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Struggling: A Pathway to Learning

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Preface

The topic of “struggling” has been widely researched in the field of education. Most of that research has focused on elementary school students learning to read and high school students taking courses in science and mathematics. However, it is believed that many of the findings from that research are applicable to undergraduate and graduate students as well as to employees who have recently been hired into a new position. In short, whenever *anyone* is faced with the challenge of learning new knowledge, skills, or abilities, the issue of “struggling” is present to one degree or another. The greater the challenge the greater the probability that it will involve significant struggling. Therefore, understanding how struggling can benefit learning is key to individual and organizational growth. It should be noted that “struggling” is a human issue.

This examination of “struggling” focuses on the construct itself, the common pitfalls associated with struggling, and the potential benefits of struggling. Conclusions are stated and applications are suggested for the development of college curricula and for the improvement of organizational learning.

The Rationale for Constructs

It has been recognized and written about by many theorists that constructs are required for clearly understanding, researching, and advancing knowledge in the social, behavioral, and organizational sciences. The emerging consensus on the value of constructs has centered on their value in defining and delimiting exactly what is being studied. Therefore, constructs provide a clear indication of what phenomenon is being studied and how it relates to or differs from other phenomena. In short, constructs make scientific research possible in the social, behavioral, and organizational sciences. (Suddaby, 2010).

Many scientific researchers have undertaken the pursuit of defining and refining the process of creating constructs. The aim of their research is to ensure that the findings about various phenomena can be shared and compiled to expand and increase the shared knowledge of those phenomena (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016).

Processes for identifying and classifying constructs have been developed by various researchers. While each process has its own unique approach, the process used below was developed by Okan and Elmadag (2018) because of its brevity and clarity. Their process starts with a “general term”

under which an “umbrella construct” is identified, followed by a “bridging construct” and the “specific construct” of interest.

The Construct of Struggling

Struggling is a very specific construct that is widely applicable across all types and kinds of human activity, particularly those dealing with social, behavioral, and organizational research. Using the process set forth by Okan and Elmadag (2018) the specific construct of “struggling” falls under a hierarchy of other related constructs as shown in Figure 1. The definitional description in Figure 1 will be used throughout this paper.

Figure 1

The Derivation of the Specific Construct of Struggling

General Term	Umbrella Construct	Bridging Construct	Specific Construct
Need	Challenge	Trying	Struggling

The simple linear definition set forth in Figure 1 would indicate that human struggling happens when attempts to meet a challenging need are not readily successful. A more sophisticated definition of human struggling would identify the underlying fact that the present levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities are insufficient to meet the challenge. Both the simple and sophisticated definitions of struggling indicate that new learning is required if the current personnel are to meet one or more of the challenges presented by the need.

It is certainly true that in organizations hiring new personnel who have the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the challenging need is one strategy that negates struggling. Unfortunately, doing so also negates employee and organizational learning setting up a vicious cycle of hiring and firing to solve new needs and challenges as they arise. The preferred approach is for organizations to use struggling as a pathway to learning in a similar manner to which educational instruction uses frustration (Lopatto, D., Rosenwald, A. G., DiAngelo, J. R., Hark, A. T., Skerritt, et al, 2020) and constructivism to create student learning.

The Pitfalls of Struggling

There are several potentially harmful issues associated with long-term or recurring struggling. Struggling can result in the failure of students to learn or the stagnation of an organization. If there is too much confusing information in a course or system-wide or systematic struggling throughout an organization, the level of learning or production will drop as will the morale of students and/or employees. Obviously, the most severe emotional price will be paid by those

students or employees who are experiencing the highest level of struggling. Less obviously, even those students in class or employees in an organization who are not struggling in their own job will suffer from long-term interpersonal effects of those who are struggling.

Long-term or severe struggling is often accompanied by personal feelings of stress, frustration, failure and helplessness. While a modicum of stress can be an incentive for students to learn and for employees to improve their personal and organizational performance, too much stress stalls performance (De Simone, Cicotto, Pinna, & Giustiniano, 2016). Additionally, feelings of frustration not only negatively impact employee performance on new tasks but can also sap employee energy from areas of personal competence. Feelings of personal failure and helplessness, hopelessness, haplessness, and depression can also result from long-term or recurring struggling (Leenaars, & Lester, 2007). The specific negative personal outcomes from system-wide or systematic struggling throughout an organization are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Personal Outcomes of Long-Term Struggling Without Support or Learning

Struggling	Unhealthy Stress	Deep Frustration	Helplessness & Hopelessness	Depressed & Paralyzed
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Long-term struggling on the part of students or employees is the result of their continuing failure to meet challenging needs in the classroom or workplace. The cause of long-term struggling is the lack of appropriate support and/or the lack of adequate resources for learning provided by the university faculty or by the organization's management.

In summary, the pitfalls of struggling occur when faculty or organizational leaders fail to correctly set the goal, clarify the process, and provide the support for those who are struggling emotionally with encouragement and those who are struggling mentally with meaningful feedback, and learning resources.

The Problems with No Struggling

While the literature is replete with studies on the problems with struggling there is little research on or mention of the problems that occur when there is a total lack of struggling. In short, the problems arise from the truth that without some level of struggling there is no progress.

In an educational setting if students do not struggle with a topic or course chances are very high that they believe they have already achieved the level of mastery that is important to them on that topic or in that course. In an organizational setting if an employee does not struggle with his or her tasks chances are very high that he or she is bored with his or her job responsibilities. In both settings, no struggling means no learning and no advancements.

Recently there has been some interest among those doing neurological and psychological research to study the effects of struggling, frustration, and failure on a person's ability to learn. Moser, Schroder, Heeter, Moran, and (2011) found that making errors and failing can lead to adaptive behaviors and new learning but that requires people to care enough to struggle to overcome their deficiencies and grow from them. Likewise, if people who make errors and failing do not struggle, they do not learn. Ergo, struggling is important to learning and advancing people and organizations. The specific personal outcomes and organizational outcomes resulting from the lack of struggling are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Personal Outcomes When No Struggling Exists

No Struggling	Little Stress	No New Learning	Task is Completed	Stagnant & Status Quo
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It is easy to see that struggling and stress can be debilitating. What is not as easily seen is that the lack of struggling and stress greatly can greatly reduce personal learning and organizational improvements. It just may be a matter of balance or a matter of learning how to use struggling and stress as levers of personal and organizational progress.

The Benefits of Struggling

Struggling, if handled correctly, can be a pathway to personal and organizational learning. There are, however, keys to handling the stress and managing the uncertainties associated with struggling.

In the educational environment, struggling normally happens in the subject areas of reading for the elementary level students and in mathematics and sciences for high school and college students. In an organizational environment, struggling is associated with new hires, newly promoted employees, and every organizational change. While each of these onsets of struggling involve their unique challenges, there also exist general issues that apply to every occurrence of struggling. It is those general issues associated with struggling that are addressed in the following paragraphs.

In the field of education there has been a movement toward constructivism as the means of deepening student learning. While there are a host of issues with using that approach in elementary schools, for secondary and post-secondary education there are two major issues of importance: (1) How does one objectively evaluate student products that are inherently "constructed" by the students? (Jonassen, 1991) and (2) How does one handle the stress and frustration experienced by the learners and teachers alike? (Lopatto, D., Rosenwald, A. G.,

DiAngelo, J. R., Hark, A. T., Skerrett, et al, 2020). While the incidents of frustration and struggling are present, the learning is greatly increased as the outcome is that students know how to learn as well as what they have learned. Also there is the benefit that struggling and facing frustration are how students learn to think critically, do problem-solving, and act in creative and innovative ways even in the face of temporary failure (Capatina, Bleoju, Rancati, & Hoareau, 2018).

In organizations the challenges are somewhat different. Firstly, the goals are clearer and more concrete than they are in a constructivistic educational setting. Secondly, there are communal costs and benefits to the early achievement of the goals so time can also be a major factor. Thirdly, the rewards and punishments are different raising the importance of the pursuit. And finally, the safeguard of repetition is only available within a small window of time. What is the same in organizations as in education are the employees learn how to think critically, do problem-solving, and act in creative and innovative ways even in the face of temporary failure (Capatina, Bleoju, Rancati, & Hoareau, 2018).

Given that even Einstein faced failures, educators should remind students and organizational managers should remind employees that setbacks are okay and that failure is turned into an opportunity to learn (Lin-Siegler, X., Ahn, J. N., Chen, J., Fang, F.-F. A., & Luna-Lucero, M., 2016). Educators could also learn from organizational struggles, setbacks, and failures. For instance, organizations use project management techniques to “structure and measure” the achievement of goals. Certainly, even in a constructivistic educational setting project management techniques could be used to identify learning issues and create project plans to address those issues. Also, a higher use of teams could assist in group construction of knowledge in the classroom as well as in outside the classroom projects.

There are also many other ideas that have been birthed in the educational field that could be and should be mirrored in organizations. For instance, educators are trained to spot struggling and frustrated students in order to come along side of them to reassure them that they are making progress and that they will conquer the subject matter before long. Warshauer (2015) called the process “productive struggling” while Kapur (2008) termed it “productive failure.” Organizational leaders should adopt those same views and associated attitudes when teams are struggling or even if they have already failed in a few attempts. Another practice from education that organizational leaders should adopt is the notion of addressing failures with “scaffolding.” Holmes, Day, Park, *et al.* (2014) suggested that failures could be addressed using the practice of scaffolding wherein the leader would step in and engage in deep inquiry into what the obstacles that are being face are and how they might be tackled one at a time.

Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen (2010) clarified that the goal of scaffolding is to transfer the onus for learning and the process thereof from the leader to the team or individual that is struggling, frustrated, or failing. The process of scaffolding can include the following activities: give the struggling ones time to talk about what they know and how they feel, seek to connect the issues faced to prior their knowledge, skills, and abilities, provide them with examples to look at or materials to study, give them “baby steps” to complete within the next 2-3 days, finally ask what they think you should do to help them be successful, remind them of others who have overcome obstacles and reassure them that they will overcome their obstacles too through hard

work, perseverance, and new learning along the way. The specific outcomes resulting from the presence of support and new learning are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Personal Outcomes When Struggling is Offset by Support and Learning

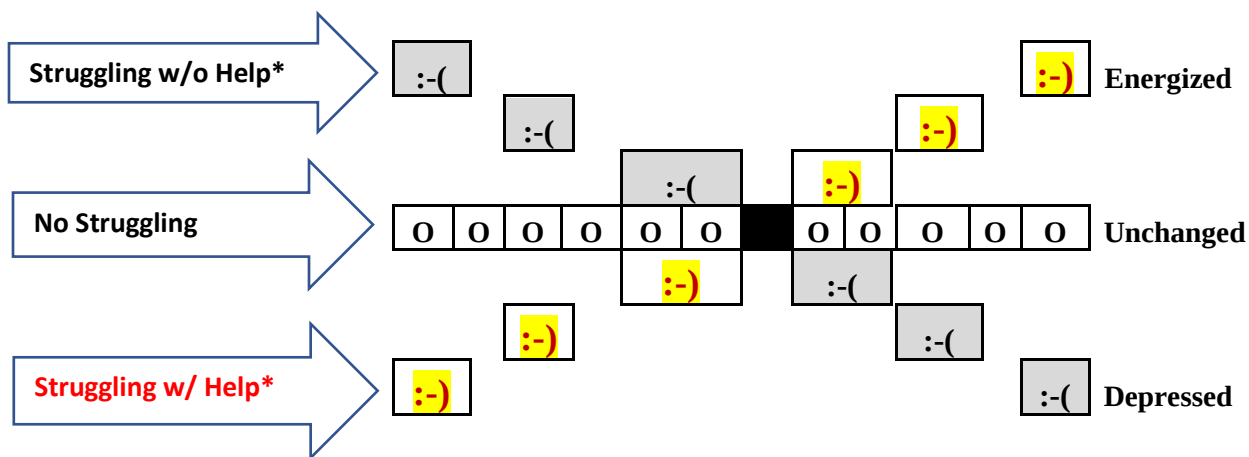
Struggling	Healthy Stress	New Learning & Support	Competency-Based Success	Elated & Energized
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Conclusions & Applications

The primary conclusion is that beneficial outcomes that can result from struggling, frustration, and even short-term failure. Those benefits are shown below to be directly related to the level of help, support, that enhance the struggle to learn. The bottom line is that struggling, frustration, and difficulties are the opportunities for learning in education as well as in organizations. The findings are depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Summary of Outcomes of Various Conditions of Struggling



* Help includes Support for New Learning.

John Dewey (1916) led us to conclude that learning new skills and adding new abilities is the channel through which knowledge is both created and applied. If skills and abilities are the precursors to knowledge, then our focus should be on constructing curriculum that builds skills

and abilities that get applied in the pursuit and creation of knowledge. However, it is axiomatic that building skills and abilities is a process wherein struggling, frustration, and even short-term failure are not only inevitable but welcomed as they are crucial to learning. Merely transferring inactive “knowledge” to students’ and testing their absorption of that “knowledge” is neither learning nor education. Knowledge is not taught it is constructed and that construction is built on developing skills and abilities which inherently means some level of struggling. In concert with that interpretation of how doing leads to knowledge, Dewey once noted that failure itself is instructive and therefore should be part of any learning experience.

In education today we seem to have invented ways to eliminated struggling, frustration, and short-term failure. We have lesson plans that focus on outcomes versus processes. We develop rubrics so that students don’t have to think about how to do an assignment. Instead, students are given a precise matrix showing what elements are required to get whatever letter grade they seek. Gone is the learning process, the struggling, the frustration, and the learning from failure. Yet we believe and assert that we are creating curriculum wherein “quality matters” and where students are invited to be creative, innovative, and get outside the box

Our current system of education has ramifications and consequences outside of the classroom. In major companies across sectors a syndrome associated with many new hires is developing. That new syndrome could be called Post-Educational-System-Trauma (PEST). Those outcomes result from years of being in an educational system where students experience no struggling, no frustration, no failure, and no learning about how to handle a meaningful career or how to deal with the struggles of daily living.

Let’s think seriously about the positive outcomes of struggling as a viable and important pathway to two important types of learning: Learning to learn and Learning to live.

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