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allenge Your Top Students

10 ways to meet the needs of your advanced learners—and help the rest of your class, too!

By Joan Franklin Smutny

We've all seen it. While you're working as hard as you can with your group of struggling readers, there's 7-year-old Sarah sitting in the "Cozy Corner" working her way through the Harry Potter series for the second time. What do you do as a teacher? How do you possibly design a whole different program for a small group of high achievers while at the same time giving all your other students what they need? There's no question that time is a major obstacle for teachers who are contending with a wide range of learning needs in their classrooms—but there are ways to ratchet up the challenges.

Over the years that I have been teaching gifted children and mentoring teachers, I have found that there are ways to run your classroom and clear strategies to use that can help you meet the needs of a wide range of students at once. Not all 10 will necessarily work for you. You can decide which strategies are the best match for your students' needs and your teaching style.

1 ALLOW CHOICE

Try to offer more than one way for your students to show what they know and understand. All of your students will benefit from having more choice in what materials they use and what assignment and project they will complete. It's essential for advanced learners, as it allows them to delve deeper into a subject. Try these adaptations for your strongest students.

1. Offer a Range of Texts Advanced students could report on a more difficult book than their peers for a research project.

2. Ask Deeper Questions Encourage your students to move fron the factual to the conceptual. Instead of just asking for facts, push students to make connections.

3. Do the Research Push students, particularly strong learners, to use a variety of texts, websites, blogs, and so forth.

4. Get Creative Instead of mandating a product, encourage divergent thinking. In addition to essays, students can express their learning through other forms—poems, collages, podcasts, and so on.

ABOVE-GRADE LEARNERS

NO. 2

INTEGRATE TECHNOLOGY

Including technology in the classroom forms a powerful bridge from academics to the real world. The flexibility of the Internet provides rich and varied learning options for advanced students. SMART Boards, blogs, e-mails, iPods, software programs, and Internet searches are among the many means to enhance learning experiences. Technology gives students access to an extraordinary range of sources and learning opportunities that they might never discover otherwise. In today's world, electronic mentoring, for example, could enable a talented science student to find a researcher with expertise on the Kilauea volcano in Hawaii and read updates on the most recent findings. The Internet also provides ways for students to collaborate with peers from other states or countries who share the same interests. Apart from offering a significant enhancement to their academic and creative lives, technology also helps advanced learners feel more connected with others, less alone and isolated.

3

LET KIDS WORK TOGETHER

For advanced learners, working with peers is critical. Social and emotional difficulties diminish when they have opportunities to learn with intellectual peers.

IN PAIRS
Students who need more challenges could work together to share their ideas on an assignment that is more complex or involved.

IN GROUPS
Let advanced students work together in areas where they need the stimulation of intellectual peers (e.g., in literature circle).

ACROSS CLASSES
Combine your advanced students across the grade, if possible. Then, you and your colleagues can share responsibilities for monitoring extra projects.

ON PROJECTS
Advanced learners could work on an independent project that is supervised by a parent volunteer or community member.

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): WENDELL WEBBER; VADIM PONOMARENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK; JAMIE SAUNDERS

4 ACCOMMODATE PACE

Accelerated learning should always be part of anything you do for an advanced child. Acceleration includes a broad spectrum of options—from assigning more difficult texts or research questions for a report to forming and coordinating a cluster group of high-ability students with another teacher. Advanced learners often acquire new concepts and knowledge quickly. It's easy to assume that if all students begin at roughly the same level of understanding, they will remain in step. In fact, some children learn very quickly, while the rest of the class requires more time to synthesize new information. It's important to respond to this quicker pace of learning by providing advanced students with more challenging and engaging activities. Strategies such as compacting, independent study, and even creative thinking activities enable above-grade students to learn at an appropriate pace for them.

NO. 5

Find out what advanced students have mastered. Nothing's worse than twiddling thumbs over lessons already learned.

DETERMINE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Advanced students come into our rooms with abilities, experiences, and skills—much of which they either hide or lay aside. Give them credit for the knowledge and skills they possess, and help them create alternative goals. Avoid drill-and-practice assignments that can cause boredom and potential discipline problems. Keep them engaged with a process that challenges their thinking and includes their interests. Try to assess their knowledge level prior to a new unit by a variety of means, from producing a K-W-L chart to engaging in informal discussion.

NO. 6

ENCOURAGE GOAL SETTING

Give advanced students opportunities to set their own personal learning goals. Display the day's or week's schedule in the classroom. Some advanced learners need to be able to see and process in their mind the sequence of the day's activities; it makes a difference in the way they feel in the classroom. They are often the ones asking, "What's next? What are we going to do today? Now what?" Displaying the schedule enables all students to own their responsibilities for the day and to monitor themselves when they undertake alternative assignments.

All students need experience in setting goals for themselves. Research demonstrates that setting goals has a powerful effect on student confidence and achievement. Advanced learners who come to school overflowing with ideas and energy need to develop the skill to break long-term goals down into smaller, short-term goals that are within their reach. When students set smaller goals that lead to a larger achievement they care about, two things happen: They can focus their energy and ability, which would otherwise become diffused, and they can measure their progress in a tangible way. Perfectionism, a common affliction of high-ability students, becomes more difficult to address in students who lack experience at goal setting. Instead of "I must write a perfect report," students learn to direct themselves to a more realistic goal: "I must fill out the K-W-L chart on the subject of my report; then, I'll move on to the research."

INS3•AboveLrn[30-35]v8.ag.indd 33 10/20/11 10:44 AM

NO. 7 *Creativity is not about paintbrushes and poems.*

TEACH CREATIVELY

These students tend to be out-of-the-box learners, so they occasionally need alternative ways to process new concepts and information. Creativity is not about paintbrushes and poems; it is a way of thinking and an attitude. In a reading class, for example, you could have your advanced students select a more difficult short story and retell the story's events from the points of view of different characters. Consider the following general principles.

EXPLORE Point out the hidden, less traveled paths and warn against set patterns.	**CREATE** Assign work that requires creative and imaginative thinking.	**ENVISION** Nurture boldness in vision and endeavor.
SUPPORT Support students' trust in their creative powers.	**IMPROVE** Give them opportunities to correct errors, refine visions, improve, and elaborate.	**EXHIBIT** Find venues for students to show, demonstrate, perform, or exhibit.

8 OK INDEPENDENT LEARNING PROJECTS

Whenever possible, give advanced students independent projects that permit them to inquire about a topic more deeply. A student who wants to create an oral history of his extended family's migration from Bolivia to the United States should be able to do so. If a project such as this requires more planning and supervision than you can manage, scale it down. The student could interview his parents and grandparents, design a map of their travels, or write a story about their journey from Bolivia and what happened along the way. Or, advanced learners in a geometry class could apply their knowledge of geometric shapes and measurement skills to research kite designs and materials, then build tetrahedron kites.

Independent learning only works when students have opportunities to practice and develop the skills they need. Independent learning options often include some of the following skills.

1. **Completing tasks** without adult intervention for longer periods of time.
2. **Quickly grasping** the main points of an assignment.
3. **Using different sources** to find information for a project.
4. **Sharing responsibility** in a group and showing initiative and leadership.
5. **Demonstrating persistence** in a challenging task.
6. **Exercising organizational skills** to meet deadlines.
7. **Taking notes** and recording sound or visual footage to aid recall.
8. **Becoming more self-aware** as a learner and better able to build on personal strengths and aptitudes.

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): JAMIE SAUNDERS; JEKA/SHUTTERSTOCK; DAN SCHULTZ

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9 FOLLOW THEIR INTERESTS

Give your advanced students a chance to explore their interests. Follow their curiosity. It's not always easy or possible in a classroom setting, but any opportunity you have to draw on student interest will greatly aid their growth and learning. Terrell Bell, former U.S. Secretary of Education, once said, "There are three important things to remember about education. The first one is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is motivation." And E. Paul Torrance wrote a now famous piece called "The Importance of Falling in Love With 'Something,'" in which he tells young people: Follow the path that most calls to you, resist the pressures of others, celebrate and enjoy your greatest strengths. Student engagement propels authentic learning experiences. As teachers, we play a critical role not only in encouraging student interests and linking them to the units we've planned but also in helping them to discover new interests. Consider these possibilities.

1. Offer choice time.
2. Do student-interest inventories.
3. Have students keep portfolios.
4. Exhibit student work on the walls, in displays, and through performances.

NO. 10

ENCOURAGE SELF-ASSESSMENT

Help students reflect on what they have learned. Have them write a paragraph about what they take away from a lesson. It helps them see their progress and own it. Advanced learners need this kind of visual record. Becoming conscious of what they know and how they came to know it makes them more aware of their learning process. Here are three ways to do that.

CRITERIA LISTS

Having a criteria list for a project helps students monitor their progress. For example, a list for a project on the science of flight could include these notes.

1. My project draws on at least two books and two websites.
2. My final project includes at least one of da Vinci's designs and explains what made it aerodynamic and what its limitations were as a flying machine.
3. My airplane design addresses the concepts of weight, lift, thrust, and drag.

ANECDOTAL RECORDS

Ask students to write responses to their learning experiences in a journal or record them on audio or video. In an independent study project, a student recorded her thoughts and feelings about how she was doing at each phase. She specifically focused on four questions her teacher posed.

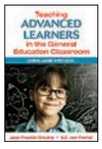
1. What parts of your work today are going well in your mind and why?
2. What problems are you having and what do you think the difficulty is?
3. What do you enjoy most?
4. What do you enjoy least?

SELF-EVALUATION

Advanced students need opportunities to reflect on their experiences and assess their progress with questions such as the following.

1. What did you enjoy the most?
2. What do you think you did best on? Why?
3. If you were starting this project again, what would you change? Why?

As you and your students reflect, you will discover new ways to further challenge them. ☐



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