

Talk Less So Students Learn More

Productive struggle is important for students to retain what they learn.

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In moments when students are not understanding, we often find ourselves trying to explain more clearly. But sometimes, more teacher talk doesn't offer clarity. When we consistently lean on teacher explanation as a primary teaching tool, we teach our students that we are the dispensers of information and they are the consumers. How can we shift from teachers owning the learning to student ownership? How do we move from students being dependent on teachers to using each other or tools as a support? Instead of jumping in to show the way, provide the tools and time to encourage cognitive struggle to get students doing more while you say less.

START WITH STRUGGLE

Jo Boaler, a revolutionary researcher and math educator, [says that struggle is critical](#) to mastering a skill or concept. When we sense discomfort in our classrooms, we can be quick to explain and provide steps to follow. But removing the struggle for students also removes the cognitive heavy lifting that leads to deep learning and understanding.

Shift the script and begin lessons by asking students to experience struggle. Explain what you are doing and how grappling with concepts will help them learn before support is given. In math, use [an open-ended problem](#) or provide [a solution with a mistake in the work](#) and ask students to analyze the error.

In other subjects, use brain research to encourage students to persevere through writer's block or try a task for a second or third time. Shift your classroom culture so that getting stuck is valued over getting the right answer right away.

REDUCE TEACHER TALK TIME

In effective classrooms, [students see themselves as their own teachers](#), and teachers know the impact that their strategies have on students' learning.

A few simple strategies can help shift the teacher from lecturer to facilitator:

Ask a student to time your mini-lessons so that they are limited to eight to 10 minutes. Ask a student to politely interrupt you when the allotted time has passed.

Use video to allow students to watch direct instruction at their own pace, while you coach your students.

Limit your initial instruction to two minutes, and leave the rest of the time for students to do the work as you coach and provide actionable feedback.

Observe students as they practice, allowing them to make mistakes, get feedback, and revise. Be transparent with students about the fact that you are in observation mode, which demonstrates that you value their work.

USE QUESTIONS INSTEAD OF EXPLANATIONS

When students have difficulty with comprehension, our instinct is to consider how we can explain more clearly. Instead, consider ways to frame questions to encourage cognitive work of

understanding. Keep a list of questions to turn to when in front of your class or working with a small group. Simple questions can facilitate deeper learning:

Turn and talk: Students turn to a partner next to them and ask each other, "What do you think?"

Looking back at this example, can you answer your own question? Can someone else answer that question?

What questions do you have?

Right about now, a student typically has a question. Who has that question today?

SLOW DOWN AND OBSERVE

Dedicate a chunk of time to observing student learning. Give your students a differentiated complex task, watch, take down data, and ask questions. Slowing down and watching students helps gather evidence of learning for planning your next steps. Use your observations to answer the questions, "What can my kids do right now? Where might they need to be pushed to next?"

Create a chart with student names and particular behaviors you might observe (e.g., zoning out, engaged, fake reading, collaborating). Throughout class, mark what you notice in each student. Use this data to plan engagement mini-lessons or conferences. Note particular behaviors such as "perseveres when problem solving" or "tries a variety of solutions." Observing students and noting what they need can better inform your next steps to move toward student ownership.

PROVIDE NON-TEACHER SCAFFOLDS

Struggling can be an important part of learning, but at times we expect students to work independently too early, too often, or without any support. When this happens, students often look to the teacher immediately whenever they are unsure, and we end up with teacher dependence. Instead, establish a culture where students ask classmates first before asking a teacher. Try some simple non-teacher scaffolds:

Establish critical partnerships with fellow students, and train students how to provide feedback to each other.

Create "coach" name tags for students to wear when they are ready to provide feedback to classmates.

Use clear teaching points paired with visuals. This can take the form of a note after a conference or an anchor chart in front of the class.

Ask students to teach the concept or strategy to another student or small groups.

Reducing teacher talk, asking questions instead of providing explanations, observing students, and providing non-teacher scaffolds engage students in their own learning. Purposefully focusing on doing less so that students do more will push your students toward doing the heavy lifting of learning.