

What does high-level challenge in the classroom look like?

Creating challenge in classrooms is an essential ingredient of any good learning environment. It takes learners out of their comfort zone and into the unknown by generating a tension that does not overwhelm nor interrupt learning. So, when purposefully done, it enhances and deepens learning by requiring students to overcome obstacles, resolve conundrums and answer their own questions through carefully constructed scenarios.

Challenge can be directed at individuals or involve collaboration between peers. Either way, it creates opportunities for careful analysis of the information provided which stimulates students to recall previous learning experiences and to draw upon prior knowledge. Challenge also encourages independence, repeat practice, resilience and enriches learning.

Working through and completing challenges as reflected in the Education Endowment Foundations report on Metacognition and Self-Regulated Learning (2019), requires learners to consider:

- What they know about similar problems
- Where have they encountered problems like this before and what happened when they did
- How they have solved such problems in the past

Challenge is important for everyone and is something all learners, not just the ablest, need access to if they are to make essential progress and reach the next stage in their learning.



Questions to consider:

01.

What do you want your learners to know, experience or be able to do as a result of challenge tasks?

02.

When have students met challenge in your classroom or subject before and how did they react?

03.

Have you created different levels of challenge across a range of task types to appeal to the full range of learners in your class?

04.

Do learners respond positively to challenge? You can help them do so with model thinking and by guiding them through the initial stages of a challenge and allowing them to continue with it in groups.

05.

Challenge isn't necessarily a ten-minute activity, so have you set aside sufficient thinking time and space for learners to deal with it?

Five fantastic ideas to try



Curious questions

Create a selection of curious questions and ethical dilemmas that require thought and which provoke discussion on a specific topic or theme. These can be directed at small groups, the whole class or even specific learners as a way to tease out knowledge, develop synthesis and application during what is a stimulating and testing experience.



The random surprise

Learners must be able to recognise and effectively apply key terminology, formulae and strategies. So, give them five or ten items (terminology, formulae, strategies) then let them link these together. Provide an additional set of items to encourage them to go further.



The A-Z challenge

Challenge learners to display their understanding and knowledge by asking them to find 26 relevant words about a topic, each starting with a different letter of the alphabet. Students can write down their answers or as an added challenge recall them from memory. This really isn't as easy as it seems!



The crime scene

Experiential learning through signposting and solving clues is brilliant fun, highly motivational and generates involvement. Put a series of clues to a 'crime or mystery' in envelopes and then ask learners to solve each one before moving on to the next. This could be classroom or school-based or even done digitally. Solving a mystery like this introduces an enticing hook to a challenge that learners love, and which helps them recall key knowledge and develop their cognitive skills.



The Mastermind hot seat

Here learners become Mastermind contestants who are put in the hot seat and asked a series of questions, some straightforward and others abstract, taken from exam papers or generated by their peers. Such quizzes help recall and encourage the application of prior knowledge.

Watch out for...

- Overwhelming students. You need to know them really well so you can plan tasks and activities based on their prior learning so you create challenge and intrigue, not overwhelm.
- Issuing challenges with no explanation. If they are to be successful, all tasks require modelling and set-up so learners clearly understand what is expected of them.

Further reading

<http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/stretch-and-challenge-in-your-classroom/>

<https://my.chartered.college/2019/05/great-teaching-techniques-stretch-and-challenge/>

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Presentations/Publications/Metacognition/EEF_Metacognition_and_self-regulated_learning.pdf

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360144X.2017.1399133>

The Pygmalion Effect in Education

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aN5TbGW5JA>

<https://www.mindsetkit.org/topics/celebrate-mistakes/make-challenge-new-comfort-zone>



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Four steps to success:



Consult

Only by fully understanding a school can you properly evaluate and determine its unique set of needs. It is our deep consultation process that enables us to deliver solutions that focus consistently and effectively on enabling pupils to achieve their full potential.



Tailor

Because all schools are different, a 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate, which is why each of our programmes can be personalised to fit your school's exact requirements and objectives.



Train

Experienced expert consultants assigned to deliver bespoke programmes with carefully devised timetables that allocate training over an agreed period.



Reflect

To ensure that learning is fully embedded, we provide follow-up material that enable on-going exploration of subjects beyond the initial training days along with guidance and tools you need to assess the impact of the training.