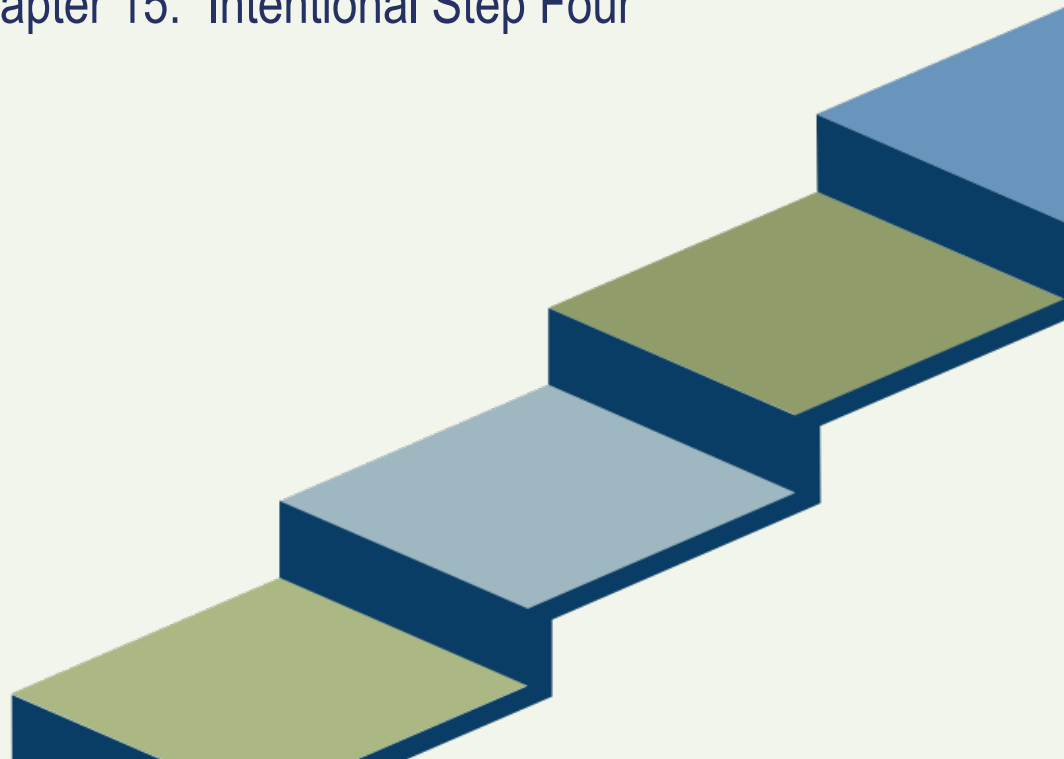


Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 15: Intentional Step Four



Chapter 15

Intentional Step Four: Plan for Productive Struggle

In most classrooms, small groups will be composed of mixed-ability students who learn at different speeds. With such a diversity of learners, we should expect that some groups will get stuck as they work together. So, what can we do when we see that a group is starting to struggle? How can we help students persevere through the task without just giving them the answer?

The key is to plan for productive struggle. We want our students to engage with rigorous tasks that challenge them to work within their Zone of Proximal Development—that sweet spot where students must stretch their current abilities to learn new content and skills. We want them to think through the problem, brainstorm solutions, and understand when and how to ask for help. Productive struggle is good; it leads to meaningful learning and growth. But we also need to ensure that when the struggle begins to tip from productive to unproductive, we have scaffolds and supports in place to help students get unstuck and complete the task.

To begin, teachers should promote a growth mindset in the classroom. This approach presents struggle, and even failure, as essential parts of the learning process. Students also learn to persevere through challenging tasks because they understand that achievement and growth are part of an ongoing journey. They can celebrate small wins and set goals for continued improvement. For more tips on establishing a growth mindset, see Chapter 14.

Teachers can also utilize effective questioning to help students get unstuck. Instead of giving students the answer, teachers can ask questions to help prompt them: Where are you stuck? What do you know about this topic? What might you do next? Where might you go to find the answers? Who could you ask for help?

If students still struggle to work through the problem, teachers can direct them to

appropriate resources, such as anchor charts, graphic organizers, texts, online tools, and/or their classmates. Providing students with additional resources and reminding them that they don't always have to turn to the teacher helps develop more student-to-student and self-driven learning. Teachers can also apply some of the scaffolding strategies in Chapter 11.

Strategy 1: Walking Field Trips

The teacher selects one student from a group that is struggling and walks with that student to other groups to observe. The teacher then asks the student: what do you notice about the way this group is doing the task? What question would you like to ask this group? The teacher then walks the student back to their seat and invites them to share what they observed with their group. The teacher can check-in again by asking the group: Now that you have this new information, how can you move forward?

This strategy can be done quickly—in five minutes or less—and can have a significant impact on groups that are stuck. Walking Field Trips encourage students to view their peers as resources instead of always relying on the teacher. It gives them additional tools to turn to when they struggle and teaches them how to seek help (.72) when they need it. This promotes self and social-awareness and motivates students to become life-long learners.

Strategy 2: Questioner

Similar to the Walking Field Trip, teachers can designate a Questioner in each group who is allowed to go to another group and ask a question. These students are the only group members who are permitted to get out of their seats during the group activity. Once the Questioner has asked a question, they will return to the group and share what they've learned.

This encourages students to rely on each other and reflect on their role and impact in the classroom community. The Questioners can also practice initiative, leadership skills, and self-efficacy (.92).

Strategy 3: Pause and Reflect

If many groups are struggling, the teacher can pause the activity and have the whole class reflect on the challenge. The teacher can lead a discussion, offer a mini-lesson, or direct the class to resources that will help get them unstuck. Students might also discuss the best way forward, so that when they return to the task, they understand how to proceed.

Inviting students to stop and think helps model for them how to process information and make reasoned judgments. Working together—with the teacher’s support—students can discuss the problem and identify solutions. This teaches them to recognize the value of other people’s ideas and collaborating as a team. The teacher can also provide resources and scaffolding (.82) to help students move forward.

Strategy 4: Hint Cards

The teacher can also hand out Hint Cards when groups get stuck. These cards contain hints about how to find the answer or which resources students can use to complete the task. For more ideas on using Hint Cards, see Chapter 5.