



The New York State Office of Religious and Independent Schools

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE CENTER (PDRC)

The Upstate PDRC - All NYS Regions North of NYC

Productive Struggle: A Quick Guide

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Goals of this Guide

- ❑ Become familiar with the research about learning from struggle, mistakes and failure
- ❑ Differentiate between productive struggle and destructive struggle
- ❑ Connect productive struggle with related learning theories (mindset, grit, rigor)

Once we stop the charade of knowing everything, and embrace knowing less, with a willingness to sit with uncertainty, unexpected things happen.

~Jo Boaler, author of *Limitless Mind*

What exactly is “productive struggle”?

- ❑ Productive struggle is the process of **effortful learning** that develops grit and creative problem solving.
- ❑ It is teaching students to not give up when they meet a challenging problem...by **not stepping in to help too early or too often**.
- ❑ Students experience productive struggle when they **persist in trying to make sense of a difficult problem and develop new strategies for solving it**.
- ❑ Students experience productive struggle when they see the **value in making mistakes**—to view mistakes not as failure but learning opportunities.

Productive struggle does **not** mean...

- Educational neglect
- Extra or harder class work
- Education by frustration



Why is productive struggle important?

- ❑ Neuroscientists have found that mistakes are helpful for brain growth and connectivity and **if we are not struggling, we are not learning**. Not only is struggle good for our brains, but people who know about the value of struggle improve their learning potential.
- ❑ We (teachers/parents) are culturally trained to rush in and help, when this is probably the last thing we should do.
- ❑ Richer, deeper learning can flow from having students struggle with a challenging task and persisting until completion.

How is productive struggle related to....

Mindset

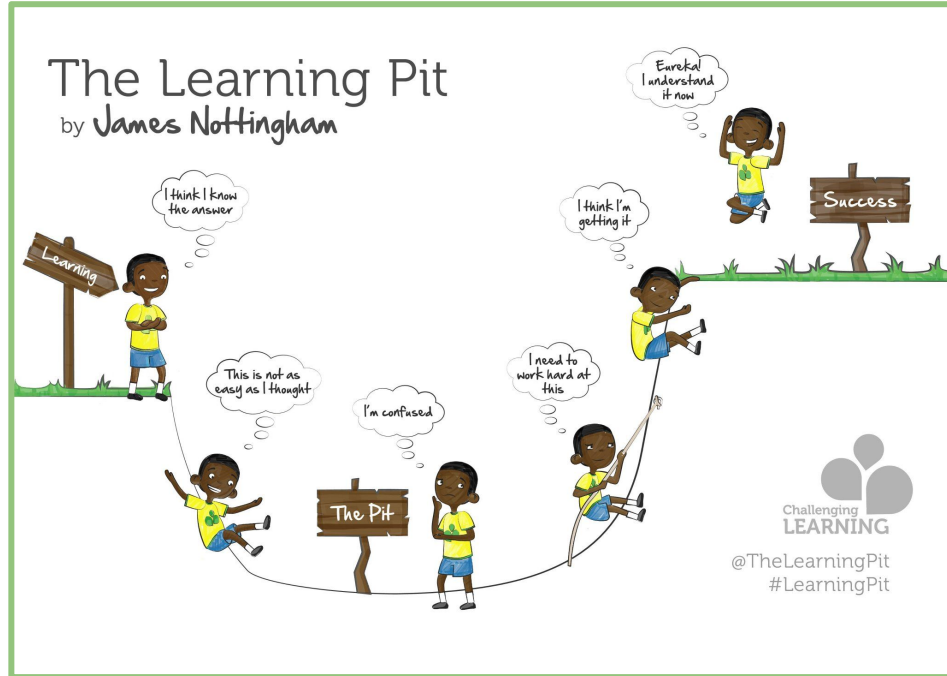


Connecting Growth Mindset to
Productive Struggle

How is productive struggle related to...

Grit

The process of struggle develops the grit.



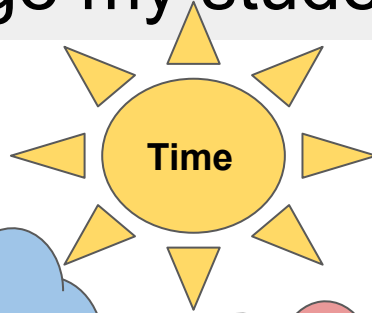
How is productive struggle related to....

Rigor

Rigor doesn't mean “more and harder work”.

Although rigor means **having high expectations for all students**, those expectations must be accompanied by appropriate support. Student success occurs when you create an instructional environment that sets high expectations for each student and **provides scaffolding without offering excessive help**. The key is to incorporate productive struggle.

How do I encourage my students to make mistakes?



Model risk-taking yourself

Explicitly teach that struggling with learning tasks helps our brains develop

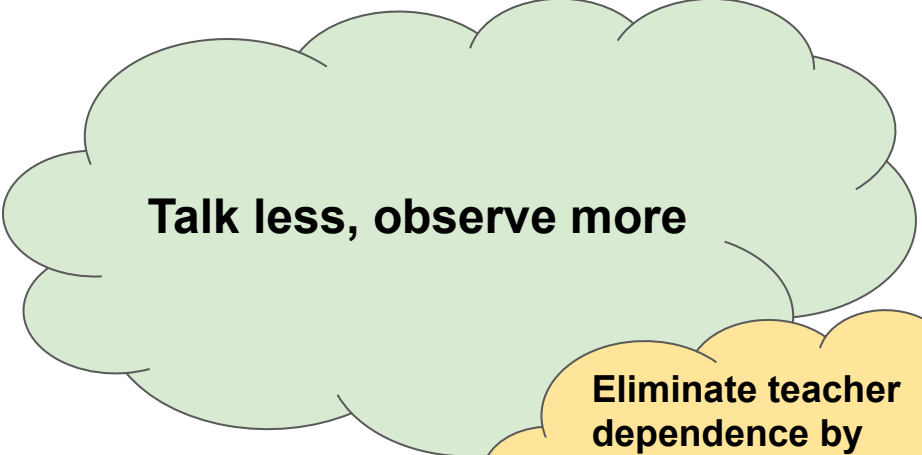
Call on students who probably don't have the right answer

De-stigmatize mistakes and legitimize failure as a great opportunity

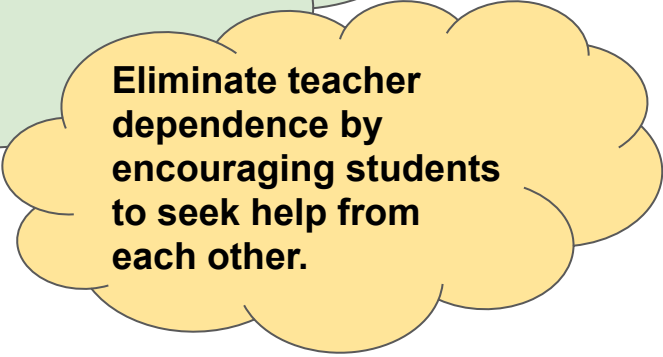
Provide tasks your students will be interested in and find worthy of their struggle.

Play games. Failure is built into many games, and children know that struggle and failure are part of the process.

But mostly....



Talk less, observe more



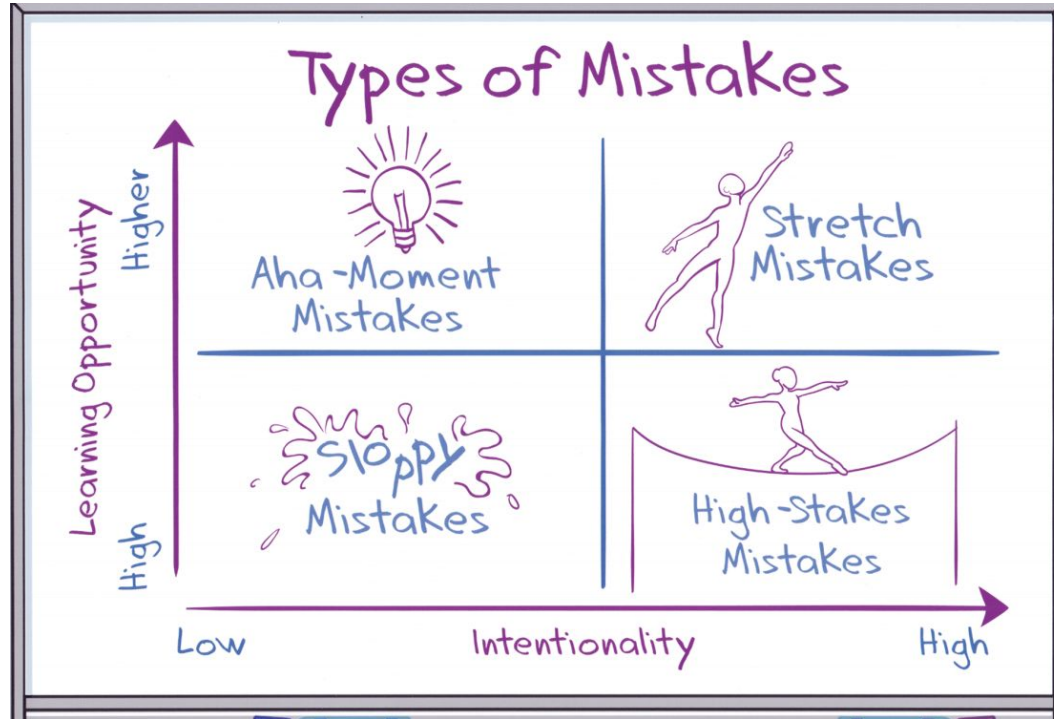
Eliminate teacher dependence by encouraging students to seek help from each other.

Be transparent

"Students who are used to being spoon-fed may find it disorienting when teachers expect them to shoulder the lion's share of work."

~Chrissy Allison, Achievement Network

Teach *about* mistakes



After all...

"A life spent making mistakes is not only most honorable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing"

- George Bernard Shaw

So, if I were going to change a few behaviors...

Give time...
Don't step in
too early or
too often

***Ask the right
questions...***
Don't stifle
curiosity or
ingenuity by
doing all the
heavy lifting

***Give
encouragement...***
Encourage students
to reflect on the
process of learning,
rather than
focusing on an
answer

Acknowledge...
That struggling
is difficult, but
important for
learning and
growing

Adapted from Warshauer (2015).

Words to live by....

When students look at me with a puppy dog face and say: "This is hard," I say, "That is fantastic. That feeling of 'hard' is the feeling of your brain developing, strengthening and growing".

*~Jo Boaler, author of *Limitless Mind**

In their book *How to Support Struggling Students*, Robyn Jackson and Claire Lambert identify clues that mark the distinction between *destructive* and *productive* struggles in learning.

Running out of strategies

Developing strategies

Step in with a strategic question when the student has observably stopped struggling, thinking or risk-taking.



A destructive struggle

- Leads to frustration.
- Makes learning goals feel hazy and out of reach.
- Feels fruitless.
- Leaves students feeling abandoned and on their own.
- Creates a sense of inadequacy.

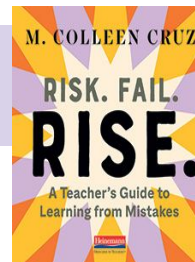
A productive struggle

- Leads to understanding.
- Makes learning goals feel attainable and effort seem worthwhile.
- Yields results.
- Leads students to feelings of empowerment and efficacy.
- Creates a sense of hope.

Source: ACSD
<https://inservice.ascd.org/how-to-tell-when-learning-struggles-are-productive-or-destructive/>

Resources

NEW!



Cruz, M. Colleen. *Risk. Fail. Rise. A Teacher's Guide to Learning From Mistakes*

Mistakes are part of learning. Every educator knows this. But what happens before and after a mistake that facilitates that learning is rarely explored practically. In *Risk. Fail. Rise.* teachers will learn how to address their own teaching mistakes, model with their own mistake-making, and improve their responses to others' mistakes.

Jackson, Robyn and Lambert, Claire. *How to Support Struggling Students*

In this guide, Robyn R. Jackson and Claire Lambert take you step by step through the process of providing proactive and progressive learning support--what great teachers do to ensure that all students receive the right kind of assistance and to get those who are struggling back on track before they get frustrated and give up.

Cox, Janelle. *10 Strategies to Keep Struggling Students Working.*

<https://www.teachhub.com/teaching-strategies/2016/09/10-teaching-strategies-to-keep-struggling-students-working/>

[4 Myths About Rigor in the Classroom](#)



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