



## **But it won't work for me!**

Paul Magnuson  
November 2016

As a faculty, we spent an hour at the end of last week during a professional development day to explore the agile mindset.

We set up the hour to be both an example of working agilely and as a way to make content available to faculty members so they could take a stab at answering this one question:

*What might we mean when we say agile mindset?*

There were three paths from which faculty could choose to research their answer: (1) explore the websites of organizations currently pulling agile into education, (2) reading and discussing articles that I'd posted to our school website and made available in hard copy, and (3) talking to individuals who had been working with the agile mindset for awhile.

When someone felt like they had an answer, they were invited to share it via a sticky note they attached to a poster.

Some fun stuff happened. Right at the top of my list was watching and listening as three middle school teachers explained in poster session format what they had been doing in their classrooms. I had asked these teachers about being available during this pd time only two days earlier. They were not only available; they were prepared. They had displays and supporting materials and were, in short, all over it.

Also at the top of my list were the two faculty members who read and discussed the original Agile Manifesto ... in French. They are both intermediate students of French, and since the manifesto is available in French, and since they are learning French, *pourquoi pas?*

Others grouped around my colleague Bill, who started us down the agile road in the first place when he sent me the eduScrum weblink, and still others read some of these articles that I put together in the post-conference buzz after the October 2016 Scrum Alliance get together in Munich.

The library was full of chatter, choice, discussion and questions. I did not circulate to see who was and who wasn't on task ... it didn't seem right ... but I'm sure both behaviors were represented. Eventually colleagues started asking me questions, too, which provided another way to research the answer to "what the heck do we mean by an agile mindset anyway?"





I'm sure I have never given the same answer to this question myself. I say something along the lines of collaboration and short iterations and autonomy, all of which support student self-regulation. It's a new way of organizing ourselves. It's a new way of being, actually.

---

At the beginning of the next week, middle school students came together for their twice a week homeroom. I saw the same patterns of interaction between them as I saw during the professional development time with faculty members just a couple of days earlier. Students working alone or together, lost in their work or talking to each other, standing at the board or sitting at a table, moving around, generally taking care of themselves as they combine work and socializing, getting stuff done and being with friends.

I was, in fact, so struck with the similarity that I pulled out my iPhone and filmed them - each and every one of them. Sixteen of the 18 students were on task. The two that were off task were at the printer, collaborating on something or other, I'm not sure what, but I can't vouch that it was part of the agenda. Then again, I can't really vouch for what the agenda was, besides learning stuff together. Maybe they were on task.

It was noisy, but not raucous. It was the type of noise that you hear in a busy cafe or coffee shop. Sustained snippets of conversation and chairs moving away from tables and the clickety clack of the computer keyboard. Just like the adults during their agile session.

What really struck me, enough to sit here tonight and write it down, is the number of students who had their heads on the table. Zero. And the number of students who looked like they wished they were somewhere else. Zero. And the number of minutes after the period ended before the last student left. Ten.

I talked briefly with Steve, one of our visiting scholars, as homeroom ended. "How would we show that all this good-looking activity has an impact on learning," he asks, not quite in those words because my memory isn't that good. And I talked to my colleagues Tom and Nic after the last students left. They wonder how many minutes is ideal for this kind of learning. They wonder how long we could sustain this kind of environment. These are good questions.

---

I love the way the interaction looked in these two situations, one with adults and one with 12 to 14 year olds. But not everyone agrees this environment is the right one for class.

After the pd hour exploring possible definitions of the agile mindset, one colleague said this:

"But it won't work for me."





Hmm. Besides the obvious rejoinder that if you think something won't work, the likelihood of it working sinks like a rock, I wondered what would happen if we pursued the comment a little further. Somewhere where you can think slowly, like when writing. So I'm thinking aloud here, quietly.

Let's start with this:

But IT won't work for me. What is IT?

IT to me seems to express a method, something to do step by step, maybe a framework. But the agile mindset, as per the answers provided by teachers (see below), is captured better in words like "mentality" and "feeling" and "idea" and a "value." Certainly a mindset isn't incompatible with application in the classroom. A mindset is something we have before planning, before teaching.

So I'm betting that *the way we worked itself* is the IT. IT is the self organizing groups, made of individuals who picked the way they would reach the outcome, who created the coffee shop chatter and fluid groupings and allowed, of course, the freedom for some to blow off the exercise entirely. That's the IT. Student choice, autonomy, freedom ... they comprise the IT that this my colleague thinks doesn't work.

But it won't WORK for me. What is WORK?

For an educational method to work I suppose there has to be a definition of some result we expect. In other words, something can be said to work when it achieves the intended goal of the all the activity.

So what is going to WORK in the classroom depends on what the students are supposed to get out of it. I'm guessing that my colleague is worried that students may not get the prerequisite level of proficiency in the number of skills that are outlined in the curriculum and that the students might not be ready for the next level, ie the class in the subject that comes next year.

This is a concern to address, and it is the most common one I expect I'll hear as we continue pulling agile into the classroom. I would guess that providing students lots of autonomy and choice will lead them, on average, to pursue things they are interested in deeper than they might in a more traditional setting, and to avoid things they aren't interested in. If a student avoids too much of areas that are required to understand at the next level, and the next, there might be a real problem.

But I don't know. I remember David Perkins telling a group of educators at the International School of Brussels that the content we choose to teach likely isn't all that important. I'm sure he's written that down somewhere, too. I agree with him. The specific content might not matter so much, but the way one goes about approaching that content, relating it to prior knowledge,





and generating questions about things you don't know... that seems pretty important. It also seems pretty transferable between subjects.

Then we can open up the discussion to developing good soft skills for general learning an interaction in a group. A lecture format is probably under developing those skills, even though the soft skills of being a good group member, leader, questioner, and colleague are vitally important.

So if the WHAT they are learning includes the ability to learn, the ability to choose a learning path, the ability to redirect yourself when you get distracted, the ability to move between individual work and group work, reading and listening, talking and writing, well, then the students better practice operating that way, even if the coverage of subject matter is reduced.

The following isn't a coup de grâce for my argument by any means, but consider this: What if students who are able to demonstrate fair or even good knowledge of WHAT on a test can't do it again three months later, a year later, or three years later? Did we teach the right WHAT? Wouldn't there have been room for including soft skills in the WHAT, for actively practicing those skills, even if it reduced a bit of the subject matter the students covered in class?

**Here are the teacher's responses to the question: *What might we mean by an agile mindset?***

- The agile mindset emphasizes a bottom up, self-driven process where the client is key and changes, even late in the processes, are adapted to create, or find, the most useable outcome.
- Giving individuals control over their duties. It creates a feeling of self-determination and control over one's goals.
- Visibility (record of progress)
- Collaboration and communication
- Reflection and feedback
- Self-direction and empowerment
- Inspect and adapt
- "keep it light"
- assess regularly and change rather than stagnate
- An agile mindset seeks to improve communication and efficiency by coming up with shorter term iterations and ongoing adjustment to the plan.
- An agile mindset is allergic to ruts. It never gets stuck in one track because it seeks constant improvement. Its tools are flexibility, adaptability, and collaboration.





- Agile mindset is an idea that leaves room for students to have the flexibility to look into the topics that they are interested in.
- Agile is a mindset that values people, interactions and learning over processes and documents, and in education is a means to achieve agency and curiosity in the learners.
- The mentality to be flexible with students and collaborate on learning with them.
- Creating your own learning/growth experiences.
- Agile means dividing up a project into smaller parts; forming a group for completing each task; putting it altogether to produce a final project. An analogy to theater:
  - Choose the play.
  - set up the crews (actors, lights, set, sound, props, costumes, grips/stage hands; stage manager; director?)
  - Give the crews time to complete their tasks.
  - Allow time for feedback and reflection.
  - Put on the show!
- Agile is a way of having self directed learning.
  - To do, Doing, Review, Done and Help Me
  - Use Post-Its and board to see where each person is. Students are more active and teachers as facilitator.
  - Super in ms and potential in all classrooms
- An agile mindset is like a community of enquiry, where teachers only facilitate learning and students take responsibility for their learning according to their learning preference.
- Agile in education is an approach where learning goals and tasks are made available in a modular/obj oriented form and learners work in teams to accomplish these in a flexible or semi-flexible and self-organizing way.
- Learning cycle: Self-organization -> accountability -> feedback -> self-organizations ...
- Differentiation by choice

