A²RH
Attitudes, Approaches, Routines & Habits Explained
Developing Learning Attitudes

Pupils’ attitudes towards learning determine their engagement with learning, so it is important that we focus on helping pupils to develop the right learning attitudes from the beginning of their time at LWC. Shaping, questioning and encouraging pupils’ attitudes is at the heart of ARRH, as everything follows from this important life skill.

An attitude is the way you choose to be; it governs the way you deal with a situation or a problem, or how you think about something. Believing that ‘you can and you will’, or that ‘you can’t...yet’ are clearly positive learning attitudes.

The great thing about attitudes is that you can change them. You can shift them from negative to positive, from fearful to accepting uncertainty as part of the process. It may not be easy, but you can do it.

In learning terms, attitudes lie at the heart of how you respond to all of the learning opportunities in school. A positive attitude to learning means deciding that you want to be better than you are, recognising that every opportunity is an opportunity to learn, and encouraging and supporting others in their learning. Having a positive learning attitude is also known as having a ‘growth mindset’, in the phrase popularised by Carol Dweck in her book ‘Mindset’.

At LWC, we believe that everyone can develop positive learning attitudes.

- We encourage pupils to focus on learning goals rather than outcome goals.
  - This means that all assessments and grades have a value because they inform the way we set about our learning. How did you get that good mark? Why did you lose marks? Was it because of gaps in skills or in knowledge? What can you do to close the gaps?
- We encourage pupils to value feedback.
  - Feedback helps inform the next step in learning. By listening and responding to feedback we can make specific changes to our processes.
- We encourage pupils to be honest about their learning.
  - Being honest about the effort put in, or the time spent, or the focus of a piece of work enables teachers to give worthwhile feedback.
- We encourage pupils to ‘fail forward’.
  - This attitude encourages ownership of and responsibility for learning. It’s about avoiding excuses and recognising when pupils haven’t put in place the best conditions for learning or improving.
- We encourage pupils to have a clear vision of what they want to achieve academically and of the purpose of studying.
  - Every attitude needs a purpose. We aim to help pupils understand the ‘bigger picture’ around learning that extends into life beyond school and university.

Parental perceptions can unwittingly put barriers in the way of their child building a positive learning attitude. Comments such as ‘I was never good at maths’, or ‘I always found French difficult’, or ‘We don’t know where it comes from...no-one in our family has ever been good at Physics’ imply that knowledge or academic success are genetically ‘hard-wired’ and thus ‘beyond our control’. Similarly, outcome-based rewards can put pressure on children to perform rather than to learn. Promising a reward if your child achieves all 9s can lead to a negative learning attitude, with fear of failure dominating, whereas recognising your child’s excellent attitude towards learning during their revision time is a powerful tool. If the child has done all that they could, listened and responded to feedback, got up every time they fell, then these are important life skills that should be rewarded.
**ATTITUDES**

**LORD WANDSWORTH COLLEGE**

**KNOWING WHERE YOU ARE GOING**

- Do you have a clear vision of what you want to achieve academically?
- Do you know what the purpose of what you are studying is?
- Do you understand the difference between 'doing the work' and learning?
- Do you believe in learning goals (I'm defined by my effort) rather than performance goals (I'm defined by my mark)?
- Is your focus always on closing the gap between what you know and understand and what you don't yet know and understand?
- Are you aware of the need to balance work and activities in your weekly schedule?

**TAKING RESPONSIBILITY**

- Do you believe in supporting others as they learn?
- Are you always honest about the effort you put in?
- Do you recognise that you are learning for yourself, not your parents or your school?
- Do you recognise that everything you do in learning terms is a choice?

**KEEPING AN OPEN MIND**

- Do you believe that the skills of learning can be learnt?
- Do you value feedback?
- Are you willing to try new ways of learning?

**DEMONSTRATING RESILIENCE**

- Do you believe in maintaining commitment?
- Do you fall forwards?
Having the right attitude is the first step to building and maintaining effective approaches to learning. An approach is the way you set about doing something. In learning terms it could be defined as having the right strategies to cope with challenges by being flexible in your thinking, and having the emotional and behavioural self-regulation to control the impulses that might run counter to the successful implementation of the strategies.

Just as there are many different paths to success in learning terms, so there is a range of different approaches necessary to achieve the goal. It is also important for pupils to recognise that they need to adapt their approaches as the challenges evolve, or as they change from one key stage to another, or as mastery of one aspect ‘unlocks’ a new level of challenge.

Having the right approach to learning means:

- Being flexible in your thinking
  - As you face different learning challenges you keep an open mind to different solutions, remaining positive even the face of difficulty, and recognising similarities between subjects or concepts;

- Being open-minded
  - Listening and using feedback as a tool to shape and refine your approach in a particular domain, asking questions and evaluating how the ‘best’ solve the same problems;

- Being emotionally self-aware
  - Recognising and controlling negative feelings or emotions that block the path to a solution, such as fear of failure, or anxiety about changing what seems to work. We call this ‘failing forward’: learning to recognise your own strengths and weaknesses in learning terms and being prepared to challenge them both;

- Being aware that the core aspects of your approach will grow and develop
  - Having the courage to recognise when an approach is no longer as effective as it should be, being creative in finding what aspect needs to change and being resilient in maintaining the change.

Self-regulation, or the ability to keep control of one’s emotions and behaviours to develop the right approach, is an important element of developing the right approaches. It means recognising one’s own strengths and weaknesses when faced with a learning challenge. Often, a lack of self-regulation leads to those phrases we often hear like ‘I can’t do this’, ‘I don’t understand any of this’, ‘This is impossible’. This is the moment to have the coaching conversation about failing forward!
Routines can be defined as patterns of action or simple structures that are repeated, so that they become a natural part of the pupil’s learning process. Over the years, pupils develop a number of different routines, some of which are beneficial to learning, some of which are less so. Our aim is to help pupils to develop a range of different learning routines, driven by their learning approaches and governed by their learning attitude. These routines will change as their learning challenges change.

Once pupils have established a positive attitude to learning, they need to establish routines to ensure that they can make tangible progress towards becoming a ‘self-solver’. Some routines will depend on the pupil having the right approaches, as inherent frustrations or ‘bumps in the road’ will rely on the pupil being able to demonstrate emotional, behavioural and even metacognitive self-regulation. The challenge to turn a series of actions into a routine, especially when that routine means ‘doing the worst things first’, or forgoing easy wins for difficult challenges are examples of situations when self-regulation is vital.

At the heart of successful routines are what Charles Duhigg (‘The Power of Habit’) refers to as the ‘3 Rs of Habit’:

- **Reminder**: a regular slot, at the same time, prompted perhaps by a phone/Outlook reminder;
- **Routine**: the series of actions;
- **Reward**: to begin with, it might be extrinsic (chocolate or watching Netflix!) but it might become intrinsic (the good feeling that comes from doing it and knowing it’s making a difference).

Each individual pupil needs to work out their own routines, based on their own particular needs. It may be to practise a skill, or to review content from the previous week’s lessons. It might be to read ahead, or to review and learn from feedback on a piece of PREP. It might have a more general aim, such as setting aside 15 minutes at the end/beginning of each PREP time to review learning, or to complete half-finished worksheets. It should include completing PREP on the night it is set.

If the routine is linked to PREP, it is always important to do the ‘worst things first’: start with the hardest piece and work on to the one that requires the least brain power. Similarly, when motivation is low, the ten-minute rule (tell yourself just to do ten minutes...and you’ll find you will keep going!)

If the routine is linked to learning or reviewing, then it is important to ensure that any specific review of knowledge or skills is both spaced and interleaved. Spaced practice is the opposite of cramming: it means focusing on something for a defined period (ideally 50 minutes) and then leaving it for a day before returning to it. The benefits of forcing the brain to recall skills or knowledge from long-term memory are clear. In the same way, pupils need to interleave their practice, moving on to a different subject once they have realised that they have ‘mastered’ the skill/knowledge they were practising. Once something starts to come easily, it is important to stop and make the brain do something different. Coming back to the skill or knowledge later is more powerful than simply carrying on with it when the mind has spent time practising. The link to exam-based memory retrieval is obvious: the brain must jump from one question type to another, and from one area of knowledge to another, all under time pressure. The more practice the brain has at doing this the better.
Developing Learning Habits

Before behaviours can develop into habits, they need to become regularly performed routines. Unlike routines, which generally imply a level of challenge, habits are things that we do ‘unthinkingly’, such as washing our hands or brushing our teeth. Building learning habits takes time. Where skipping a routine generally doesn’t make you feel too bad, skipping something that is a habit normally feels wrong.

To begin with, pupils can develop some simple habits that support their learning routines. Once it feels right to:

- Practise skills as well as topic content;
- Start with what they don’t know, not what they do know;
- Use feedback effectively;
- Review work and take effective notes;
- Make every PREP moment count;
- Work in a clear, clean, quiet environment;
- Remove all distractions when focusing on learning;

...then supportive habits are already being formed that will help pupils not just at school but in later life. If these become ingrained and can happen without thinking, then whatever the routine needed, the pupil is already giving themselves the best chance of making it effective.

Other habits may take more time to develop, because they involve making conscious choices to self-challenge. These might include:

- Taking the tough choice not the easy one for PREP or work: do I just ‘do the PREP’, or do I try to ‘do better than just doing the PREP’?
- Taking the choice to build in 15 minutes of review time every evening;
- Taking time to use the VLE resources to guide learning choices;

At the same time, it is important for pupils to develop habits that encourage positive mental health, such as:

- Breaking from work to give their brain a chance to ‘recover’;
- Using ‘brain breaks’ to relax, not to do more brain-based activity such as using screens or going online

If the pupil develops the right habits, then their routines become significantly more powerful. Again, self-regulation is at the heart of building effective habits.
At first glance, it might seem odd to be writing an article encouraging failure. For many, the word projects an image of unfulfilled potential, of missing out, of under-achieving, of not becoming what one might have become. But this is about the need for schools to be places where pupils can (and do) fail. In this article I will be considering the more general implications around the interpretations of failure, and in the next article I will focus more specifically on building a ‘failing forward’ academic culture.

From an early age, children are frequently exposed to the negative implications of failure. For all the attempts in schools to rebrand it as First Attempts In Learning, the message so often conveyed to children in many areas of their lives is one of undesirable outcomes. All too often, the focus of failure is on the moment of failure, rather than on the reasons for or the response to that moment. Newspapers, newsfeeds, television broadcasts can sharpen that ill-directed focus through their pursuit of the quick and powerful image or story at the expense of the detail that gives that moment a meaningful (and learning-rich) context. It is the multiple explosions of the SpaceX starship rockets that makes the news, rather than the lessons learnt or the discussion, testing and modelling aimed at resolving the problem; it is the relentless media pressure surrounding a football manager going through a ‘bad patch’ of results, rather than on the work they are doing behind the scenes. Such simplistic images of failure, with the accompanying ‘banner-headline’ criticism, ridicule or condemnation are quickly absorbed by impressionable young people. It is hardly surprising, then, that children (and parents) can perceive failure to be something to be avoided at all costs.

It might be argued that this is no bad thing, and that we should not dress things up with different labels just so that people can feel better about themselves. My argument is that we need to reflect carefully on the potential damage caused to a child’s self-efficacy through ill-considered focus on the moment of ‘failure’, without any consideration given to the causes, circumstances, consequences and responses. In some cases, this damage can
have a lasting impact on a child’s ability to deal with situations that demand resilience and that may result in initial failure.

This can be further exacerbated in school, when teachers focus exclusively on the marks achieved by pupils irrespective of the approach demonstrated to achieve them, or when a classroom atmosphere exists in which ‘getting it right’ carries more weight than ‘having a go’. It can be hard for a child to rid themselves of that zero-sum game: ‘good marks = intelligent, bad marks = stupid’, and that the learning journey of is therefore of little importance. Instead of asking for guidance or feedback, pupils often remain silent rather than ‘expose’ their ‘failure’ in a public way in the classroom.

*It is not finding things hard or confusing that is the problem. It is the automatic, barely noticed thought process which converts difficulty and mistakes into a self-critical judgement of inferiority. When students don’t see that it is the ‘interpretation’ not the fact of failure that is affecting their feelings, their determination to learn is always going to be brittle.*

Such messages can bury themselves deep in the mind if received at a young age, providing plenty of ammunition to Steve Peter’s ‘chimp’ as it sits on the pupil’s shoulder in later years. They can also set in motion behaviours aimed at controlling or avoiding situations where failure might reoccur, the very situations so often needed for meaningful learning to happen. Fearing failure, believing that failing once means you are a ‘failure’, or avoiding challenge to circumvent failure are approaches to learning directed by such thoughts.

For some pupils, these behaviours lead to a relentless and unforgiving work ethic, driven by a feeling that they must overcome failure through more work, more practice, more time spent on the subject. Others adopt a ‘don’t try so don’t fail’ approach, sticking firmly to things they know rather than seeing failure as a ‘part of the process’. These beliefs about the purely negative connotations of failure can be reinforced unwittingly by misdirected parental praise or rewards given purely for results or outcomes.

*In the rush to make people successful exam-passers, we have forgotten the deeper purpose of education; we have overlooked their deeper need to become successful people, eager to learn and grown in the real-life world of work, leisure and relationships – and to become successful people they need a rich set of useful, general-purpose habits of mind that will stand them in good stead whatever they want or need or turn their hand to.*

Although many teachers would love to inspire their pupils with a love for their subject, we know that for most of them there will be a gradual forgetting of Newton’s laws, the rules for forming the future tense, or the consequences of William landing in England in 1066. If teachers are to do their job well, what should remain are transferrable hard and soft skills, strategies drawn from the pupils’ experiences (supported by those in authority) for setting and managing one’s own expectations, and for dealing with failure and success (and treating those two imposters...you know the rest). In addition, they should leave with a distinct awareness of ‘self’, and of the meta-cognitive skills that should be at play every time learning happens in school. Such a person might well be labelled a ‘self-aware learner’.

So how do we reframe the concept of failure so that it becomes a meaningful learning experience, valued by pupil and parent alike? How can we achieve the seemingly impossible aim of re-framing the right kind of failure as a desirable outcome, whilst spreading a more subtle definition amongst those primarily responsible for shaping the next generation?

3 Ibid (p1X).
We choose to do this by encouraging our pupils to recognise two approaches to failure, defined as failing forward and failing backwards. One is the ‘right type’ of failure, and the other is not! The concept is a simple one, but it demands strength of character, self-awareness and bravery if it is to have a long-term positive impact.

Classrooms are places where failures are often all too visible. The pupil who timidly raises a hand to answer a question may well spend the rest of the lesson squirming quietly at the swift ‘no’ that their incorrect answer elicited from the teacher. The test paper returned with the D or E grade can feel like a public certification of lack of ability in the subject, rather than the outcome of a set of random questions testing specific skills on a specific area of knowledge.

It is all too easy to fail backwards, to equate lack of success in a test with inability in the subject and to assume that one poor result or one wrong answer is indicative of a general trend. Others respond by deflecting ownership of failure by focusing on circumstances out of their control such as ‘poor teaching’, or ‘not having enough time to prepare for a test’.

For some pupils, failing backwards comes after a long period of success. For a while, as the tasks sit within a pupil’s comfort zone, outcome-based success comes easily and encourages the belief that the pupil can ‘do’ the subject. But as it gets harder and the marks drop, these pupils can be ill-prepared to know how to respond.

Th[e] challenge – to believe anything is possible – is huge and scary for both teachers and pupils. Pupils need to know that learning can be hard, can be painful, risks failure (and that this is part of the process) and can be boring, repetitive and frustrating, as well as fun and fascinating...Risk-taking is essential for learners if they are going to make maximum progress. Trying harder activities, reading difficult texts, solving ‘impossible’ problems...are the types of challenge that make pupils start to get the habits of persistence and resilience they need to be successful.4

Failing forward is tougher and takes time to learn. If we are honest, we are probably never fully comfortable with the concept. It involves taking risks, taking responsibility, recognising that there are times when you must be brave and that it might not work, whilst having the resilience to stick with the belief that failing forward defines you positively as person. It means that you show the same determination you had when you kept getting up every time you fell when learning to walk, or with every crashed gear or stalled engine at the roundabout. It’s about extending one’s comfort zone, not ‘going beyond’ it. Going beyond has a sense of disconnect with ‘safety’, whereas ‘extending’ suggests that you are using, shaping and challenging what you know so that you can know and do more. It needs everyone’s help, from the teacher who encourages those steps through constructive feedback and intelligent questions, to the other pupils in the class on the same journey, who will themselves seek that same support when they too are in a similar position.

Many schools believe that they encourage a ‘fail forward’ culture only to confuse pupils with different messages in their everyday lives. Individual teachers may send different messages about whether they value process or outcome; end-of-term assemblies may focus on ‘unbeaten seasons’ rather than the players’ engagement and improvement; there may even be a prize culture that rewards only the top scorers. Such confused messages from the school can undermine the principle of ‘failing forward’ unless they are clearly set within a context where outcome- focussed recognition is clearly signposted as such. I am not suggesting that outcomes should not be rewarded, but rather that schools need to conduct an audit of where such cultural misalignments might occur and to reflect on how they will be addressed, adapted, or explained so that they can sit coherently within the bigger cultural picture.

Similarly, school walls across the country are adorned with posters displaying Michael Jordan proudly celebrating his 10,000 failures or highlighting Edison’s bumpy journey towards revolutionising our lives. But any school which relies on these 2D representations of success from people so far removed from their pupils’ lives is missing the opportunity to use the most effective resource... its own pupils. Each pupil who sees the benefit of failing forward becomes, through the changes visible in their approach in all the classrooms they occupy, a living embodiment of how such an approach can change everyone’s learning and confidence, and how ultimately embracing failure can lead to success. But in order to create a culture where failure is viewed positively and not seen as something to fear, it needs to be backed up by an everyday language used around the school, where teachers use the language of failing forward or backward. The testimony or actions of one current pupil in one classroom who has shifted their approach from failing backwards to failing forward has a greater impact on their peers than a corridor full of posters of famous, ‘successful’ people.

Creating a culture of failing forward empowers pupils at all stages of their learning and attainment. The importance of sometimes choosing the difficult path over the easy one, of being comfortable with making mistakes in order to improve rather than being frightened to investigate places where mistakes might be made, is a significant part of the learning journey. It is only effective when pupils know that what matters for sustainable success is the process, not the outcome, and that embracing failure is a vital part of that process. If our aim is to equip young people for the challenges of the adult world, then one of the biggest responsibilities of a school is to create and celebrate a healthy approach to failure that lasts a lifetime.