Name:

Period:

1. Do you think that it is important for students to struggle in order to grow and develop their individual skills?
2. Which of the strategies do you believe are the most effective for student growth (assuming that struggle is necessary for growth).
3. Are there better ways for students to develop? Explain with examples.

# A Lesson Planning Framework That Leads to Productive Struggle

Dialogic learning is a form of collaborative inquiry that works like gradual release of responsibility in reverse—beginning with “you do.”

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For many teachers, the go-to structure for lesson planning is the “I do, we do, you do” format, also known as the gradual release of responsibility (GRR). In this model, the teacher first demonstrates a skill (“I do”) and then the teacher and students use the skill together (“we do”). Then students do the work themselves, either individually or in small groups (“you do”).

There’s a good reason that this format is so widely used: [It works](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=irWvBkI5jeAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=Archer,+A.+L.,+%26+Hughes,+C.+A.+(2010).+Explicit+instruction:+Effective+and+efficient+teaching.++New+York:+Guilford+Press.&ots=YI5Yyi0NR6&sig=9MHcukxZg6vqsHOaJq8Epb1gsuU#v=onepage&q=Archer%2C%20A.%20L.%2C%20%26%20Hughes%2C%20C.%20A.%20(2010).%20Explicit%20instruction%3A%20Effective%20and%20efficient%20teaching.%20%20New%20York%3A%20Guilford%20Press.&f=false), efficiently helping students master a skill or find the correct answer.

But it’s also possible to plan a lesson [the other way around](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/003172171209300708?journalCode=pdka), to start with “you do” and work backwards. One way to do that is called dialogic learning, in which the teacher and students use collaborative inquiry to [co-construct knowledge](https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/trtr.1547). Typically, dialogic learning begins with the teacher giving students a thorny problem to grapple with on their own, and then, after a period of individual or group work, the class comes together to make their thinking visible.

If your students aren’t used to dialogic learning, expect resistance at first, because it intentionally maximizes students’ productive struggle with content. You can prepare them for the heavy lifting by making sure an exercise is low stakes and telling them what to expect: “You probably aren’t going to know how to solve this problem right away—that’s OK. The point is for you to puzzle over it and see what you can figure out. I’ll give you five minutes.”

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### 7 FORMATS FOR DIALOGIC LEARNING

**1. Changing perspectives:** Have students fill out a questionnaire with their own views and then have them fill it out as if they were one of the characters of a story they’re reading (e.g., Templeton the rat from Charlotte’s Web or Pony Boy from The Outsiders), or someone in a historical period (Susan B. Anthony or a runaway slave). Then have them explain their reasoning.

**2. Predicting from data:** Give students a graph with some missing data on a subject they’re studying and have them make predictions about the missing data and explain their reasoning. Then show them the actual data and ask them to make sense of it. For example, you could give third graders the numbers of Americans who live in urban and suburban areas and have them predict how many live in rural ones. Or give middle school students a graph of carbon emissions for every decade from 1900 to 2000 and have them predict the figure for 2020 and explain their prediction. Then give them the actual data. You can take both of these examples further by asking students to predict the future and explain their thinking.

**3. Sorting:** Split students into small groups, and give each group an envelope with labeled cards to be sorted (e.g., the names of living creatures, prime and non-prime numbers, or names of literary characters who are familiar to them). Have the groups sort the cards and then come together to share their work. Students who are familiar with Venn diagrams can sort them that way. Be prepared for students to come up with different schemes for sorting—things get interesting when there’s more than one right answer.

**4. Finding the rule:** Don’t give students a rule or definition and ask them to memorize it—see if they can discover it. Instead of telling students the formula for the perimeter of a rectangle, have them figure out the perimeter and work their way back to the formula. Instead of telling students what a proper noun is, circle the proper nouns in the first paragraph of the morning message and ask students how to spot them in the second paragraph. After students have a go at finding one of these rules, you can tell them the commonly accepted version.

**5. Learning from primary sources:** Have small groups look at laminated photos of a locale or a time period (e.g., rural China, a one-room schoolhouse, or life during the Harlem Renaissance). As they look, have students fill out a T-chart with what they notice and what they think it means. Then have groups come together to discuss their ideas. Other primary sources include video clips, audio tapes of music or poets reading their work, and artwork from a historical period.

**6. Creating some data together and interpreting it:** Ask students a provocative question with a limited number of possible answers. (For example: Was Frog being a good friend to Toad in Frog and Toad Are Friends? Do you think nuclear power is a good way to fight climate change?) On the board, set up vertical columns for the possible answers and have students post a sticky note with their answer in the matching column to create an instant bar graph. Ask them to justify their answers with evidence from the text or by doing research. Take it further by having them provide detail in their writing.

**7. Using the textbook:** At the beginning of a unit, give students a question that appears in the textbook at the end of the chapter. If you label it a “Challenge Question” and make it low stakes, students should be willing to grapple with it and risk being wrong. It will help you gauge what they know, and they’ll be more interested in learning what comes next.

One last thing: While it’s easy to focus on the exciting tasks we give our students, we also need to remember to leave plenty of time for them to reflect and make their thinking visible—that’s where the learning really gets fun.