Unpacking Productive Struggle: Supporting Teachers in Conceptualizing Challenge

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Reflect a moment...
struggle

scuffle
brawl
grapple
fight
exertion
writhe
effort
wriggle
struggle
thrust
strive
toil
labor
work
wrestle
strain
battle
tussle
What Does **Struggle** Look Like?

- Let’s brainstorm: What does struggle look like in the classroom? What are some examples of learning situations that cause students to struggle? What are some specific ways that our advanced learners experience struggle?

Sorting out **Struggle**

- What types or categories of struggle do you see?
Shifting the Lens

- How might you shift a couple of the examples to be a more productive struggle?

Struggling with Struggle

- What are the challenges of responding when students are struggling?
productive struggle

What does *productive struggle* mean?
Terms for Productive Struggle

- Productive struggle
- Desirable difficulties
- Impasse-driven learning
- Controlled floundering
- Disequilibrium

Productive Success

Productive Failure

Unproductive Success

Unproductive Failure

Kapur, 2016
Describing Productive Struggle

“Students expend effort in order to make sense of mathematics, to figure out something that is not immediately apparent” (Hiebert & Grouws, 2007, p. 387)

Productive struggle emerges when a learning task...

- Demands that learners think deeply through challenging problems, concepts, and relationships among ideas
- Reflects value for effort and recognition of the relationship between effort and growth
- Engages learners in monitoring their own response to challenge

Some Context - Project LIFT (https://lift.uconn.edu)

- Javits-funded project focused on general education classrooms at grades 1-3
- Project goals
  - Exploring student behaviors that may be evidence of advanced academic potential
  - Linking instructional practices to the high-potential behaviors students may show
  - Infusing strategies to elicit and support high potential into standards-based instruction for all learners
  - Considering next instructional steps when students demonstrate high-potential behaviors
Connection to Struggle

● How do we support teachers in engaging all learners in more inquiry-oriented, less teacher-directed activities that may encourage high-potential behaviors to emerge?

● How do we support teachers in responding to the struggles learners encounter in these learning activities?

● How do we help make struggle productive?

● How do we help teachers recognize when to help and how much?

“Productive struggle leads to some great thinking and requires perseverance.”

Professional Learning Activities

● Exploring examples of struggle
● Defining patterns and relationships
● Examining responsive actions
● Recognizing unhelpful types of helping
● Encapsulating productive struggle
Some Moments Prompting Struggle (Warshauer, 2015)

- Getting started
- Carrying out a process
- Uncertainty in explaining and sense-making
- Expressing misconceptions and errors
Other Sources of Struggle

- Vocabulary and clarity of instructions
- Interpersonal issues and collaboration
- Fear of taking risks
- *Management* of the learning task

Supporting Productive Struggle

Supporting productive struggle in the classroom requires attention to...

- Source of the struggle
- Emotional and cognitive elements
- How the struggle is framed
- Supports to promote growth as a result of the experience.
- Potential for experiencing some sense of failure in the process
Struggle for Teachers, Too

- “Wrapping my head around teaching for the strategy, not the answer”
- Managing “think time” for students
- Assessing when the struggle is productive or unproductive
  - Guiding students in managing their emotional response to struggle
- Deciding how much help to give and at what level
- Providing the opportunity and the context for struggle

Productive Resolution for Productive Struggle

(Warshauer, 2015; Rodgers, 2017; Jacobs et al. 2014)

- Ask and encourage questions to identify the source of the struggle
  - Use questions that invite thinking and risk-taking
  - Avoid interrupting their strategy
  - Acknowledge without saying “right” or “wrong” as much as possible
Productive Resolution for Productive Struggle
(Warshauer, 2015; Rodgers, 2017; Jacobs et al. 2014)

- Maintain intended goals and demand of the task
  - Limit “telling” and other moves that take away from their thinking
  - Give time - avoid stepping in too soon or too much and taking the intellectual work away.

Productive Resolution for Productive Struggle
(Warshauer, 2015; Rodgers, 2017; Jacobs et al. 2014)

- Support student thinking by acknowledging effort
  - Use positive reinforcement and specific praise to acknowledge effort
  - Remind students that struggle is ok
  - Invite students to share ideas even when not fully formed
Productive Resolution for Productive Struggle
(Warshauer, 2015; Rodgers, 2017; Jacobs et al. 2014)

- Enable students to move forward
  - Encourage identification of the source of the struggle
  - Use questions with care to scaffold
  - Model and encourage stress reduction strategies

Reflecting on Struggle

- Being open to sharing and the fluidity of what responses could be! Not having concrete categories, etc.
- Sorting the group's larger ideas/thoughts into categories.
- Thinking of how to sort and categorize information.
- Categorizing, but it really improved my understanding
- Some of the activities today required some outside of the box thinking - this is often a struggle for me - especially when working on the spot, without time for introspective thought. But - we did it!
Thank you!
For more information, email us or visit us at https://lift.uconn.edu