

Making Sure Students' Struggles Are Productive

Using a 'not yet' approach helps students see that challenging moments can be opportunities to reach their learning goals.

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While we know every learning challenge is an empowering opportunity to grow, we also know that message might sometimes be lost on our students. Those learning challenges can cause some students to become frustrated and shut down from the learning.

We need to empower our students to celebrate those learning challenges and help them realize that obstacles and setbacks are a valued part of the classroom culture. We need to create a not-yet classroom where productive struggle is encouraged and students see themselves as capable learners and fearless risk-takers. The not-yet approach is all about designing and creating an authentic classroom culture that encourages the process of learning while accepting that setbacks and obstacles are part of that process.

Embracing the Struggle

Let's start with productive struggle. According to [Jo Boaler](#), professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education, "If you aren't struggling, you aren't really learning. When we're struggling and making mistakes, those are the very best times for our brains."

As educators we understand and appreciate the importance of that struggle. We have often struggled ourselves to learn something new. But because that new learning was important to us and because we had support in case we weren't successful, we continued until we achieved our goal.

So how do we create a classroom community where students value the importance of that struggle and where they see themselves as not-yet learners?

Here are four suggestions to help you create a not-yet classroom.

1. Create a vigorous learning intention: Scaffold success criteria that give students the opportunity to make sense of what they're supposed to know and be able to do. Give students a chance to ask questions about the learning intention and time to paraphrase it so that it makes sense to them.

In my book [Ready to Learn: The FRAME Model for Optimizing Student Success](#), I explain, "When students paraphrase the learning intention and success criteria, it gives teachers a chance to discover what their students know or understand about the learning intention."

This discovery is critical because if students find paraphrasing the learning intention a challenge, this could indicate a gap in the students' learning. Teachers, then, can address this gap and, if necessary, rewrite the success criteria so that the students have the opportunity to overcome the deficit.

Scaffolding the success criteria provides a means to motivate students and gives students an opportunity to self-assess their understanding and determine whether they've achieved that particular criterion. As students move through the success criteria, there's a sense of empowerment—they know they're heading successfully toward the fulfillment of the learning intention. If they haven't met a

specific criterion, however, the teacher can dedicate time so that students are able to work in small groups with their peers or one-on-one with their teacher for more support in meeting that criterion.

2. Eliminate the word *failure* from your vocabulary: As an example, if your essay directions asked students to write a thesis paragraph and a student turned in a body paragraph, did the student fail the assignment?

The student fell short of the goal of writing a thesis paragraph, but there certainly was some degree of understanding, since the student was able to write an analytical body paragraph. Make allowances for that and offer positive guidance.

3. Be transparent in your introduction of the work: Don't sugarcoat the assignment or project by telling your students it's "so easy" or that everyone will "get it." On the contrary, tell your students the task will be difficult, but the work they're about to do is worthy of their time and their talent.

Let students know they'll encounter setbacks and obstacles as a part of learning that task, but with support from you, their classmates, and various teacher-chosen resources, students will be able to meet that challenge and work toward mastery of the goal.

4. Give students the time and space they need to be successful: Create learning opportunities to normalize development and empower students to realize that learning takes time and that mastery isn't the end of growth. We're all working within parameters of schedules, and those schedules dictate the time spent on learning. Often those schedules are determined by mandates beyond our control, but there are ways we can offer time and space within our own classrooms.

To add in extra time, maybe the lesson covers two class periods instead of one; or maybe the teacher is able to co-teach with another educator to assist students who might need extra help, therefore moving the learning at a more structured pace.

To offer extra space, perhaps the teacher and students could utilize the library or auditorium to give students more room to create groups or pods of learning; or maybe the teacher is able to create learning situations that move beyond the classroom walls through the use of virtual field trips. We've seen the curiosity and wonder in our students as they devour something that piques their interest because they have the time and the space to dig deep into something of relevance to them.

Where each student is on their learning journey at any given time is a result of situations and experiences that might often be beyond our control. We know that high expectations don't mean anything if the learning process doesn't support achieving them.

Designing classrooms and routines that normalize productive struggle as part of the learning process gives students the opportunity to meet those high expectations within a supportive yet challenging classroom community.