

# Psychology of Exceptional Learning

## Learning Attitudes

John Munro

**What is an attitude ?** Ask pupils to discuss when they have heard this term being used. They will probably report situations like

- I have a negative attitude to school work
- What is your attitude towards women / conservation ?

Attitudes are things we believe or think about a person, a thing or an event. Attitudes are beliefs.

- A person's disposition towards something, for example, how disposed someone is to mathematics.
- How a person feels about the idea, what the person believes about the idea.

**Examples of attitudes** students have about learning;

- History is interesting because it tells us about people lived.
- Assignments are a waste of time; I never get them finished.
- English is a bludge; it's just about how you talk.

We can also have attitudes towards ourselves as learners;

- I will never be able to learn mathematics because I don't understand algebra.
- I don't need to study hard in English because everyone passes it.

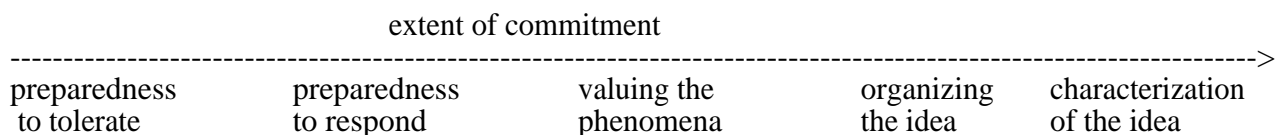
"What is your attitude to .... ?" "What do you feel about .... ?"	Positive attitude	Negative attitude
History	is interesting; it tells us how people lived	
Assignments		are a waste of time; I never get them finished.
English		is a bludge; it's just about how you talk
being an independent learner		There's no point trying; teachers don't let you be independent
learning mathematics		I will never be able to because I don't understand algebra

**What are attitudinal behaviours ?** A systematic way of describing student attitudes to learning in academic areas. Ways in which a person demonstrates attitudes towards an idea, an issue, a situation.

taxonomy of attitudes	attitudinal behaviours
being prepared to receive it or to attend to it, for example, a preparedness to tolerate an idea	they will give time to listen to, or to see the idea but are not prepared to pursue it, to seek it out for themselves. They are little more than 'neutral' towards it.
being prepared to respond or to respond actively to the idea, doing something with or about the idea.	they are prepared to interact with the idea, to actively and willingly pursue it but will not seek it out.
valuing the idea; perceiving it as having some level of worth and consequently revealing this valuing in consistent behaviour.	students express a valuing for an idea, pursue it and seek it out independently and willingly, show that they value it more than other ideas, show valuing and consistency in their preferential behaviours, they are willing to defend it, justify and support it .
organizing the idea; relating the idea to one's life; it is seen to be so valuable that it is related within the person's overall value system, the conceptualization of values and the use of these for determining the relationships between values.	students show through their behaviours that they have related the phenomena to their life, for example, uses reading to solve problems, difficulties in other areas of life, shows a greater valuing of this than for other ideas.

characterizing the idea ; organizing the values, beliefs, attitudes associated with the idea into an internally consistent system or a 'world view' for example, a consistent world view on recycling.	students with a consistent world view on recycling attempt to live their life through a recycling (talk, act, thinking terms of it, value all that recycling means, go as far as possible to convince others of recycling ).
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The five stages can be seen as lying on a dimension of personal commitment to the idea;



Each stage indicates a different level of commitment to an idea and a greater internalization of behaviour. We can gauge where students are in their attitudes towards a particular phenomenon or idea by observing how far along the dimension they are, as indicated by their verbal and nonverbal behaviours.

**Helping students understand the effects that their attitudes have on learning.** Review the effects of both positive and negative attitudes on learning. Because the negative attitudes have greatest negative impact on learning, examine these further.

What learning / teaching conditions lead to students learning positive attitudes ? Teaching that

- (1) challenges students in their thinking about the idea but does not threaten or penalise.
- (2) lets students see they can be successful, even if they need to invest a level of attention and activity.
- (3) gives the ideas a positive emotional loading; they are of interest, fun.
- (4) encourages self-engagement; there is an on-going personal engagement on the part of students; they can see how there are things that they can do in order to further a cause (for example, learn more about insects, achieve a better environment).
- (5) models or presents a vision of 'what might be'; the students can see or at least glimpse the possible outcomes of having a positive attitude.
- (6) encourages students to link the new ideas that they are learning with their existing knowledge
- (7) helps the students to see that the outcomes are worthwhile, useful, valuable, relevant to their life, concur with aspects of their existing value system.
- (8) allows them to decide or control when they want to be involved, that allows them to manage and direct to some extent their personal involvement.

**Helping students change their attitudes:** some issues to consider

1. encourage students to examine and discuss their attitudes to learning.
2. encourage students to discuss how their positive attitudes help them to learn and how their negative attitudes limit learning.
3. discuss options that they have for acting in alternative ways in relation to the ideas or situations. If they see themselves being successful or enjoying the situation, will that change their attitudes ? Students in discussion can develop the commitment dimension described above from their pooled experiences. They can use this to develop option for themselves.
4. if the students have pursued some of the options and have been more successful, how have their attitudes changed ?

We can help students to become aware of their attitudes towards an idea, how they can change these (if they want to) and how they can make this change in their own lives.

**Attitudes and self talk** How can we distinguish between attitudes, emotions, feelings and issues linked with self esteem ? Help the students see the difference between how they feel about a subject and the self talk they use to learn it. Students can have negative attitudes or beliefs about a subject but still use rational self talk.

**Some negative attitudes that can restrict learning** Because the negative attitudes have greatest negative impact on learning, examine these further. Typical negative attitudes that pupils record are

shown below. Take each of these attitudes in turn, have students question it and link it with functional self talk:

negative attitudes	students question it	functional self talk
I'm not going to feel good about doing it and so I'll put it off till later.		
I'm not going to do well in the test and everyone will know I'm dumb		
I just can't get my assignment finished on time.		
I've got to get my work right the first time; if you don't, it means you're second rate.		

Lead students to question each of these attitudes, for example

Teacher	Do you need to get the task finished ultimately ?	-->	Does putting off starting it help you get it finished ?	-->	What would help you to feel better; getting it finished or putting it off ?	-->	What can you do to help you to get started ?
student	Yes, we need to finish it		No, putting off starting it doesn't help		Getting it finished would help me to feel better		We could work out a plan, begin working on the first bit, doing a small bit at a time, etc.

Review the sequence of questions and show pupils how we have moved from a more negative to a less negative attitude;

Starting attitude : I don't like doing this task and so I'll put it off	-->	Modified attitude : I don't like doing this task. If I start it now I'll get it finished sooner and then I'll feel better
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Use this analysis to lead pupils to develop a procedure for dealing with negative attitudes and feelings. This can be developed through a group discussion, as follows:

*What are the things you need to do to change negative attitudes to more positive attitudes ?* Collate the pupil's suggestions and encourage them to sequence them. A possible sequence is

- (1) recognize the bad attitudes and say the feelings you have with them (categorize the feeling),
- (2) ask yourself "What can I do about it ?"
- (3) identify the situations that are associated with the attitude or feeling
- (4) decide what you were saying to yourself when you had the negative feeling in the situation,
- (5) decide more useful, functional things that you could say about the situation.