

Self-Efficacy and Motivating Struggling Learners

(Portions of this handout are adapted from “Self-Efficacy: A Key to Improving the Motivation of Struggling Learners” by Howard Margolis and Patrick P. McCabe in *The Clearing House* 77(6), July/August, 2004.)

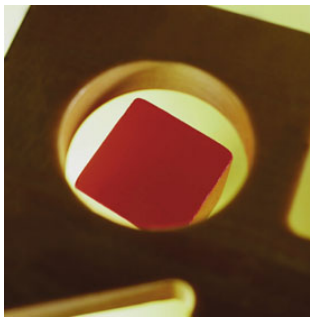


For struggling students, assignments, tests, and other academic requirements that teachers place on them are as imposing as these giant redwoods. They tower over the student who sees himself as inconsequential and ineffective to make changes in his academic destiny.

One of the most promising areas which may prove helpful for teachers to tap is a student’s sense of self-efficacy. This may indeed be the key to open up possibilities.



PERSPECTIVE is important in motivation. As the teacher, it is important to remember what learning is like from the perspective of the LEARNER, especially a STRUGGLING LEARNER. Note the difference in perspective of Hurricane Isabell from both a ship and a space station.



The STRUGGLING LEARNER is often a square peg in a round hole. His “square” learning styles and preferences and abilities and speeds so not fit the “roundness” of the design of school.



The STRUGGLING LEARNER has often dug a hole beginning early on and by middle school is often well “over his head” in this hole of school failure. It is not as easy as directing him to “Study harder.” or to say, “You can do it!” He either lacks the skills or the confidence and belief that can effect such changes in school performance.



One insight into this phenomenon is called, SELF-EFFICACY.

Schunk and Zimmerman suggest,

“Self-efficacy . . . influence[s] task choice, effort, persistence, and achievement. Compared with students who doubt their learning capacities, those who have a sense of efficacy for [particular tasks] participate more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, and achieve at a higher level. . . . Students do not engage in activities they believe will lead to negative outcomes.”

When someone is in a hole over his head, the logical thing to do is lower a ladder to him so he can climb out!



At this point, though, something rather unexpected happens: The student doesn't readily take advantage of the rescue!

Why not?

- comfortable with failure
- peers
- afraid of success and the expectations it brings
- identity is wrapped up in his precarious position
- uncertainty

To make the ladder helpful and provoke the student to climb it to success and freedom, several points are necessary to note.

1. The student didn't get into the hole (especially over his head) over night, and he won't climb out of it overnight. If he could, the ladder would probably be unnecessary!
2. Climbing the ladder is an incremental process (step-by-step), not a single momentous leap. This requires patience and perseverance on everyone's part.

3. Sometimes the student will slip on a step and regress. As long the movement is upward toward success and freedom, this is an expected part of the climb. Be sure everyone, especially the student, knows this ahead of time.
4. There is more than one way to climb a ladder – be sure to work *with* the student to find the best way for him or her.

Two components are necessary for the ladder to lead to success and freedom. One involves ability, the other disposition.

To be successful, the student must develop learning strategies that probably are not present. These must be explicitly and constantly taught and refined.

To desire to climb the ladder and keep climbing, the student must retrain what he says to himself in the face of failure and success. This is typically called attribution because it involves what the student tells himself (or to what he attributes success and failure).

Incremental progress (one step at a time) requires proximate goals and providing instructional and performance opportunities that are within the student's range of ability. At least initially, the teacher needs to "stack the deck" in the student's favor by providing assignments and tasks within appropriate guided and independent levels of instruction.

The teacher should *expect* learned helplessness tactics from the student: avoidance, excuse-making, blaming, sickness, forgetfulness, anger, and other coping behaviors. After all, it's not fun to fail! As a coach might, the teacher encourages, spends time with, coaxes, challenges, and cheers for the students. Sometimes, especially in peer or group situations, it's helpful to get everyone to cheer everyone on.

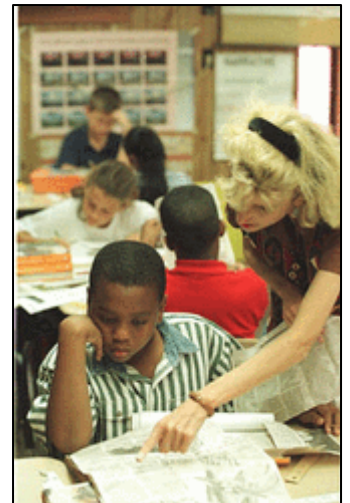
Explicit, direct instruction will be helpful. The teacher will need to assume the student does not know learning strategies. To tell this student to "study harder" is absolutely ineffective because it *assumes* the student already knows how to study *effectively*. He doesn't! (Usually, he or she will associate *harder* with *longer*. More of the same ineffective study will not improve anything and will almost certainly de-motivate.)

Strategy-Attribution Sequence

Mushinski Fulk and M.A. Mastropieri have developed a strategy to combine attribution retraining with strategy instruction.

- Step 1. ***Explain purpose.*** Explain the purpose of the strategy. Make sure the student understands how the strategy helps him or her. Relate the purpose to the student's frame of reference so he or she sees the value in learning the strategy. (Remember, perspective from the "bottom of the hole" here!)

- Step 2. **Discuss effort.** Discuss with the student how he or she controls his or her own effort and the critical role effort plays in producing successful outcomes. You may use sports, music, art, or other areas by analogy to illustrate this point.
- Step 3. **Model examples.** Apply the strategy correctly and incorrectly, Label the examples correct and incorrect. In other words, let them see what the strategy actually looks like! (This would be similar to demonstrating how to take a step at a time up the ladder by literally lifting your foot and placing it on the rung, etc.)
- Step 4. **Model attributions.** Model controllable attributions while engaging in the strategy (e.g., “I got the right answer because I first skimmed the chapter, read all the headings and subheadings, and tried hard. . . . I got the wrong answer because I rushed and didn’t skim the whole chapter. I didn’t try hard.”)
- Step 5. **Provide guided practice.** Give the student ample opportunity to practice the combined strategy-attribution sequence with timely task-specific feedback until he or she routinely gets the right answer, makes positive attributions about his or her efforts, and appears comfortable with the strategy (e.g., “Kelly, that’s great. You got the right answer because you first skimmed the chapter and worked hard. You told yourself that putting the effort in improves your understanding.”).
- Step 6. **Provide independent practice.** Give the student ample opportunity to use the combined strategy-attribution sequences by himself or herself. Monitor student behavior and offer task-specific feedback as needed (e.g., “Nice job Kelly. You worked hard and gave yourself credit for skimming the chapter before reading it. Your effort made a difference.”).
- Step 7. **Conduct formative assessments.** Assess the student’s progress and modify the teaching strategies if difficulty is apparent (e.g., if Kelly has trouble skimming full chapters of some twenty pages, reduce skimming to a more manageable fraction and provide more frequent feedback).
- Step 8. **Introduce a new strategy.** Once the student routinely uses the strategy correctly and takes credit for making adequate effort and using it correctly, introduce a slightly different strategy appropriate for the student’s instructional level. Re-institute attribution retraining sequence with Step 1.



A couple of important points to keep in mind in this process: As students find themselves hopelessly “stuck” in a failure pattern (i.e., the “hole”), they become more and more hopeless and helpless. This leads to a lack of motivation, depression, acting out, avoidance, and other counter-productive behaviors. The teacher should keep in mind the psyche of the student, as he or she works with him or her.

This process is not just a *rescue* although its goal is to get the student out of the hole. It is much more: It is an empowering process in which the teacher provides knowledge, skills, and a “new talk” to lead to the student’s being able to make decisions with real choices about his or her performance and destiny. It’s no longer a victim mentality; it’s now a choice with new skills and new opportunities!

Lance Armstrong’s Story and his “Live Strong” campaign. We all have choice even in struggle. His story illustrates this as well as any.

