**COMBATTING LEARNED HELPLESSNESS TOOL**

**Encourage Engagement and Accountability**

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| **1. HOLD STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You assign classwork and go over it before holding students accountable for having completed it, | **THEN…**students realize they can wait till the timer rings, then copy the answers as you go over them. So they don’t even try to do the work. They will sit quietly or chat with a neighbor, which is more fun. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Either circulate and assign credit (with a stamp or initial) as students work, collect it before reviewing, or provide and give credit for “notes from discussion” that students must complete in addition. |
| **2. MAKE THE PITCH.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You fail to make a pitch for the lesson’s objective, | **THEN…**students will wonder, *Why are we doing this?* Being told WHAT they are doing (i.e., the agenda) is not enough. Without knowing the purpose for the lesson, students feel like hostages, and while they might comply with your demands, they are less likely to feel motivated or personally invested in the work. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Share the objective (which is ideally “RPM”—rigorous, purposeful, and measurable[[1]](#footnote-1)) and make a pitch that explains what’s in it for them. And remind them of that purpose throughout the lesson (*“Let’s not forget WHY we’re looking for the most relevant evidence: so we can wow readers and convince them of our argument”).* |
| **3. TEACH REVISION STRATEGIES.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You provide written feedback to students with many details about grammar, diction, organization, etc., in isolation, | **THEN…**students learn to depend on others to revise their work and can’t recognize their own mistakes. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Teach revision strategies (i.e., outlining their own essays to ensure coherence, classifying fragments and complete sentences, fixing run-on sentences, checking for consistent verb tense, etc.) and build time for students to revise work—with your feedback on revisions. |
| **4. USE TURN AND TALK[[2]](#footnote-2) AND COLD-CALLING.[[3]](#footnote-3)** |  |  |
| **IF…**You rarely use turn-and-talk and cold-calling,  | **THEN…**students recognize that only peers who raise their hands will get called on, so they can sit back and wait for others to do the work. Also, students who might want to speak can become intimidated by those who tend to dominate the conversation. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Use purposeful turn-and-talk (and have students jot notes) with cold-calling to increase engagement and accountability for performance. Find a way to randomize cold-calling (i.e., use note cards with student names that you shuffle through), and other times, plan your cold-call (choose a few who are typically middle-of-the-road in understanding, one high, and one struggling student). |
| **5. TREAT STUDENTS LIKE DETECTIVES.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You introduce new concepts or definitions by requiring students to copy down notes, | **THEN…**students will not necessarily grasp or retain this information because they have not had to wrestle with it. Copying down definitions does not teach students how the concept works or how to use it. Telling is not teaching. | **SO, INSTEAD:** When introducing NEW content, give clear examples of the phenomenon (e.g., two bold-faced examples of “metaphor,” explained), then ask students to INFER from those examples what the phenomenon appears to be and how it seems to work. There is not one right answer. |
| **6. INCLUDE INDEPENDENT WORK.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You do ALL the work together or in partners,  | **THEN…**students learn that they don’t need to do the hard work since it’s always done together and for them. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Plan and keep independent work time sacred in class with active monitoring and personal feedback. |
| **7. LET THEM STRUGGLE A BIT.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You answer student questions immediately during independent work time, | **THEN…**students learn not to try or struggle on their own. They’ll always wait for you to swoop in! | **SO, INSTEAD:** Set a timer as soon as 100% of students are actually WORKING and you have announced previously that you will address questions after 5 min of sustained work time. When the timer goes off, you can say, “Raise your hand if you need my attention,” and write student names on the board. Students then return to work and you address questions in the order of the names on the board so students aren’t sitting there waiting with their hands up.  |
| **8. TRAIN STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You ask all the questions,  | **THEN…**students never learn to ask their own or invest themselves enough to wonder. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Create time for asking and answering questions about the text, problem, or content at hand. Invest students in seeking their own answers.[[4]](#footnote-4) |

**Provide Models for Clarity**

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| **9. PROVIDE CLEAR MODELS.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You fail to model the work and/or you skip guided practice, | **THEN…**students will not work well independently. When students are unclear about what they are supposed to do, they do nothing. Or chat. Or do something else to get into trouble. Misbehavior is often the result of students feeling incompetent and acting out to distract from the fact that they don’t know how to be successful at what you are asking them to do. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Provide a clear, instructive model of whatever skills or strategies you want students to use. And remember, “I Do” doesn’t mean “I do everything while you sit silently and do nothing.” You need to engage students and check for understanding during the modeling phase so that you can assess if students need more modeling, paired work, or independent work.  |
| **10. ANALYZE EXEMPLARS.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You don’t provide students with model essays, sentences, or examples, BEFORE they need to complete a task,  | **THEN…**they don’t know what “good” looks like and will be uncertain about what to do. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Analyze an exemplar before you set students to work. Assess it together on a rubric or compare “good” and “great” so students can aim for “great” from the start. |
| **11. INVITE STUDENTS TO USE GENERALIZABLE STRATEGIES.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You focus on the specific task/text/problem at hand without inviting students to apply a generalized skill/strategy, | **THEN…**they will miss the opportunity to access the tools in their toolbox. They might even forget that they possess relevant skills/strategies. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Teach and name STRATEGIES, then remind students to use them when faced with challenges. Not “What should we do here?” but “What strategy should we use *in a situation like this*?” Provide clear steps for strategies. |
| **12. MODEL HAND-RAISING.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You ask questions during class discussions without modeling hand-raising, | **THEN…**students are likely to call out.  While this might seem like a management problem, it can become an ENGAGEMENT problem because some students—esp. quieter ones—feel intimidated by those who tend to call out, so they share their ideas less often if calling out is the norm. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Model hand-raising to ensure that students raise their hands to answer.  Ensure you call on multiple students—or better yet, let students know the expectation is to call on another student when they are done to continue the discussion without you driving it. |
| **13. SET A PURPOSE FOR READING.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You assign reading without establishing a purpose for reading, | **THEN…**students don’t know what they are supposed to look for or pay attention to. The default is NOTHING. So you can’t blame them if they stare out the window and think about lunch. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Clarify why you are reading this particular bit of text and what they are supposed to do while reading. Either provide a question or ask them to generate their own questions about the text.[[5]](#footnote-5) |
| **14. CLARIFY PARTNER WORK RULES.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You tell students to “read and work with a partner,”  | **THEN…**you will see a lot of chatting and no reading. This is because students are unclear about their roles, so they wait for each other to take the lead, with the result that neither does. It’s easier to chat. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Clarify the role that each partner will play in the work: e.g., “Partner A will read aloud while Partner B will raise and record How and Why questions about this page. On the next page, you will switch roles. Partner B will read, and Partner A will surface the questions and write them down.” Choose the partners ahead of time so that you are purposeful in the groups with respect to ability/personality, etc.[[6]](#footnote-6) |
| **15. MAKE STUDENTS PROVE YOUR ARGUMENTS.** |  |  |
| **IF…**You ask students to guess what word you’re thinking of (which you think they should know), | **THEN…**students will call out random guesses until you give them enough hints to say the right word. Or they will say nothing because they don’t know what you’re talking about. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Stay away from guessing games like, “What word am I thinking of?” Tell them the word, tell them that you think it’s important, and ask them why you think that. Focus less on recall questions and more on using information or clues to infer and explain. |

**Encourage Risk-taking**

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| **16. USE STOP AND JOT OR TURN AND TALK[[7]](#footnote-7) BEFORE COLD-CALLING.[[8]](#footnote-8)** |  |  |
| **IF…**You cold-call without using stop and jot or turn and talk first,  | **THEN…**students feel put on the spot and are more inclined to opt out. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Give students a chance to think by writing something down and/or sharing with a partner before you cold-call. |
| **17. REMIND STUDENTS “THERE IS MORE THAN ONE RIGHT ANSWER.”** |  |  |
| **IF…**You ask open-ended questions without adding, “There is more than one right answer,” | **THEN…**students might believe there is ONE right answer, and they don’t know it, so they will not take the risk of trying to answer. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Say, “There is not one right answer” more often to invite students to take more risks and participate without fear of being wrong.[[9]](#footnote-9) |
| **18. DON’T INCENTIVIZE THE EASY WAY OUT.** |  |  |
| **IF…** You ding students a point for every grammatical error in their writing, | **THEN…**students will avoid risking errors by writing simple/simplistic sentences instead of more complex ones that show critical thought. | **SO, INSTEAD:** Don’t do that. Think about what kind of risk-taking you’re rewarding, such as attempting to write complex sentences. Consider using a holistic score for grammar (e.g., “no errors, some errors, numerous errors”). |

1. See Chapter 2, “Principle #2,” for an explanation of how to create RPM objectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015). For a detailed description of “Turn and Talk,” see 324-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015). For a detailed description of “Cold Call,” see 249-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more guidance on training students to ask their own questions, see Sarah Tantillo, *Literacy and the Common Core: Recipes for Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 115-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more thoughts on teaching students how to set a purpose for reading, see Chapter 4, “Genre, Audience, and Tone.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more guidance on shared reading, see my MiddleWeb blog post “Shared Reading Needs to Have a Clear Purpose,” Jan. 8, 2018, found at <https://www.middleweb.com/36699/shared-reading-needs-to-have-a-clear-purpose/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015). For a detailed description of “Turn and Talk,” see 324-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015). For a detailed description of “Cold Call,” see 249-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For more thoughts on teaching students to embrace learning from mistakes, see Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015). For a detailed description of “Building a Culture of Error,” see 64-72. See also Carol Dweck’s explanation of fixed vs. growth mindset in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)