

Setting Students Up for Success

Create the path of least resistance

By REBECCA FRIEDMAN with CHAVI ABRAMSON

What do a successful teacher and a wealthy grocery-store owner have in common? This sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but the answer is simple. Both are familiar, even if they don't know it, with "technical successes" and "technical failures." Aiming to maximize his sales, our grocer

puts staples such as milk, eggs, and bread at the back of the store, as his customers may pick up other items while looking for the staples. Placing the staples at the back of the store is a "technical success," while placing them at the front constitutes a "technical failure." In the classroom, a technical success arises when a teacher prepares her students to succeed, and a technical failure exists when she sets them up to fail.

Students need a learning environment that encourages success, but how can a teacher create such a place? In thinking about this question, I explored how the physical layout of my classroom, our academic schedule, and my behavior in class affected my students' ability to succeed. I also investigated how teachers around me set their students up for success or failure.

Just as a store owner must lay out his store for maximum sales, a teacher must set up her classroom as an effective learning environment. The structure may vary with the teacher's style of teaching and her students' needs. A teacher who typically introduces a lesson and then instructs the students to work individually might arrange desks in a "U" shape. The teacher can present a topic with minimal distractions and easily monitor students while they work independently. Students with diverse academic abilities might warrant "clustered" or "grouped" seating instead. Seating students in heterogeneous groups maximizes the learning environment: weaker students see how stronger students learn and approach problems, while stronger students gain a deeper understanding of the subject by teaching it to others, creating a "technical success."

It is important to think not only about where students' desks are located, but also about what's on top of them. Does one student always color on his desk? Maybe he focuses better while doodling. I can help him out by covering his desk with oversized paper and replacing it when necessary. Who knows, maybe he will grow up to be a famous illustrator.

Classroom practices should provide students with the path of least resistance to academic success. Facilitating



Rebecca Friedman (left) and Chavi Abramson

students' cooperation, independence, and ability to focus is the key. Consider common technical failures in the classroom, such as asking students to "think hard" right after lunch or recess or to listen quietly when they have a lot of energy. A teacher faced with these challenges can allow students to read independently or write in a journal after lunch or play an educational game that the students can get excited about.

A teacher concerned about students who finish assignments early can create a "must do/may do" chart. This chart can be student-specific or for the whole class, but the idea is that students complete "must do" activities before beginning those in the "may do" column. Students take responsibility for their own learning and time management. Most important, it prevents the technical failure of students who complete their work early and sit idle or, worse, distract students who are still working.

Imagine that we are reviewing last night's homework assignment and I ask, "Who has the answer to problem number two?" Several hands go up. I call on a student, who asks to go to the bathroom, effectively stopping the lesson. Or I call on one student for the answer and several others shout out, "He stole my answer!" These students may be left so frustrated that they find it difficult to focus. To avoid these technical failures, at the beginning of the year I teach my students a few basic signs in American Sign Language (ASL). If students want to go to the bathroom, they show me the sign, and I silently respond with "yes" or "no." Likewise, students sign "me too" when they weren't called on but want to demonstrate that they knew the answer. I acknowledge them verbally or with a thumbs-up. As a result, these students feel good. The use of ASL effectively eliminates student-initiated distractions, a clear technical success.

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