

Details

What Productive Struggle Looks Like When Students Use Technology with Peg Grafwallner - 191

In this episode, educator and author, Peg Grafwallner, joins to unpack the term productive struggle and what this can look like in every content area - from ELA to PE. You'll also hear about Peg's book, *Ready to Learn*, and how teachers can model productive struggle throughout the day, including with technology, to set up students for success.

Link to live show notes: <https://classtechtips.com/2022/11/29/productive-struggle-191/>

Introduction

Hello there, my name is Monica Burns and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast!

I'm a former NYC public school teacher and started the Easy EdTech Podcast in 2019 to share my favorite tips, tricks and strategies for technology integration. You'll hear stories from my time in the classroom, the work I do now with schools and districts, and my travels to different EdTech events.

Each episode is designed to give you ideas you can try yourself, share with a colleague, or bookmark for later in the school year — so don't forget to head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode.

If you're listening to this episode on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, or another podcast player you'll see the show notes link in the description, too.

Promotion/Reminder

This episode is sponsored by my Etsy store. Did you know that I have an Etsy store full of printables? If you're listening in November, make sure to check out all of my Thanksgiving and Fall activities and games for your classroom. You can print them out or use the PDF files alongside your favorite EdTech tool. Head to [Etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com) and search for "class tech tips" or use the link in the show notes and podcast description to explore the new items I've created.

Today's Intro

This week's episode is titled: *What Productive Struggle Looks Like When Students Use Technology*, and I know you are going to get a lot out of this conversation with educator and author Peg Grafwallner. You'll here us mention her book *Ready to Learn*, as well as her recent Edutopia article that is all about a topic we encounter daily – productive struggle.

We'll talk today about what this can look like in every content area (from ELA to PE) and how it connects to classroom technology integration.

Episode Transcript

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to chat with you today. And before we jump into all things productive struggle, I'm hoping Peggy can share a little bit about your work your background, what your role in education is, and kind of what your day to day looks like for listeners.

Peg Grafwallner:

Absolutely. Well, first of all, my name is Peg Grafwallner. I'm an instructional coach and reading specialist at Ronald Reagan College Preparatory high school in Milwaukee. And I've been in education about 30 years or so. Which, where did that time go? Mm-Hmm.

<Affirmative>. But I've been instructional coach for eight years. So to, to give you an idea of what the day might look like. And first of all and I wanna be real clear on this, I don't have students anymore. I, I don't have a roster teacher of record. I work with teachers. So I'm able to collaborate with them in embedding literacy into their lessons without disrupting the classroom of objectives. And that's very important as an instructional coach. The last thing you want is to put more on a teacher's plate. My job is to take it off the plate. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>.

Peg Grafwallner:

So, as an example, my day might look like in the morning I might go into phys. ed. Recently our phys. ed teacher was teaching ultimate Frisbee, Well, I dunno if you knew this, but ultimate Frisbee was pushing to become an Olympic sport. So I got this great article on it, brought it into FD students we jigsaw, jigsaw the article. And I asked them to the main idea details and to write a summary. And what was really important about that is to show students writing is not just the work of English, the work of social studies mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, it encompasses all of us all day. So again, what is that teacher already doing where I can enhance at a, as opposed to something else. I might be in a science class where we're working on a cause effect and offering sentence stems to help students in that cause effect. Or I might be in a music class focusing on compare and contrast among composers. And if you notice I did not, like I said, choose the traditional English classes to share with you or the traditional social class social studies. It's really important that we focus on skill building and really important that we focus on all of our content, not just well, I'm gonna air quote here, the four

core mm-hmm. <Affirmative> as we know. There's so much more. So that might, that might be a typical day.

Monica Burns:

Well, I love those cross-curricular connections, the physical education connection, the science connection. And it leads us into what we will talk about today, which as you mentioned, really goes across different content areas and different subject areas. And today we're talking about productive struggle. And before we bring technology into the conversation, Right. Or that EdTech a piece mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, can you help us unpack that term productive struggle?

Peg Grafwallner:

Sure. When I think of productive struggle, I'm thinking of giving students the opportunity to encounter setbacks and obstacles. And when they do encounter those, what do they look like? Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So as an example, we'll have students that will get an obstacle or encounter a setback. Do they become so frustrated that they give up? And we've seen students do that, right? The head goes down on the desk or they might even get up and you know, the classic, Can I use the restroom? Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, we know what that means. Well, in productive struggle, the goal here is to encounter those setbacks cuz we know we're gonna have 'em encounter those obstacles. Let students know they're coming. But given the opportunity to dive in and meet that challenge head on. You know, think about it just, just ourselves for a minute. Let's use an example.

Peg Grafwallner:

You, you woke up this morning and your faucet wasn't working well, you could call a plumber and that's gonna cost you several hundred dollars just to have someone walk in the door. Or you could go to YouTube, which is what a lot of us do now. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And you could try and fix it yourself. And if you're able to do that, imagine your empowerment, you're ready to dive into another challenge. Well give our students that same kind of opportunity. Yes, you're working on this math formula, it's not working. I mean, it's not going according to the way you would hope. You can't get to that perfect answer, the right answer. Well, what resources are available? Your teacher is one. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> your peers, that's another resource. What strategies have you used already? Those are all resources. So giving students the opportunity to say, Okay, the work is gonna be hard and I'm gonna talk about that later.

Peg Grafwallner:

The work is going to be challenging. You will encounter a setback. You will encounter an obstacle. But what does the process look like? You know, we focus a lot on that end goal.

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, of course we do. Cuz that's what has to be graded. I get that. But we need to slow down a little bit and look at the process. Again. When you were focusing on your sink and trying to fix the faucet, you didn't keep doing the same thing over again cuz you knew it wasn't working. You learned a lot of things along the way. So if the faucet does decide not to work again, you're prepared, you're ready. Or at least you know what strategies not to use. So I think it's the same with our students. Let's give them, I mean, let's be honest and tell 'em this is gonna be hard work. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you know, we spend a lot of time saying things like, Oh, this is so easy. You'll have no problem understanding this. We're doing a disservice. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, let's tell 'em the work is gonna be tough. You're gonna get stuck. And that's okay. What strategies, what resources do you have to help you get through that? That's productive struggle to me.

Monica Burns:

And I love the transparency that you put there. Yeah. Just that idea that, you know, this is not a secret. That things are hard. Right. We talk about it, we talk about it throughout the process. Right. And, and we celebrate the process as we go along with students.

Peg Grafwallner:

And, you know, with that process, I'm a big believer in reflection. We usually end up reflecting at, at the end of the lesson, at the end of the unit, do we need to rethink that? Should we be reflecting all the way through that process so the student can say, Wow, this part was really hard for me. That's where I encountered that setback. But I didn't give up. I went and grabbed a resource. I asked my teacher for help. I went and joined this group, small group over here, and they help me. So again, that feeling that I can do it and when I'm able to do it, that feeling of empowerment that, hey, I'm willing to challenge myself now to something else.

Monica Burns:

And just that idea that these pieces could be embedded throughout the process. Right. And that they're acknowledge and celebrated. And it's something that is, you know, it happens, right? It happens in all the things that we do inside and outside of the classroom. And just that, you know, I agree with you that it can be such a disservice to students if we're focusing simply on the final product and not looking at all of the big wins as well as those setbacks. Right. That might happen along the way. And you know, as we think today about productive struggle and the connection to classroom technology, I'm really excited to jump into this idea of productive struggle alongside tech in the classroom. What are some of the struggles you see students or even teachers facing as they're interacting with different digital tools?

Peg Grafwallner:

Right. And you know, I think so first of all, I think we often assume that a lot of our students, if not all of our students, and a lot of our, our younger teachers are digital natives. We, we have to get rid of that. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. Not everybody is comfortable with tech. And I remember, oh, I remember years ago when I taught a skills class and the librarian bought Kindles for all of my students because she thought they would enjoy holding that Kindle. And actually they wanted to go back to the book. They wanted to physically turn the page, They wanted to see how much they had read as opposed to seeing the percentage. So, Right. So it's one of those kinds of things. That's the first thing. Second thing is, you know, we have to remember this. Sometimes our students, again, are going to encounter a setback or an obstacle with that new piece of technology, learning that new software, whatever that may be.

Peg Grafwallner:

We have to acknowledge that we cannot just, again, give our students a piece of tech and say, Well go figure it out. I'm all for exploring. I really am. But we have to also let them know, I hear you. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, yes, you're right. This is difficult and that new software you're learning or using technology to do some research that might be difficult too. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, we have to acknowledge that for students and let them know that they need, if, if they need that time, extra time, they need that extra space. So be it. And again, what resources are available for them. We can't use it. And I know you know this Dr. Monica, we can't use tech for the sake of tech's sake, right? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> tech is meant to enhance. And if tech is not enhancing our lesson, or if tech is not part of the purpose of our lesson, then, then it's, it doesn't really have a place.

Peg Grafwallner:

But we have to give students that time, that space, that opportunity, again, letting em know the work is gonna be hard. And technology while here to enhance. You might get frustrated with that too. Again, what are the resources available to help you? And I would say the exact same thing as students are working on that technology, what processes can they talk about? What setbacks have they encountered that didn't work? What obstacles have they encountered that they were able to overcome? So again, giving students that opportunity to have that conversation and use tech the way it's meant to be used.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And just, you know, as you were talking, I was thinking about some of those frustrations, you know, we've all encountered Right. Or those roadblocks, Right. That we've encountered. You know, I don't wanna throw it all the way back to trying to save something to a floppy disc and then two days later it not being there. Right. But that, you know, that's an early frustrational memory for me at least. But, you know, for students who are in a space, and they

might even see like a student next to them that is flying through mm-hmm. <Affirmative> knows every button anticipates what's gonna happen next. And maybe they haven't had similar experiences or they're just not kind of problem solving in that same way. You know? I absolutely agree that it can be, you know, so challenging for students mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and having that level of transparency, those pauses, the reflections that, how did you figure that out? Celebrations are such an important thing that, you know, is, is easy to keep moving, especially when you're in a, a techy environment.

Peg Grafwallner:

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And I think you bring up such a great point. So that student who is getting it and who is, you know, catching on more quickly, that student is a resource. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And I think, and we, I don't know if we do a good enough job of saying to students, Let's point on our resources. I'm here for you. Your fellow students are here for you. You know, what, what strategies have you used? Again, what is here for you that you can use as opposed to shutting down? Boy, we wanna avoid that at all costs. All costs.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And one of the pieces, and as you were thinking, you mentioned the resources I was thinking of too, I know I've been on the road a little bit more the past few weeks as we're recording this in November. And it's been, you know, part of my conversations, I think I'm leaning in a little bit more to this idea of modeling right. For students as well. Right. We, and I'm sure you know, with your background, you've had the same experience. Right. You know, we pick up a picture book for students, right. And we are thinking aloud and, and showing how we're working through the text, Right. It's something that we're doing so automatically, but it's something that we have an opportunity to do as well, right? If we're clicking a button as we're showing off something for students and it's not quite working, or maybe it is working, but we're gonna talk through the mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, you know, the frustration kids might see, you know, So, you know, I think of that as one way to set up students for success and spaces right. To model that productive struggle when using technology and, you know, how can teachers, you know, set up kids for success and really help them understand that a task might be tough or include, you know, different obstacles along the way.

Peg Grafwallner:

And I think during the pandemic, and, and this is just my take on it we did, we worked on socially emotional skills a lot, which was, is remained so critical mm-hmm.

Monica Burns: <Affirmative>.

Peg Grafwallner:

But I think with academics I don't wanna say we lowered our standards as educators, but there was a lot going on, let's face it. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And now we're trying to get students back into it and letting them know, again, they're not alone for sure, but it's gonna be tough. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So let's work together to move forward on that. Definitely. technology's a part of that. Absolutely.

Monica Burns:

And so as you're kind of thinking through about these different, you know, tasks, I know you had some great suggestions in your article for Edutopia that I'll, I, I'm mentioned in the intro and will link out to, for everyone to see people who listen to the blog regularly. You know, I give lots of Edutopia shout outs. It's one of my favorite resources and I've been connected with them for a long time. So is there, like, are there suggestions that we can think about, you know, that can really help, you know, maybe apply to digital tools, maybe thinking more broadly to really set up everyone in a learning environment for success?

Peg Grafwallner:

Absolutely. I'm going to take the four suggestions that I used from that Edutopia article, and let's talk about them a little bit. So the first one, create that vigorous learning intention and scaffolded success criteria. And you'll notice I used the word vigorous, not rigorous. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And here's why. Rigorous comes from the Latin word rigēre, which means stiff and of death. I don't need my learning intention to be stiff. I need my learning intention to be empowering and engaging. But in that learning intention, if I am working, if I, if I'm focusing on technology, it needs to be there. Let students know that that's an important part of that learning intention. And then when you're writing your scaffolded success criteria, the reason it's scaffolded is so students can self assess mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So let's say there's a criteria in there that does require technology, the use of technology.

Peg Grafwallner:

And let's see, a student is not able to quite master that yet. Okay. The student then can self-assess, say, you know, I need to slow down, go to their resources. And again, instead of getting frustrated and giving up, look at this as a little obstacle, right? That I need to get through. So my learning intention, vigorous learning intention, my scaffolded success criteria, as you're using technology, make technology part of that ally and sc and as we had said earlier, make it purposeful. Don't throw in tech for the take of, for the sake of tech's sake. The second thing, eliminate the word failure. Now, I know many of us have done this already, but in technology, I think we have to be really aware of that. So I didn't meet the intended outcome when using this piece of technology or software, what, whatever the case might be.

Peg Grafwallner:

Does that mean I failed? Not necessarily. What it means is it just didn't work for this. Could it work for something else? So again, when we talk about the word failure, which you know, it's, it's really, here's where I get frustrated with that. We say to students, failure is not an option. We've heard that, right? I mean, are books written about that? Mm-Hmm.

<Affirmative> failure is definitely an option. It sure is, but it's got such a negative connotation that I really want our listeners to again, eliminate that and talk about a setback. Talk about an obstacle when our students hear the word failure, Oh, they're done. I'm done. I'm never gonna learn. I don't get an obstacle or a setback. Okay. I'm just not there yet. I'm gonna keep plugging away at this. Whether it's learning that new piece of software or as I said earlier, I need my technology cuz I'm doing some research mm-hmm.

Peg Grafwallner:

<Affirmative>. And it's not Chromebooks just not working the way I want it to. I can't find the research I want, whatever the case may be. It's a setback. It's not a failure. I continue to move forward in all the things that I've learned and the strategies I know not to employ next time. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, be transparent. Let students know the work is gonna be tough. Be honest. And with that technology too, I encourage, as you said earlier, begin with the routines and systems associated with the technology. What is the expectation you have for that? What is it that you know? And modeling, as you had said earlier we're a community of learners. We need to understand that technology, the importance and value of technology and why it's meant to enhance the work. It is not the work it is meant to enhance our work. Again, you're confident that they will overcome that setback and overcome that obstacle. It may take a while and that's okay. And then finally, give students time and space to be successful. And that's what we had talked about earlier mm-hmm. <Affirmative> in learning anything new. As you mentioned in your, your example, you know, I have the student over here. Ooh, that student that's getting right away over here. I need extra time. Mm-Hmm.

Monica Burns:

<Affirmative>,

Peg Grafwallner:

We need that extra time. All of us do. And I think especially now I'm sure you feel this way sometimes. I know I do. I know our students do that treadmill that it just doesn't slow down. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So maybe this technology, the ability to learn, like I said, something new. Let's pause a little bit. But the key is as they're learning it, that's where those reflection pieces come in. That's where that process comes in. The modeling, the opportunity to have conversations. Why isn't it working? Or, or how do I need to use it? And then finally, space. And space can be just about anything. Flexible seating. Do we need to move out of the classroom

into a different environment? Don't you find sometimes that when you're working on something, oh, it's not going the way you want. Even getting up, moving to another space, getting a glass of water and coming back, you have a whole new mindset. Could that help? So students, again, we're working on something brand new, let's do it out in the courtyard, or let's go to the library today. Let's get out of our classroom. Maybe that'll help. These little things I think can make a big difference.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And I agree with you with just this, you know, opportunity to lean into places where kids might have had experience before with technology. Right. Really giving those opportunities for reflection so that they can talk about the process and those pauses, right. That we know are so important when students may get a little frustrated or a little overwhelmed, Right? That's a, a different kind of skill than we think about, as opposed to just content area skills that is so transferable for students in different learning environments. And so, you know, I know that listeners have had experiences probably themselves, right? Where at productive struggle, maybe today as they're listening to, depending on the time of day, they've already had a moment, right? And if they are looking to try out strategies in their learning environment, they're looking for just kind of a, a quick way to get started or to think about putting something into practice, you know, tomorrow, in the next few days, what is something that they could try out right away?

Peg Grafwallner:

Well, my first recommendation is always that vigorous learning intention and scaffolded success criteria. Because to me that is a cornerstone. Actually, I'll rephrase it is a foundation of a great lesson. So making sure that's written, again, clearly student friendly language, but giving students the opportunity to ask and analyze, to ask questions about that learning intention. So when we are including technology in our learning intention, the student actually has the opportunity to raise their hand and say, I'm not understanding what we're supposed to do there. And that's where your modeling comes in. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, or this isn't making sense to me. Or go ahead and say the students, why don't we paraphrase this? Put this in your own words. Make it clear to you. So again, students know what they are to know it and be able to do. And the second thing is the opportunity to reflect.

Peg Grafwallner:

Like I said, we are, I, I remember when I had my English class and you know, I would teach, let's say Romeo and Juliet. Well, at the end of the lesson we reflected, why didn't I reflect throughout? I mean, my gosh, it's five acts. Why didn't I reflect after every act? But I didn't. So I would really encourage that. Give your students a chance, even if it's a you know, half a page exit slip, Give them that time. 10 minutes at the end of class. Okay, we're focusing, you know,

we focused on this last couple days. How are you feeling about this technology? How did it work for you? Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, let's have that conversation. And it could be, again, an exit ticket on paper or just a opportunity for students to share their frustration out loud. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And the other reason I think that's so vital is in doing that they can communicate using the, the tech language that's necessary instead of saying things like, Oh, I'm mad it didn't work.

Peg Grafwallner:

Okay. Right. All right. What is it that didn't work? And how can we be, how can we be real clear on what didn't work? What strategies have you tried? That kind of thing. I really think that helps the communication of understanding that frustration and the fact that when it does work, which it eventually will the empowerment that our students feel and to celebrate that empowerment. You know, when they're able to overcome that obstacle. We just don't do the pat on the back and say, Oh, good job, Uhuh. No. We spend time on sharing and celebrating, overcoming that obstacle.

Monica Burns:

And I think that's something that, you know, as people are listening today and they're thinking forward into their week or into the new, you know, the new calendar year, you know, and they are looking to recommit to something or try out something new, even just with their language choices or those small moments, I think can make such a big difference. Well, Peg this was so useful and actionable for listeners and I wanna make sure that they can connect with you and learn more about your book *Ready to Learn*. So where should they go if they wanna stay connected?

Peg Grafwallner:

Well, first of all, I'd love to hear from everybody. I'm at www.peggrafwallner.com. My book is available at Amazon. And of course please connect with me. I'd love to come out and visit with you. I'd love to have a conversation going. And I really appreciated this and this is wonderful. So thank you again so much. Oh, and they can find me on Twitter as well. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

Wonderful. And we will link out to all of those things, so everyone can find you.

Peg Grafwallner:

Great.

So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode...

Create a vigorous learning intention.

Scaffold success criteria.

Eliminate the word failure.

Be transparent.

Give students time to be successful.

Provide spaces that cultivate success.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode including all of the ways to connect with *Peg Grafwallner* on classtechtips.com/podcast and finding today's episode #191!

Promotion/Reminder

This episode is sponsored by my Etsy store. Did you know that I have an Etsy store full of printables? If you're listening in November, make sure to check out all of my Thanksgiving and Fall activities and games for your classroom. You can print them out or use the PDF files alongside your favorite EdTech tool. Head to [Etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com) and search for "class tech tips" or use the link in the show notes and podcast description to explore the new items I've created.

Outro

Thank you for tuning into another Tuesday episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast. If you are listening on Apple Podcasts or Spotify, or another favorite app, don't forget to hit the "Follow" button – this way next week's episode will be waiting for you first thing next Tuesday morning.

And if you want to share an idea from the episode with a friend or colleague, text, tweet or post the link on your favorite social media platform – and of course you can tag me @ClassTechTips with any questions!

Episode Resources

- Check out Peg Grafwallner's [website](#), [YouTube](#) & Edutopia [article](#)
- Follow Peg Grafwallner on [Twitter](#) & [Facebook](#)

- Learn more about productive struggle in [*Ready to Learn: The FRAME Model for Optimizing Student Success*](#)

Find Peg Grafwallner's books on Amazon:

- [*Clearing the Path for Developing Learners: Essential Literacy Skills to Support Achievement in Every Content Area*](#) (2023)
 - [*Not Yet...And That's Ok: How Productive Struggle Fosters Student Learning*](#) (2021)
 - [*Ready to Learn: The FRAME Model for Optimizing Student Success*](#) (2019)
 - [*Lessons Learned from the Special Education Classroom: Creating Opportunities for All Students to Listen, Learn, and Lead*](#) (2018)
-
- [5 Ways To Create a Positive Classroom Culture](#) (Blog Post)
 - [Become a "Hover-Free" Teacher with Choice-Based Instruction with Miriam R. Plotinsky](#) (Podcast Episode)
 - [Learn How to Stay Focused with Focusable](#) (Blog Post)
 - [Using Tech to Help Students Overcome Math Anxiety with Allison Dillard](#) (Podcast Episode)
 - [How to Promote Student Agency in Digital Spaces](#) (Blog Post)
 - [The What, Why, and How of Visual Thinking Strategies with Dr. Erin Chaparro](#) (Podcast Episode)
 - [How To Get Students Excited About Learning](#) (Blog Post)
 - [9 Screencasting Tools for the Classroom](#) (Blog Post)
 - [Use Digital Videos for Assessment and Engagement with Screencastify](#) (Blog Post)