

## Understanding the Needs of Advanced Learners

Whatever label we use—“gifted learners,” “high-end learners,” “academically talented learners,” or “advanced learners”—it seems to bother many people. In this book, “advanced learners” is used for two reasons. First, this label doesn’t seem to carry some of the more controversial overtones of some other descriptors. Second, it says to the teacher in a mixed-ability classroom, “Don’t worry so much about identification processes and formal labeling. Take a look at who is ahead of where you and the curriculum guide expect your students to be. Then you have a place to start.”

Some students may be advanced in September and not in May—or in May, but not in September. Some may be advanced in math, but not in reading; or in lab work, but not in memorization of related scientific formulas. Some may be advanced for a short time, others throughout their lives but only in certain endeavors. Some learners are consistently advanced in many areas.

Because the primary intent of differentiated instruction is to maximize student capacity, when you can see (or you have a hunch) that a student can learn more deeply, move at a brisker pace, or make more connections than instructional blueprints might suggest, that’s a good time to offer advanced learning opportunities.

But advanced learners, like other learners, need help in developing their abilities. Without teachers that coach for growth and curriculums that are appropriately challenging, these learners may fail to achieve their potential. For example, when a recent study compared Advanced Placement Exam results of the top 1 percent of U.S. students with top students in 13 other countries, U.S. students scored last in biology, 11th in chemistry, and 9th in physics

(Ross, 1993). There are many reasons why advanced learners don’t achieve their full potential.

- **Advanced learners can become mentally lazy, even though they do well in school.** We have evidence (Clark, 1992; Ornstein & Thompson, 1984; Wittrock, 1977) that a brain loses capacity and “tone” without vigorous use, in much the same way that a little-used muscle does. If a student produces “success” without effort, potential brainpower can be lost.

- **Advanced learners may become “hooked” on the trappings of success.** They may think grades are more important than ideas, being praised is more important than taking intellectual risks, and being right is more valuable than making new discoveries. Unfortunately, many advanced learners quickly learn to do what is “safe” or what “pays,” rather than what could result in greater long-term learning.

- **Advanced learners may become perfectionists.** We praise them for being the best readers, assign them to help others who can’t get the math, and compliment them when they score highest on tests. When people get excited about their performance, these students often assume it’s possible to keep being the best. Because they attach so much of their self-worth to the rewards of schooling and because those rewards are accessible for years at a time, advanced learners often don’t learn to struggle or fail. Failure then becomes something to avoid at all costs. Some advanced learners develop compulsive behaviors, from excessive worry to procrastination to eating disorders, and occasionally even suicide. Many advanced learners simply become less productive and less satisfied. Creative production typically has a high failure-to-success ratio. Students who have the

capacity to be producers of new knowledge but who are afraid of failure are unlikely to see their productive capacity realized.

- **Advanced learners may fail to develop a sense of self-efficacy.** Self-esteem is fostered by being told you are important, valued, or successful. Self-efficacy, by contrast, comes from stretching yourself to achieve a goal that you first believed was beyond your reach. Although many advanced learners easily achieve a sort of hollow self-esteem, they never develop a sense of self-efficacy. These students often go through life feeling like impostors, fearfully awaiting the inevitable day the world will discover they aren't so capable after all.

- **Advanced learners may fail to develop study and coping skills.** When students coast through school with only modest effort, they may look successful. In fact, however, success in life typically follows persistence, hard work, and risk. In many cases, advanced learners make good grades without learning to work hard. Then when hard work is required, they become frightened, resentful, or frustrated. In addition, they “succeed” without having to learn to study or grapple with ideas or persist in the face of uncertainty. We graduate many highly able students with “evidence” that success requires minimal effort, and without the skills necessary to achieve when they discover that evidence is invalid.

Advanced learners, like all learners, need learning experiences designed to fit them. When teachers are not sensitive to that need, they may set learning goals for advanced students that are too low or that develop new skills too infrequently. Then, if students are successful anyhow, they often fail to develop the desirable balance between running into walls and scaling them. Advanced learners share other learners' need for teachers who can help them set high

goals, devise plans for reaching those goals, tolerate frustrations and share joys along the way, and sight new horizons after each accomplishment.

Several key principles are useful when coaching advanced learners for growth.

- Continually raise the ceilings of expectations so that advanced learners are competing with their own possibilities rather than with a norm.

- Make clear what would constitute excellence for the advanced learner so she knows, at least in large measure, what to aim for in her work.

- As you raise ceilings of expectation, raise the support system available to the student to reach his goals. When tasks are appropriately challenging, you'll find high-end learners need your support and scaffolding to achieve genuine success, just as other learners do.

- Be sure to balance rigor and joy in learning. It's difficult to imagine a talented learner persisting when there is little pleasure in what the learner once thought was fascinating. It's also difficult to imagine growth toward expertise when there is all joy and no rigor.

## Understanding the Needs of Struggling Learners

Labels are tricky with struggling learners, too. The term “slow learners” often carries with it a negative connotation of being shiftless or lazy, yet many struggling learners work hard and conscientiously—especially when tasks are neither boring (such as a steady diet of drill and skill) nor anxiety-producing (such as tasks that require more than they can deliver even when they work hard). The term “at-risk” overlooks the portion of the learner that may well be “at-promise.” One child's struggle stems from a learning disability, another's home life takes all her energy, and another just finds a subject his nemesis.

Further, just like with an advanced learner, the learning profile of a struggling learner may shift over time; for example, suddenly a student becomes an eager reader after trailing the class in decoding and comprehension for some time. Many students whom we perceive to be “slow,” “at-risk,” or “struggling,” may actually be quite proficient in talents that schools often treat as secondary, such as leadership among neighborhood peers, story telling, or building contraptions out of discarded materials.

Nonetheless, many students do struggle with school tasks. They are a diverse group who can challenge the artistry of the most expert teacher in listening deeply, believing unconditionally, and moving beyond a recipe or blueprint approach to teaching to shape classrooms that offer many avenues and timetables to understanding.

Here are some principles that can be helpful in ensuring that struggling learners maximize their capacity in school.

- **Look for the struggling learner’s positives.** Every student does some things relatively well. It’s important to find those things, to affirm them in private conversations and before peers, to design tasks that draw on those strengths, and to ensure that the student can use strengths as a means of tackling areas of difficulty. A student with kinesthetic ability and a weakness in reading, for example, may find it easier to comprehend a story by pantomiming the events in it as someone else reads aloud, and *then* reading the story to herself.

- **Don’t let what’s broken extinguish what works.** Few adults elect to spend the majority of their days practicing what they *can’t* do. The difference between us and students is that we have a choice. Struggling learners are more likely to retain motivation to learn when their days allow them to concentrate on tasks that are relevant and make them feel powerful. Many

learning-disabled gifted learners, for example, find school intolerable because educators spend so much time “remediating” their flaws that there’s no space for enhancing their strengths. It’s important to avoid this temptation with struggling learners in general.

- **Pay attention to relevance.** It’s easy to understand why many struggling learners believe school is not “their place.” They don’t “do school” well today, and we keep insisting that persistence will pay off “someday”—often in another grade or level of school in which the child believes he has little prospect for success. Dewey (1938) reminds us that if school isn’t for today, it will often turn out to be for nothing. He believed this to be true for all learners. Certainly it is so for many struggling learners. A skilled teacher conscientiously works to make each day’s explorations compelling for that day.

- **Go for powerful learning.** If struggling learners can’t learn everything, make sure they learn the big ideas, key concepts, and governing principles of the subject at hand. Not only does this approach help struggling learners see the big picture of the topic and subject, but it also helps build a scaffolding of meaning, a requisite framework for future success.

- **Teach up.** Know your struggling students’ learning profiles. Create tasks for struggling learners (individuals or groups with similar profiles) that are a chunk more difficult than you believe they can accomplish. Then teach for success (by encouraging, providing support, guiding planning, delineating criteria, and so on.) so that the seemingly unattainable moves within the learners’ reach. A strong sense of self-efficacy comes not from being told we’re terrific, but rather from our own recognition that we’ve accomplished something we believed was beyond us.

- **Use many avenues to learning.** Some students learn best with their ears, some with their eyes, some with touch or movement. Some are solitary learners, some must interact with friends in order to learn. Some students work well by gathering details and constructing a bird's-eye view of what is being studied. Others will not learn unless the bird's-eye view is clear to them before they encounter the details. Struggling learners sometimes become more successful learners just because their way of learning is readily accessible through both teacher design and student choice.

- **See with the eyes of love.** Some kids come at the world with their dukes up. Life is a fight for them in part because the belligerence that surrounds them spawns belligerence in them. These kids are no less difficult for a teacher to embrace than for the rest of the world. But behind the tension and combativeness abundant in the world of the angry child, what's lacking is the acceptance and affection he disinvites. Perhaps a good definition of a friend is someone who loves us as we are, and envisions us as we might be. If so, these students need a teacher who is a friend. The eyes of love reflect both unconditional acceptance and unwavering vision of total potential. It's not easy, but it is critical.

Here are a few important principles to recall as you plan for success for students who struggle with school.

- Be clear on what students must know, understand, and be able to do in order to grow in their grasp of a subject. Teacher fog will only obscure an already difficult view for struggling students.

- Set important goals of understanding and use of ideas for struggling students, then figure out how to build scaffolding leading to student success in those goals. Don't dilute the goals.

- Work for learning-in-context. In other words, help the student see how ideas and skills are part of their own families and neighborhoods and futures. Helping students connect their lives with ideas and skills presupposes that, as teachers, we understand the students' neighborhoods, cultures, and families and what connections are possible.

- Plan teaching and learning through many modalities. If a student has heard about an idea, sung about it, built a representation of it, and read about it, success is far more likely than if one avenue to learning predominates.

- Continually find ways to let the student know that you believe in him or her—and reinforce legitimate success whenever it happens. If I believe in you, I'll find a way to ensure that you succeed, and will be sure to point out that success to you whenever it is genuine and earned.

### **Differentiating Learning Experiences to Address Academic Diversity**

Differentiated instruction is not simply giving a “normal” assignment to most students and “different” assignments to students who are struggling or advanced. That approach usually creates a “pecking order” among students, which then tends to cause other troubles. Students assigned a remedial assignment, which looks simple to others, can take it as a message that they are inferior. Advanced assignments tend to look more interesting to nearly everyone except the advanced learner, who may perceive it as more work. These strategies can backfire, causing both advanced and struggling students to feel different from those who do the “real” assignment.

In a differentiated classroom, a number of things are going on in any given class period. Over time, all students complete assignments individually and in small groups, and

whole-group instruction occurs as well. Sometimes students select their group size and tasks, sometimes they are assigned. Sometimes the teacher establishes criteria for success, sometimes students do. And setting standards for success is often a collaborative process. Because there are many different things happening, no one assignment defines “normal,” and no one “sticks out.” The teacher thinks and plans in terms of “multiple avenues to learning” for varied needs, rather than in terms of “normal” and “different.” The goal for each student is maximum growth from his current “learning position.” The goal of the teacher is coming to understand more and more about that learning position so that learning matches learner need.

### **A Final Thought**

In the end, all learners need your energy, your heart, and your mind. They have that in common because they are young humans. *How* they need you, however, differs. Unless we understand and respond to those differences, we fail many learners.

Some of us are drawn to teach struggling learners, some are natural champions of advanced learners, and some have an affinity for the sort of “standard” student who matches our image of the 4th or 8th or 11th grader we thought we’d be teaching. That we have preferences is, again, human. The most effective teachers spend a career meticulously cultivating their appreciation for children not so easy for them to automatically embrace, while continuing to draw energy from those students whom they more automatically find delightful.