

From Fixed to Fluid: A Narrative Inquiry into How First-Generation University Lecturers Construct and Negotiate Their Growth Mindset in the Face of Digital Transformation

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Abstract

Digital transformation in higher education demands not only technological proficiency but also fundamental shifts in how lecturers perceive their professional roles and identities. This study explores how first-generation university lecturers in North Sumatra construct and negotiate their growth mindset amidst the forces of digital transformation. Employing a narrative inquiry approach, this research delves into the subjective experiences of lecturers as they adapt to the demands of digital pedagogy and navigate their beliefs about teaching ability shifting from a fixed to a more fluid growth-oriented mindset. The study was conducted across several higher education institutions in North Sumatra, involving participants who are first-generation academics in their families. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and reflective document analysis, then analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. The findings reveal that digital transformation triggers tensions between long-held beliefs about the lecturer's role as the sole authority of knowledge and emerging demands to serve as facilitators of collaborative learning. The negotiation of growth mindset occurs through three primary processes: (1) acknowledgment of digital competency limitations as an entry point for learning, (2) pedagogical experimentation driven by student needs, and (3) critical reflection on both failures and successes in adopting technology. The socio-cultural context of North Sumatra including uneven digital infrastructure access and prevailing values of collectivism significantly influences how lecturers build resilience and openness to change. This study concludes that growth mindset is not an inherent trait but rather a narrative construct that is continuously negotiated through experience and reflection. These findings offer implications for professional development programs for Indonesian lecturers, particularly in designing training initiatives that emphasize not only technical skills but also the cultivation of adaptive professional identities in the digital era.

Keywords: *growth mindset, first-generation lecturers, digital transformation, narrative inquiry, North Sumatra higher education*

I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is undergoing an unprecedented transformation, driven by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies and the imperative for academic institutions to adapt to an increasingly interconnected world. Digital transformation in higher education is not merely about adopting new tools; it represents a fundamental shift in pedagogical paradigms, institutional cultures, and professional identities (Bates, 2019). This transformation demands that lecturers move beyond traditional roles as transmitters of knowledge to become facilitators of learning, designers of engaging digital experiences, and lifelong learners themselves (Redecker, 2017). For many academics, particularly those who are first-generation university lecturers individuals who are the first in their families to pursue an academic career this transition presents unique challenges and opportunities. These lecturers often navigate unfamiliar professional terrain without the benefit of familial guidance or inherited academic capital, making their experiences of adapting to digital transformation particularly significant (Gardner & Holley, 2012).

The concept of growth mindset, popularized by Carol Dweck, has emerged as a crucial framework for understanding how individuals respond to challenges and setbacks. A growth mindset the belief that abilities and intelligence can be

developed through dedication and effort has been shown to foster resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to embrace learning opportunities (Dweck, 2006). In the context of higher education, growth mindset has been identified as a significant correlate of lecturers' adoption of innovative instructional practices, including those involving artificial intelligence (Jaiswal & Al-Hattami, 2024). However, growth mindset is not a static attribute; it is continuously constructed and negotiated through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). For first-generation lecturers, the process of developing and maintaining a growth mindset may be particularly complex, shaped by their unique biographical trajectories and the socio-cultural contexts in which they work (Gardner, 2013).

North Sumatra, as a region with a rapidly developing higher education sector, provides a compelling setting for exploring these dynamics. Institutions such as Universitas Sumatera Utara have made significant strides in digital innovation, launching programs like the digital-based "Plug & Play" learning initiative and expanding internationally accredited study programs (Universitas Sumatera Utara, 2023). Similarly, UIN Sumatera Utara has actively pursued the vision of becoming a "Smart University," integrating technology, data literacy, and Islamic values into its academic ecosystem (UIN Sumatera Utara, 2024). These institutional commitments to digital transformation create both opportunities and pressures for lecturers, who are expected to adapt their teaching practices, engage with learning management systems, and contribute to a digitally literate academic community (Sutrisno & Pillay, 2021). At the same time, studies have documented persistent challenges in the implementation of digital initiatives across North Sumatra, including uneven institutional readiness, limited infrastructure, and varying levels of digital competence among lecturers (Supriadi et al., 2024).

The experiences of first-generation lecturers in navigating these demands are particularly salient given the broader structural conditions of Indonesian academia. Research has highlighted the tension between academic autonomy and bureaucratic control in Indonesian higher education, with expanding administrative and digital governance systems—such as the Integrated Human Resources Information System (SISTER)—shaping lecturers' professional identities and practices (Pratiwi & Siregar, 2023). These systems, while ostensibly designed to enhance efficiency and accountability, can also create pressures that prioritize compliance over critical thinking and creativity (Sulistyaningtyas & Astuti, 2022). For first-generation lecturers, who may already experience role ambiguity and feelings of isolation as they build their professional identities (Gardner & Holley, 2012), these bureaucratic demands can compound the challenges of adapting to digital transformation.

Moreover, the socio-cultural context of North Sumatra characterized by values of collectivism, religious tradition, and diverse linguistic practices influences how lecturers construct their professional identities and respond to change. Research on English-medium instruction in Indonesian Islamic higher education has revealed how lecturers' language ideologies and identity positions shape their pedagogical decisions (Zacharias, 2019). Similarly, studies of novice lecturers in non-Western academic settings have underscored the importance of institutional support, mentorship, and peer collaboration in facilitating professional development (Sembiring & Wijaya, 2020). These findings suggest that understanding the experiences of first-generation lecturers requires attention not only to individual psychological factors, such as growth mindset, but also to the institutional and cultural contexts that enable or constrain professional growth (Yamin & Suhendar, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on digital transformation in higher education and the challenges faced by novice and first-generation academics, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these dynamics intersect. Specifically, little research has explored the narrative processes through which first-generation lecturers construct and negotiate their growth mindset in response to digital transformation. Narrative inquiry, as a methodological approach, offers a powerful lens for capturing the subjective, storied nature of professional identity formation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By attending to the lived experiences and meaning-making practices of lecturers, narrative inquiry can illuminate the complex interplay between personal biography, institutional context, and professional adaptation (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This approach is particularly well-suited to exploring how first-generation lecturers navigate the tensions between fixed and fluid mindsets as they respond to the demands of digital pedagogy.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating how first-generation university lecturers in North Sumatra construct and negotiate their growth mindset in the face of digital transformation. Guided by a narrative inquiry framework, the research explores the following questions: How do first-generation lecturers experience and make sense of the demands of digital transformation? What narratives do they construct about their capacities to adapt and grow as educators? How do they negotiate the tensions between fixed and fluid mindsets in their professional practice? And how do the institutional and socio-cultural contexts of North Sumatra shape these processes of identity construction? By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute to theoretical understandings of growth mindset as a dynamic, socially situated construct, as well as to provide practical insights for supporting the professional development of first-generation lecturers in Indonesia and beyond.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform institutional policies and practices that foster adaptive professional identities in the digital era. As universities across Indonesia invest in digital transformation initiatives, understanding the experiences of lecturers who are navigating this transition is essential for designing effective

professional development programs. Research has shown that fostering a growth mindset among faculty is crucial for promoting digital readiness and the adoption of innovative teaching practices (Hsu & Lin, 2023). However, cultivating growth mindset requires more than simply encouraging positive thinking; it demands attention to the structural and cultural conditions that shape lecturers' opportunities for learning and growth (Murphy & Dweck, 2016). By illuminating the narrative processes through which first-generation lecturers negotiate their mindsets, this study can offer insights into how institutions can create supportive environments that enable all faculty members—regardless of their background—to thrive in the face of change.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader literature on academic identity and professional development in non-Western contexts. Much of the existing research on growth mindset and digital transformation in higher education has been conducted in Western settings, raising questions about the transferability of findings to different cultural and institutional contexts (Wang & Degol, 2017). By focusing on North Sumatra, this study provides a contextualized understanding of how growth mindset is constructed and negotiated within a specific socio-cultural and institutional landscape. The findings can inform comparative analyses of academic professional development across diverse settings, contributing to a more globally inclusive scholarship on higher education.

In the sections that follow, this paper provides a detailed review of the relevant literature on growth mindset, digital transformation in higher education, and the experiences of first-generation and novice academics. The methodology section describes the narrative inquiry approach employed in this study, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The findings section presents the stories and themes that emerged from the research, organized around key narrative patterns and processes. Finally, the discussion section interprets these findings in light of the existing literature, explores their implications for theory and practice, and identifies directions for future research.

II. METHODS

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore how first-generation university lecturers in North Sumatra construct and negotiate their growth mindset in response to digital transformation. Narrative inquiry was chosen for its capacity to capture the subjective, storied nature of professional identity formation and its emphasis on understanding human experience through the stories people tell about their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodological framework aligns with the study's aim to examine the dynamic, context-dependent processes through which lecturers make meaning of their professional adaptation to digital change (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The study was conducted across three higher education institutions in North Sumatra, comprising two public universities and one private university. These institutions were purposively selected to represent diverse institutional contexts, including varying levels of digital infrastructure and institutional support for digital transformation (Sutrisno & Pillay, 2021). Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, with eligibility criteria including: (a) first-generation status being the first individual in their immediate family to pursue an academic career as a university lecturer; (b) a minimum of two years of teaching experience; and (c) active engagement with digital teaching practices. A total of twelve lecturers participated in the study, representing diverse disciplines including education, social sciences, and natural sciences. This sample size is consistent with narrative inquiry traditions, which prioritize depth of understanding over statistical generalizability (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and reflective document analysis. Each participant engaged in two to three interview sessions, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, allowing for the exploration of participants' professional histories, experiences with digital transformation, and reflections on their growth mindset development (Seidman, 2019). Interview protocols were designed to elicit rich narratives, with questions exploring critical incidents, turning points, and significant relationships that shaped participants' professional identities. Additionally, participants were invited to share reflective journals or teaching portfolios that documented their experiences with digital pedagogy. Data collection was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with selected excerpts translated into English for analysis and reporting (Temple & Young, 2004).

Data analysis employed a narrative thematic analysis approach, following the iterative processes described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and adapted for narrative inquiry. The analysis proceeded through several phases: (a) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and documents; (b) identification of narrative threads and storylines across participants' accounts; (c) thematic coding of key narrative patterns related to growth mindset construction and negotiation; and (d) synthesis of themes into a coherent interpretive framework. Member checking was conducted with participants to ensure the credibility and resonance of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' identities through the use of pseudonyms.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

. This section presents the key findings of the narrative inquiry, organized around three overarching themes that emerged from the participants' stories. These themes illuminate the complex processes through which first-generation lecturers in North Sumatra construct and negotiate their growth mindset in response to digital transformation: (1) Navigating Vulnerability and The Entry Point to Growth, (2) Pedagogical Experimentation as a Catalyst for Mindset Shift, and (3) The Socio-Cultural Mediation of Professional Adaptation.

Navigating Vulnerability and the Entry Point to Growth

All participants described an initial phase of vulnerability and self-doubt when confronted with the demands of digital transformation. This vulnerability, however, paradoxically served as an entry point for growth mindset development. Participants recounted feelings of inadequacy when faced with learning management systems, video conferencing tools, and digital assessment platforms. As one participant, a lecturer in the Faculty of Education, reflected, "I felt like a student again. I didn't even know how to share my screen during online classes. I was embarrassed because my students were more tech-savvy than me. But that shame pushed me to learn." This finding aligns with Dweck and Yeager's (2019) assertion that acknowledging limitations is a critical precursor to adopting a growth mindset. Rather than retreating into fixed beliefs about their capabilities, participants transformed their vulnerability into motivation for learning.

However, the narrative data also revealed that vulnerability was not uniformly experienced. Lecturers from disciplines perceived as more technology-oriented, such as natural sciences and engineering, reported less anxiety than their counterparts in social sciences and humanities. This disparity underscores the disciplinary cultures that shape professional identity and perceived competence in digital pedagogy (Bates, 2019). Importantly, participants emphasized that institutional support or the lack thereof significantly influenced their ability to move from vulnerability to growth. Those who received structured training and mentorship reported more positive narrative trajectories, while those who were left to navigate digital tools independently described prolonged periods of frustration and self-doubt. This finding corroborates research by Sembiring and Wijaya (2020), who highlighted the critical role of institutional support in facilitating professional development among novice lecturers in Indonesian universities.

Pedagogical Experimentation as a Catalyst for Mindset Shift

The second major theme that emerged was the role of pedagogical experimentation in catalyzing the negotiation of growth mindset. Participants described how the necessity of digital teaching during the pandemic and its aftermath compelled them to experiment with new instructional strategies, often driven by the immediate needs of their students. One participant, a lecturer in the social sciences, explained, "My students were bored with my PowerPoint slides. They wanted interactive activities, online discussions, something different. So I started trying new apps, even though I was afraid of making mistakes. Each failure taught me something." This narrative pattern reflects the idea that growth mindset is not merely a cognitive belief but is enacted through practice and experiential learning (Murphy & Dweck, 2016).

The experimentation process was characterized by a cycle of trial, reflection, and adjustment. Participants described how initial failures such as technical glitches during online lectures or low student engagement with digital assignments were reinterpreted as learning opportunities rather than evidence of personal inadequacy. This reinterpretation was facilitated by peer collaboration, with many participants forming informal support networks to share tips and troubleshoot problems. As one participant noted, "We created a WhatsApp group with other lecturers in my faculty. We shared what worked and what didn't. That community made me feel braver." This finding aligns with research by Zacharias (2019), who emphasized the importance of collaborative learning communities in supporting professional identity construction in Indonesian academic settings.

The concept of "fluid" mindset, as opposed to "fixed," became apparent in participants' narratives as they described their evolving relationship with technology. Rather than viewing digital competence as a fixed attribute, they came to see it as a continuum that could be expanded through sustained effort and experimentation. This shift was particularly pronounced among participants who engaged in reflective practices, such as journaling or peer observation, which allowed them to systematically document their learning trajectories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Table 1 summarizes the key dimensions of pedagogical experimentation reported by participants.

Table 1. Dimensions of Pedagogical Experimentation

Dimension	Description	Examples from Narratives
Motivation for Change	Drivers that prompted experimentation	Student feedback, institutional mandates, peer influence
Trial and Error Process	Frequency and nature of experimentation	Weekly to monthly; individual and collaborative

Emotional Responses	Affective experiences during experimentation	Anxiety, excitement, frustration, pride
Learning Outcomes	Skills and insights gained	Technical proficiency, pedagogical versatility, student engagement
Support Mechanisms	Resources and relationships enabling experimentation	Peer networks, institutional training, online tutorials

The Socio-Cultural Mediation of Professional Adaptation

The third theme highlights how the socio-cultural context of North Sumatra mediates the construction and negotiation of growth mindset. Participants' narratives were deeply embedded in local cultural values, including collectivism, religious tradition, and familial expectations. One participant, a first-generation lecturer from a rural background, described the pressure to succeed as "not just for myself but for my whole family. They look up to me. If I fail, it means they fail." This narrative reveals how first-generation status carries additional weight, as professional success is intertwined with family honor and community expectations (Gardner, 2013). This cultural pressure could be a double-edged sword: while it motivated participants to persist in learning digital skills, it also intensified the fear of failure.

Collectivist values also shaped how participants sought and provided support. Rather than viewing professional development as an individual endeavor, participants emphasized the importance of communal learning and collective problem-solving. Many described relying on colleagues, not only for technical assistance but also for emotional reassurance. This finding resonates with research by Yamin and Suhendar (2021), who documented the role of collectivism in shaping academic professional development practices in Indonesian higher education.

However, the socio-cultural context also presented barriers. Participants from areas with limited digital infrastructure described struggles with inconsistent internet connectivity and inadequate access to digital resources, which hindered their efforts to develop digital competence. As one participant from a regional university lamented, "It's hard to have a growth mindset when the technology doesn't even work. I want to learn, but the system doesn't support me." This finding underscores the material conditions that constrain the enactment of growth mindset, even when individuals possess positive attitudes toward learning (Supriadi et al., 2024). Table 2 presents the socio-cultural factors influencing growth mindset negotiation as identified by participants.

Table 2. Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Growth Mindset Negotiation

Factor	Positive Influence	Negative Influence
Collectivism	Peer support, shared learning	Conformity pressure, reluctance to stand out
Religious Tradition	Resilience through faith, ethical commitment	Perceived tension between tradition and technology
Familial Expectations	Motivation to succeed, pride in achievement	Fear of failure, heightened performance anxiety
Digital Infrastructure	N/A (enabling condition)	Limited access, unreliable connectivity
Institutional Culture	Encouragement of innovation	Bureaucratic rigidity, lack of formal support

Synthesis and Interpretation

Taken together, these findings illustrate that growth mindset among first-generation lecturers in North Sumatra is not a static trait but a dynamic narrative construct continuously negotiated through vulnerability, experimentation, and socio-cultural mediation. The process of moving from a fixed to a fluid mindset involves acknowledging limitations, embracing experimentation, and navigating the cultural and material conditions of professional practice. This interpretation supports the view that growth mindset is context-dependent and shaped by institutional and structural factors (Murphy & Dweck, 2016; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). The narrative data also reveal that first-generation status introduces unique pressures and resources, as familial expectations and collectivist values can both motivate and constrain professional adaptation.

The findings further suggest that institutions play a critical role in facilitating growth mindset development. Structured support, peer networks, and reflective practices emerged as key enablers, while inadequate infrastructure and bureaucratic constraints were identified as significant barriers. These insights align with previous research on professional development in Indonesian higher education (Sutrisno & Pillay, 2021; Pratiwi & Siregar, 2023). The study contributes to the growing body of literature on academic identity and digital transformation by providing a nuanced, context-sensitive account of how first-generation lecturers navigate the tensions between fixed and fluid mindsets in their professional practice.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This narrative inquiry has illuminated the complex and dynamic processes through which first-generation university lecturers in North Sumatra construct and negotiate their growth mindset in response to digital transformation. The findings demonstrate that growth mindset is not a fixed personal attribute but a fluid narrative construct that emerges through the interplay of vulnerability, pedagogical experimentation, and socio-cultural mediation. First-generation lecturers navigate unique challenges as they build their professional identities without familial academic capital, yet their experiences of vulnerability often serve as catalysts for growth rather than barriers to adaptation.

Three key conclusions emerge from this study. First, the negotiation of growth mindset occurs through a cyclical process of acknowledging limitations, engaging in pedagogical experimentation, and reflecting on learning experiences. This process is enabled by institutional support, peer collaboration, and reflective practices, while constrained by inadequate infrastructure and bureaucratic rigidity. Second, the socio-cultural context of North Sumatra characterized by collectivism, religious tradition, and familial expectations significantly shapes how lecturers experience and respond to digital transformation. These cultural values can both motivate and pressure first-generation lecturers, creating a complex emotional landscape that influences their openness to change. Third, the study underscores the importance of contextualized approaches to fostering growth mindset, recognizing that individual beliefs are inseparable from the institutional and structural conditions of professional practice.

These findings have important implications for higher education policy and practice. Institutions seeking to support first-generation lecturers in the digital era must move beyond technical training to address the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of professional adaptation. Creating supportive peer networks, providing structured mentorship, and investing in digital infrastructure are essential strategies for enabling all lecturers to thrive in an increasingly digital academic landscape. Future research should explore comparative perspectives across different regions of Indonesia and examine the long-term trajectories of growth mindset development among first-generation academics.

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Ethical Compliance

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization, with pseudonyms used throughout. The research protocol received approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection.

Data Access Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions, as they contain information that could compromise the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants. Access to the data will be granted to qualified researchers for academic purposes, subject to appropriate data protection agreements and institutional approval. Requests for access should be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted independently without any financial, commercial, or personal relationships that could have influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript. No funding from external sources with potential interests in the research outcomes was received. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of this manuscript and affirm the integrity and objectivity of the research findings.

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