something with the knowledge you’ve acquired, you have to go so much deeper than simply having the knowledge.

So, do I want students to simply know math, or be able to do things with the math using what they’ve learned? Obviously, it’s going to enhance student achievement.

Q: Why is it important to promote classrooms that support creativity — and what role are classroom devices playing in that shift toward more creativity?

COUROS: Many people have offered the notion that students are already creative before they walk into school. So I don’t know if it’s about developing creativity or fostering the innate curiosity that our kids already have. We don’t want to take that away from them. And if you examine what’s happening throughout the world, the jobs where you don’t have to think too much, factory-model type jobs, those are actually disappearing.

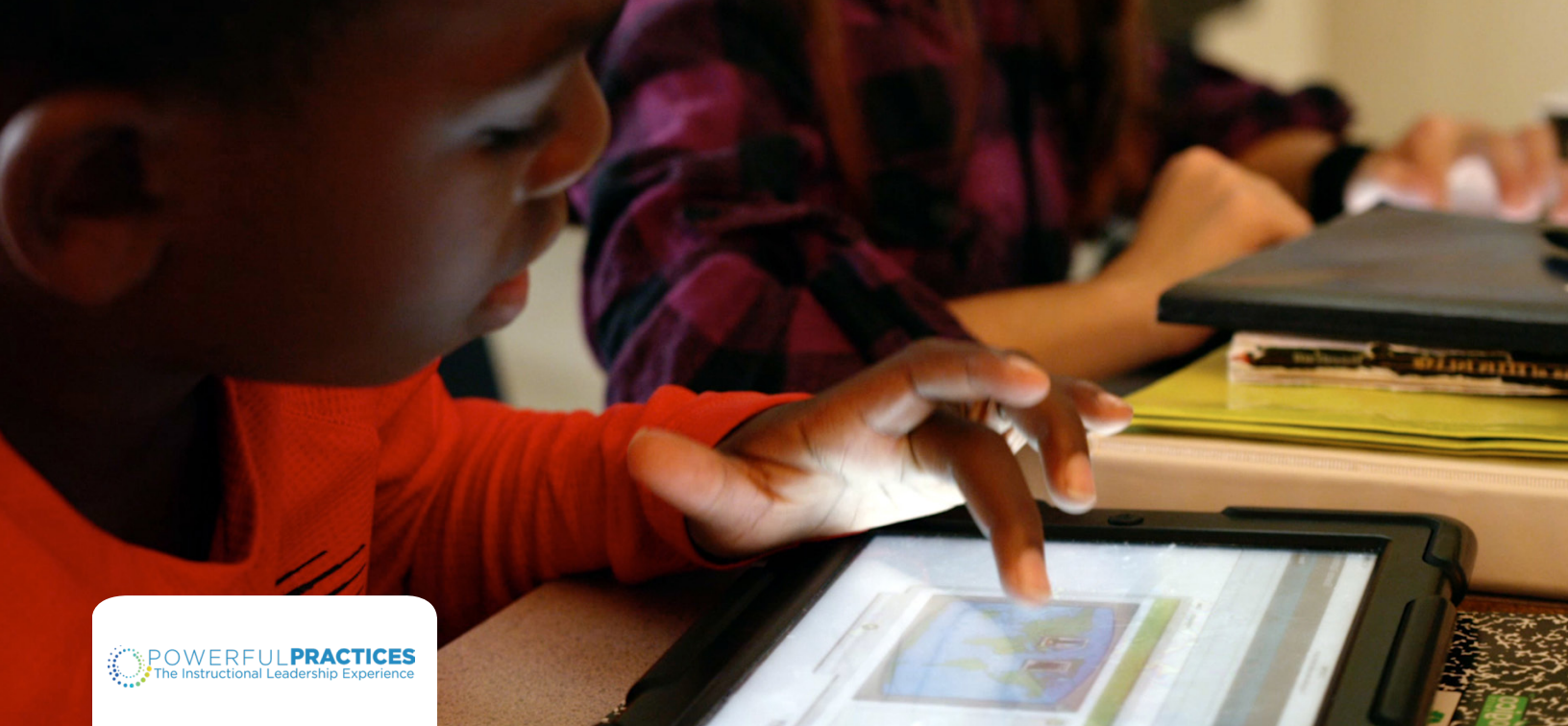
There’s an Amazon grocery store in Seattle where you check in with your mobile device, take what you need from the shelf, and walk out, and it charges you based on what you picked up. In those commercials, there are no people at cash

registers. Things that can be automated eventually will be automated. The notion that we need to foster creativity is going to become even more important if kids are going to be successful, not only in the future but right now, because it’s already happening.

As to technology, I don’t necessarily need students using devices all the time, but I do want them having access all the time. Of all the opportunities that technology brings to your classroom, research is certainly one important element, but what we can create with it is what’s powerful. The more in-depth you understand something, the more likely you are able to create something powerful with it.

Q: In regard to the current state of education — with devices in abundance and information at everyone’s fingertips — are students better prepared for tomorrow than they were in the past?

COUROS: In some ways, I think kids today are becoming better learners than we were because they have access to so much information. They’re able to learn in more profound and in-depth ways. What we’re trying to do is ensure schools foster that. We want them to develop as learners and be comfortable with change. As adults, we seem less and less comfortable with the notion of change, and what change can bring. I think that’s a crucial skill that we need to teach our kids — how to become adaptable and constantly evolve their own learnings and ways of thinking.



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Q: You’ve talked in the past about the need for leaders to embrace change in education. Do you think the barriers to adapt to change have lowered over time, with devices being proven out as crucial tools, or are educators just as skeptical of change as they always have been?

COUROS: I don’t necessarily think that today’s educators are reluctant to change. I think they’re reluctant to spend their time learning something that won’t necessarily help their students. It’s much more important today that leadership doesn’t just show off new things they can do, but instead articulate and have people experience why it’s so important to do this new thing.

If I knew something would change my life for the better, and it was proven to me, then I’m of course going to be more likely to take that opportunity to learn it, but if it’s simply aspirational, something I’m undertaking in the hopes of it leading somewhere better, then it’s not something I’m necessarily comfortable taking a risk on. Leadership is so important now in how we help people see that whatever change we’re talking about actually leads to better results.

Q: What’s one thing that you think is missing from today’s classrooms that you try to work toward as an educator yourself?

COUROS: I think reflection is something we talk a lot about, but don’t actually spend time doing in the classrooms. I think I’ve grown so much from using a blog as a space to do open reflections, and I’d love for more students to do the same. I think if you’re trying to move forward with anything, you have to look back at what you were doing, and we are far too often just obsessed with constantly looking at new things and taking in new knowledge. But how often do we actually take what we’ve done before and consider it, and make these crucial connections? I know I didn’t believe in it before I started doing it, and it’s had a profound impact on me ever since. So I really try to work with educators on how to think about embedding reflection, even if it’s in very simple ways, with their students and with themselves.