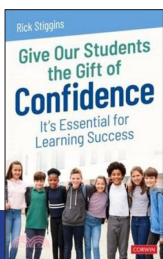




How do instruction and assessment contribute to academic confidence in learners?

There is a dynamic of American life that is almost never addressed in our public or private discourse about the rearing and education of our children. Yet this facet of early learning has a profound impact on each of us, both in school and far beyond. Rick Stiggins writes about the emotional dynamics of learner success and failure in the classroom and the impact of those dynamics on each learner's developing confidence or self-doubt. In this excerpt, Stiggins recounts the context of teaching and learning in American classrooms.



This Learning Point was adapted with permission from the first chapter of *Give Our Students the Gift of Confidence* (Corwin, 2023) by Rick Stiggins. Learn more about the book and the author at rickstiggins.com/book/give-our-students-the-gift-of-confidence

Introducing the emotional dynamics of learner success and failure

We all remember the constant evaluations we experienced in the classroom as well as at home. Sometimes those judgments were communicated privately while others became very public. Sometimes they were positive indications of success, sometimes they revealed that we fell short. Regardless, we always felt their emotional impact within, and, over time, those experiences shaped our beliefs in ourselves as learners.

The emotional dynamics of learner success and failure are important in general terms because they underpin each student's sense of academic well-being in school. Those who feel confident are in a position to take the risk of trying to learn, while those who doubt their chances of success approach new learning with anxiety, the enemy of learning success.

They are uniquely important today because they impact the lives of our children in post-pandemic classrooms in which teachers are striving to recover profound achievement losses. This will not be possible unless all students believe in themselves as capable learners.

If our children are to be prepared to

prosper in these times of rapid social, technological, and economic change, schools and families must embrace the two-part mission of ensuring that all children (1) master the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college or workplace training, and (2) develop the self-confidence needed to meet whatever learning challenges life presents to them in school and beyond. We know how to do this. We have in hand today the ideas and strategies needed to succeed on both fronts.

What could or should be the role of classroom instruction and assessment in instilling academic confidence or self-doubt? Should we merely think of assessment as the school testing "dipstick" used to judge success or failure at a particular point in time and, having judged, we move on? Clearly, this has been our tradition in the winner vs. loser grading for sorting context; and assessment for triage into the winner or loser column.

Emotional dynamics at play in the classroom

Based on their own record of learning success (or the lack thereof) as reflected in their own interpretation of their assessment, students will approach new learning in any context somewhere along a continuum from very confident to very doubtful about





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the probability of their future learning success. If they come to the new learning challenge carrying extreme doubt, this thinking probably will lead them to a “why even try?” conclusion and obvious results. But, even if this struggling student musters the courage needed to try anyway, she or he may approach the new challenge under an umbrella of stress and anxiety which, as we have established, are the enemies of learning and performance.

The only way to turn these struggling students around is for them to experience what they regard as at least a small success that they can attribute to their own efforts. If this kind of success is not forthcoming for them, they are doomed. Unavoidable failure triggers more hopelessness. However, if they quickly experience at least a mini-success, faint hope might emerge leading to a little more investment and a bit more success. The result can be the opening of a possible pathway to success and a tinge of confidence. Optimism might grow in them. Practice might become more persistent. A winning streak might form, raising the likelihood this learner will withstand other setbacks on their way and ultimately achieve success.

Immediate and persistent effort is likely to lead to success that reinforces confidence, risk taking, strong effort, and even more success. Over time, these learners will build the inner reserves needed to power through unexpected setbacks. But if an unexpected failure is so strong as to crack their confidence and cause it to waver, as above, an immediate success that the learner feels is due to their own work can patch the crack. Their winning streak can continue.

Turn students into partners

Classroom instruction and assessment has an important role to play in instilling academic confidence in

learners. When we weave assessment into the teaching and learning process as a continuous source of dependable evidence of strengths and areas in need of improvement, students and teachers can plan learning experiences needed to bring students to their desired levels of competence. In this progression, assessment is not merely a measure of achievement—assessment of learning—it can also be a cause of that achievement; we call this assessment *for* learning. As it turns out, assessment can serve both purposes.

One excellent way to develop learner agency is to turn students into partners with their teachers in making instructional decisions that drive their success. In other words, use ongoing classroom assessment while the learning is underway to provide both students and teachers with understandable information (assessment results) they can use immediately to plan what comes next in learning. So, students become consumers of their own assessment results, tracking their progress and analyzing what needs to come next. They experience and understand their own progressive improvement over time. When learners believe that success is within reach if they keep trying, this process can put them on winning streaks and keep them there.

To learn more

Learning Point: What is learner agency?
<https://bit.ly/LP-Learner-agency>

Curated Collections of MAC resources that introduce you to:

- Assessment FOR Learning <https://bit.ly/MAC-AFL>
- Assessment OF Learning <https://bit.ly/MAC-AOL>

Components and Elements of the formative assessment process, Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME)
<https://bit.ly/FAME-CE-chart>

The Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community open to educators and policymakers committed to improving their assessment literacy and increasing student learning through equitable and effective assessment practice.