Building Goals around WOOP

The WOOP process (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan) looks to engage learners in goal setting by stretching their aspirations while acknowledging the messy realities of progress. In her book, "**Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation**,"Gabrielle Oettingen challenged the belief that merely imagining positive futures helps us succeed. She developed WOOP as an evidence-based framework that, unlike traditional goal-setting approaches that emphasize positive visualization alone, invites individuals to picture success and deliberately confront what might get in the way. She argues that without coupling "**wishes**" and "**outcomes**" with a clear look at the internal **obstacles** along with a concrete **plan** to overcome them, positive thinking on its own can lull us into complacency. The dual focus on desire and difficulty encourages agency, perseverance, and strategic thinking. (Here's a short video clip describing WOOP.)

WOOP begins with a **Wish**—something meaningful, challenging, and attainable.

Wish: A high school student wants to develop a consistent weekly study routine instead of cramming before exams. It's challenging because they juggle work, social commitments, and several demanding courses.

The next step, imagining the **Outcomes**, asks us to explore how it would feel to achieve the wish, and what benefits would follow.

Outcomes: What would life feel like if the wish was met?

- They'd experience less stress and anxiety, especially before major deadlines.
- Their grades would likely improve because they'd be learning over time rather than memorizing at the last minute.
- They'd feel more in control of their schedule, instead of constantly reacting to academic pressure.
- They'd have more guilt-free, free time knowing their work was already underway.

WOOP's power comes from the **Obstacle** phase: honestly identifying the internal habits, emotions, or behaviors that could derail us.

Obstacle: The biggest internal obstacle could be the student's tendency to procrastinate when tired. After a long day of classes or work, they tell themselves they'll "study later," but then get distracted by social media or hanging out with friends. Another obstacle is a sense of overwhelm, not knowing where to start, so doing nothing.

Plan: Having identified the obstacles, a plan creates specific strategies to navigate those obstacles when they arise. For example;

- If I feel overwhelmed and don’t know where to start, then I will open my planner and choose one small task to complete first.
- If friends invite me to hang out during my planned study time, then I will join them afterward as a reward for finishing my task.

The WOOP elements might provide an effective guide for instructional coaches. Many coaching trainers focus on beginning coaching with a goal that the teacher has established. Identifying a **wish** can establish an initial goal. I often ask a teacher to describe what it would look and sound like if we made progress toward the wish. A teacher might describe that currently when a task challenges, students turn to passive, learned-helplessness behaviors. He wishes for risk-taking, trail and error, experimentation and reflection.

Outcomes can be benefits for students as well as for teachers. Students learning trial and error processes and increasing perseverance are certainly better prepared for future academic and life challenges. Less learned-helplessness student behaviors allow greater opportunity for the teacher to impact deeper learning for all students. I often examine outcomes as an element of a costs/benefits conversation with a coachee. Change is likely required on the part of the coachee. What’s the cost of the change? (Time, stress, emotions) What are the benefits to be generated for the teacher and the students?

Obstacle and Plan: In instructional coaching, this is where the observation and feedback are likely to plug in. Changing student learned-helplessness behaviors will very likely require new teacher behaviors. How will the teacher respond to a “waiting to get started student?” What response will the teacher give to students’ questions seeking clues? These new behaviors are difficult to consistently execute. Practicing in advance with the coach and getting observed feedback become part of the **plan** for change.

A WOOP coaching conversation might sound like this:

Coach: When your students are working in groups, what is something you wish were happening more often?

Teacher: Honestly, I wish they stayed engaged instead of drifting off. When the task gets hard, they give up fast or just wait for someone else to do it.

Coach: If your wish started to come true—what would it look and sound like in your room?

Teacher: Hmm. I'd see students trying things without waiting for me to tell them the next step. There'd be more experimenting, even if they got it wrong at first. And they'd talk with each other about what they're doing instead of sitting quietly and staring.

Coach: And how would that feel for you as the teacher?

Teacher: Amazing. I think I'd feel proud of them—and less

exhausted. Right now, I feel like I’m constantly trying to push them forward.

Coach: And for the students? What benefits show up for them if they take more learning risks?

Teacher: They’d build confidence. They’d learn that not knowing something isn’t the end of the world. I guess they’d be better prepared for more complex tasks later on.

Coach: So, you’re imagining more perseverance, more agency, and skills that help them beyond just this unit.

Teacher: Exactly.

Coach: And for you, the benefit is less time spent pulling them along and more time digging deeper into learning.

Coach: What change do you imagine you might need to make?

Teacher: I’ll have to change how I respond in the moment.

Coach: That’s an important acknowledgment. What might get in the way? When students are off task or waiting, what internal trigger or habit makes it tough to respond how you’d like?

Teacher: I think I jump in too fast. I don’t like seeing them struggle, so I give them hints. I know I’m reinforcing the behavior, but it’s hard to stop.

Coach: It sure is. What else?

Teacher: Noise. When groups get noisy, I lose patience. I shut it down because I worry it’s getting chaotic.

Coach: If those situations are predictable, what’s a plan you can use to respond differently when they happen?

Teacher: Maybe I could have a couple of go-to responses ready. Like, if someone asks me for the answer, I could say, “What have you tried so far?” or “Show me where you’re stuck.” And

if noise is the issue, maybe I can check what the noise is about before I react.

Coach: Sounds like a plan. So if…?

Teacher: If a student asks me a question just looking for a clue, I'll respond with, "Tell me what you've already tried."

Coach: And when you sense it's too noisy?

Teacher : If a group gets noisy, I'll approach and listen before deciding whether to intervene.

Coach: What if we plan to rehearse a few responses together, then I'll observe and notice what worked and where adjustments might help.

Teacher: That feels doable. I'm excited to see if the students can rise to it.

Coach: You're stepping into a different role—not rescuing students, but coaching them.