

We all make MISTAKES

Teachers sometimes say it ‘doesn’t matter’ if students are wrong, but that might not be a helpful message to send, cautions **Colin Foster**...



In the bad old days, school students would be punished or shamed for making mistakes. Students wouldn’t speak up in class for fear of being mocked – not just by their peers, but by the *teacher* if what they said was incorrect.

With students afraid of getting things wrong, misunderstandings and misconceptions ended up being buried, in the hope that no one would ever discover them. That’s certainly not an environment conducive to learning, let alone positive wellbeing.

Positive messaging

So, how are things looking now, in the modern classroom? Thankfully, teachers no longer consider it acceptable to humiliate

rebuked if they slip up. All of this is good, contributing to a ‘positive error culture’ that in turn produces classroom environments where learning is prioritised and students – we hope – want to be.

At the same time, however, I believe there are occasions when this positive messaging can go slightly wrong.

I’ve often heard teachers tell their class, ‘*It doesn’t matter if you’re wrong*’ – which for me, isn’t quite the message that’s likely to be most helpful. The teacher is trying to coax responses from possibly reluctant students, and reassure them that a wrong answer isn’t the end of the world.

The teacher here just wants them to *have a go* and take the risk of making a mistake. They (rightly) want

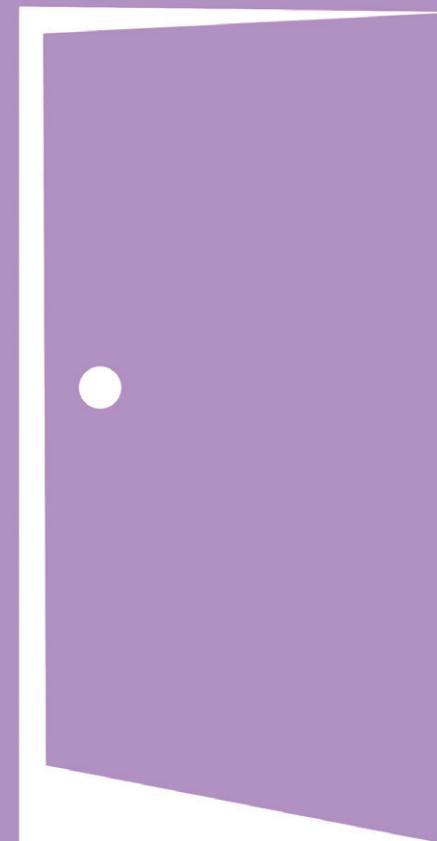
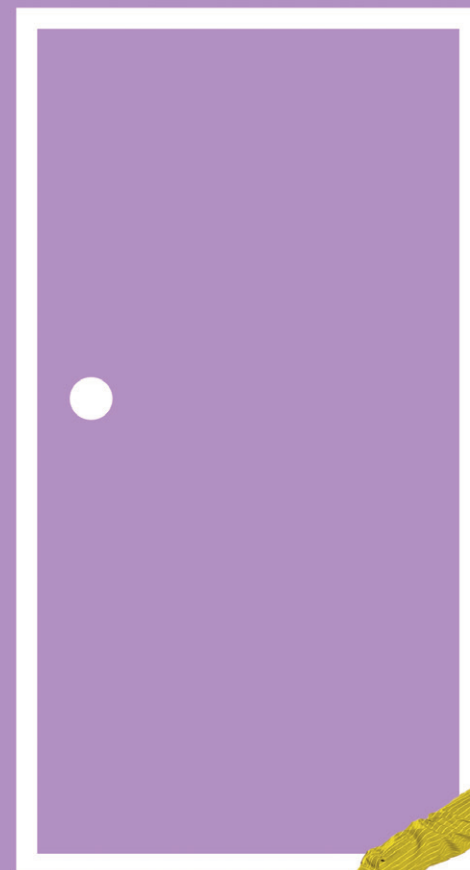
Getting something wrong is what happens just before you learn something. A mistake is therefore an exciting moment – it’s the cue that means you’re about to learn something. The mistake isn’t good in itself, but it can be the basis for something good that later comes out of it.

Wanting to be right

The reason this matters is that young people generally do want to be right. In fact, young children can often be especially pedantic, and love correcting tiny errors in what adults say – even when it’s debatable whether something’s actually an error at all: “*Can you pick up your coat, please?*” “*It isn’t a coat, it’s a jacket!*” Young people want to know what’s what, and it’s good that they care about being right or wrong.

It’s a short step from ‘*It doesn’t matter if you’re wrong*’ to simply thinking ‘*It doesn’t matter*’. It’s like playing tennis without a net – if it doesn’t matter when you’re wrong, then presumably it doesn’t matter when you’re right. Why are we even bothering with school, if being wrong is no problem?

The point is that it *does*



“A mistake is an exciting moment – it’s the cue that means you’re about to learn something”

students or belittle them for their mistakes. Instead, we’ve come to see mistakes as an entirely natural part of the learning process.

We want to value what students say, even when they are incorrect, because it’s by talking about difficulties and bringing them out into the open that we all move forward. Students are encouraged to always ‘have a go’, and not fear being

to get around the students’ natural fear of failure, but I think the messaging around achieving these important goals matters.

It isn’t so much that it ‘doesn’t matter’ if someone’s wrong, because if that were true, mistakes would have no value. The point is that *being wrong is an opportunity to learn* – and perhaps a better opportunity to learn than when someone is right!

matter when someone’s wrong, which is why a teacher won’t just leave mistakes hanging in the air. The teacher will instead pick up on the error, explore and develop what’s been said, and then help everyone learn more from it.

If, for example, a student says that a billion is ten times as big as a million, the teacher won’t simply say “*Well, that’s wrong, but it doesn’t matter*”. It does, of course, matter that the students understand why this is wrong, and that a billion is, in fact, a *thousand* times as big as a million. It’s okay to be wrong sometimes – as we all are – provided we take the opportunity to *learn from our mistake*.

Yes, it is okay to make mistakes, but we should try to make each mistake less and less often. Next time round, we want to get that thing right. Because being right does matter.

Post-truth

At the moment, it feels as though we’re in something of a post-truth climate. Who and what can young people trust today? Social media lets them very quickly and easily find communities of people with strange, and often disturbing views about things. If those communities have hundreds of followers, then it can seem like lots of other people think the same way once you’re inside them – even if that’s just a partial view of what’s actually a tiny minority of the population.

Before the online era, people with strange and fringe views would often find it very difficult to find fellow travellers who shared those views, and have little hope of persuading others to join them. In the present day, anyone can now find any view on virtually any topic, theme or event well-represented somewhere. Under this system, everything that some individuals see will be true *for them*. The logical

endpoint of this is that we can never really know what’s right or wrong.

Young people today could thus be forgiven for despairing that it doesn’t matter if you’re wrong, because we can’t know who’s wrong and who’s right, anyway. Who knows, maybe *everybody’s* wrong?

It’s because of this that I think now is the time for teachers to reassure students that facts very much *are* a thing; that some things are true and some simply aren’t, no matter who might be saying them. We want young people to grow up with the confidence to care about what’s correct and what isn’t. We want them to be empowered to talk back to online videos and podcasts that make false claims.

It isn’t okay to repeatedly propagate misinformation or ‘alternative facts’ while insisting that doing so doesn’t matter. At the same time, it’s perfectly normal and fine to get things wrong – just so long as it’s part of a journey towards trying to understand things better.

How much you know is one thing. Whether you’re correctable, and therefore getting more things right more of the time as you go on, is far more important. Being on an upwards curve towards a greater truth is what education is all about. We won’t be right all of the time, but if we take our mistakes seriously, we’ll be more right tomorrow than we were today.



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