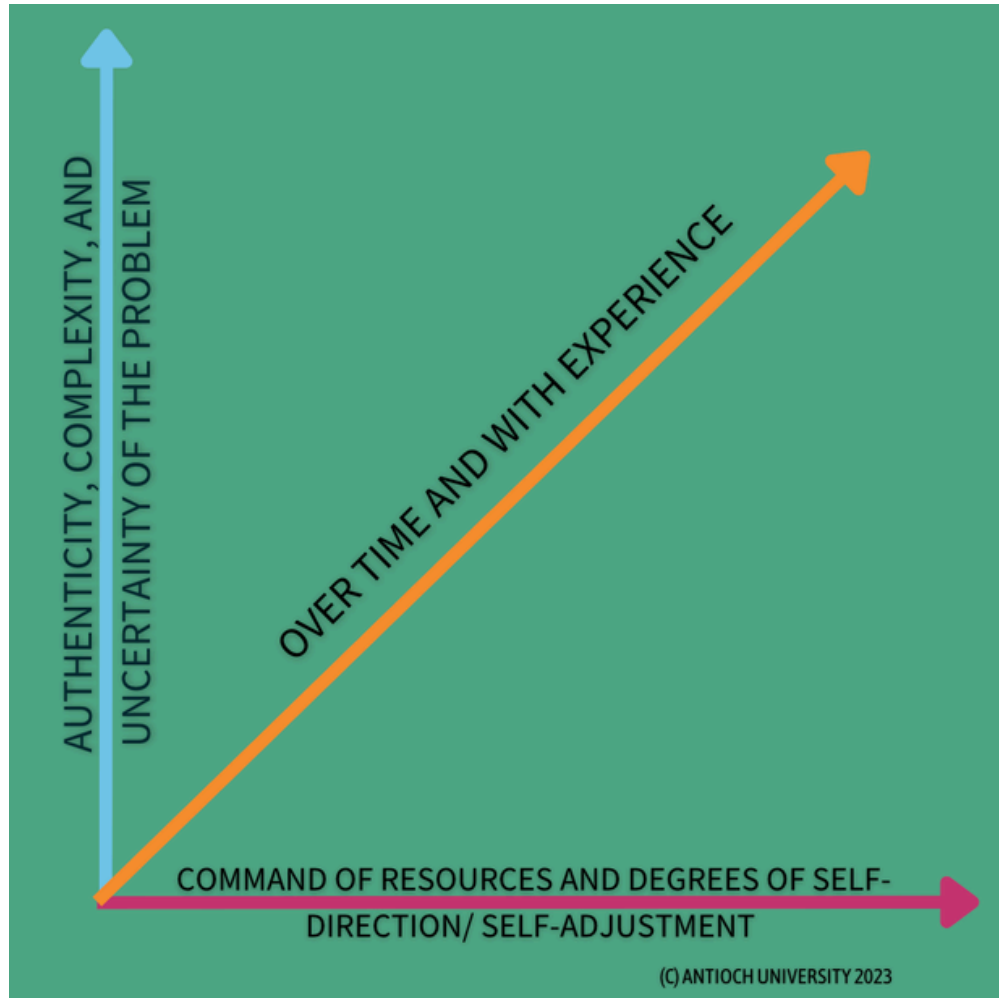


# Upping the Challenge

Excerpted from *The Complete Guide to the Critical Skills Classroom*



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## Adjusting on the fly

When we talk about "upping" the challenge, what we're really talking about is adjusting or fine-tuning the parameters of the experience. You may need to increase or decrease the complexity depending on what you see and hear while students are working.

Sometimes it's obvious what students need- for example, if they're working diligently but just can't get the work done by the deadline, you might negotiate for more time. If one person seems to be doing more work than others, you might add additional structure around roles and responsibilities. Sometimes it's not so obvious. What looks like chaos or failure maybe a sign that you need to offer more (or less) structure, support, resources, time, etc.

For example, you may have designed the experience as a letter to the class, asking them to address a specific problem. In your mind, you imagined that in chunking the challenge, students would determine that the work needed to be broken into pieces and distributed across groups of varying sizes. What actually happens is very different. Students break into even groups of 4 based on counting off, with no plan for who will do what. Within minutes, the groups are a mix of off-task and frustration and the noise level is rising. What do you do?

First, you call a time out and bring everyone back together to reflect on what's happening, what should be happening, and what needs to happen differently to move forward. Then, you might choose to adjust the size of the groups and provide additional resources (or guidance on which resources to use). Or you might decide to spend time building a timeline together, or use a project planning form to break the work into steps. You might choose to assign roles, or pull the big challenge into smaller pieces.

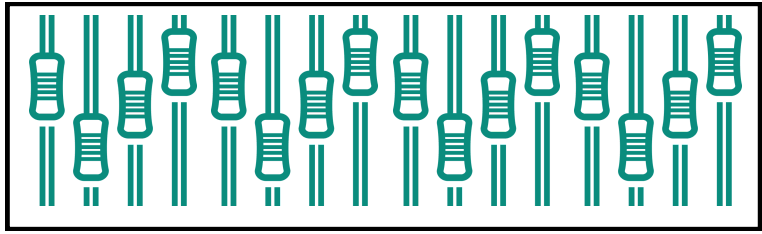
Maybe you designed what you think will be an easy challenge. It includes bullet-points for the product with clear criteria for what the work should look like and demonstrate. It covers content that students know well and you give students plenty of time to complete the work.

The result, however, looks very much the same as what's described above. What do you do? In this case, you need to "up" the challenge a bit. Shorten the time available, take away some resources, add additional "wild cards" ("We have guests coming to see you present!" or "Actually, I just realized that this should also include a visual aid that stands on its own and it needs to have 6 cited sources!") Increase the level of complexity (but not too much) and see if that adds some urgency to their efforts.

As a coach/facilitator you can more easily see the group's process than they can, as the teacher you have to make a decision about what each student and what the class as a whole needs. Forward momentum? To revisit the critical skill they're working on? An opportunity to negotiate expectations? A small success to celebrate?"

In any given situation, you are increasing or decreasing these parameters based on the goals, strengths, and growing edgings of the group. You'll find specific advice throughout this text, but your own experience and your knowledge of your students is going to be most useful. It can be helpful to think of a sound mixer at a board- adjusting the different sliders to get the mix just right. one or more of the sliders What's on the sliders, specifically?

- **Size of group**
  - larger groups increase the level of risk, as do student-selected partners or groups



- **Length of time to complete**
  - Too much (or too little) can increase/decrease the sense of urgency

- **Number of knowledge standards**

- The more standards, the more complex the experience

- **Number of disciplines**

- Drawing from more than one discipline (math + ELA) increases the complexity

- **Number of skills/ dispositions**

- Asking students to demonstrate more than one skill or disposition (problem solving + collaboration) increases the complexity

- **Experience with knowledge**

- Practicing or applying the familiar is less risky than practicing applying new content

- **Experience with targeted skills/ dispositions**

- Practicing or applying previously practiced skills/ dispositions is less risky than learning new ones

- **Complexity of the product**

- A product that is familiar and clearly defined (a poster with 3 points, an image, a title, and the names of the group members) is less risky than one without clear parameters (create something to educate people about whales and persuade them to contribute to whale conservation)

- **Scarcity of resources**

- “Everything you need to complete this challenge is in this box. Each group has it’s own box,” vs “You can use any resources you can find to do this work.”

- **Limitations you’ve placed**

- You may choose to add additional limitations such as talking cards, particular materials or sources that are off limits or required. Adjusting these can increase or decrease the risk.

- **The complexity of the written challenge**

- A document with bullet points and brief, clear instructions is less risky than a letter in which everything is embedded but a number of questions need definition.


- **The level of self direction vs. involvement and direction from the teacher/coach.**

- The role of the teacher can shift from primary resource and authority to observer (with a number of iterations of between those two extremes). Adjusting your role will increase or decrease the level of risk as well.

- **"Publicness" of the exhibition**

- Presenting to a partner, to the teacher in written or recorded form) is least risky. Each additional audience member increases the level of risk. Outside audiences increase the risk exponentially.

**Or, to put it another way...**

Level of Risk	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiar, Small-Scale Task</li> <li>• Critical Skill/ Disposition Focus</li> <li>• Individual or pairs (teacher determined)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mid-scale Task</li> <li>• Critical Skill/ Disposition Focus</li> <li>• Product/Process Standards</li> <li>• Knowledge Standard</li> <li>• Problem to solve</li> <li>• Small groups, selected (student input)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mid to Large-Scale Simulation</li> <li>• Critical Skill/ Disposition Focus (student input)</li> <li>• Product/Process Standards (student input)</li> <li>• Knowledge Standard</li> <li>• Embedded Problem to solve</li> <li>• Role and Scenario</li> <li>• Potential for External Critique</li> <li>• Pairs or small groups (randomly generated)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mid to Large-Scale Real-Life, Neatly Designed Problem</li> <li>• Critical Skill/ Disposition Focus (student-generated)</li> <li>• Product/Process Standards (student generated)</li> <li>• Knowledge Standard</li> <li>• Sponsor/Review Panel/External Critique</li> <li>• Full class, pairs or small groups (student generated)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mid to Large-Scale Real-Life, "Messy" Problem</li> <li>• Critical Skill/ Disposition Focus (student-generated)</li> <li>• Product/Process Standards (student generated)</li> <li>• Knowledge Standard</li> <li>• Sponsor/Review Panel/External Critique</li> <li>• Action and Impact</li> <li>• Full class, pairs, and small groups (student generated)</li> </ul>

## A note about public exhibitions:

We reference “exhibitions” often in the Critical Skills Classroom, but please be aware that public exhibitions can be tricky. ***If the audience includes anyone besides your class, it is imperative that students not be allowed to fail. You may need to step in with a degree of direction that you didn’t expect or even cancel the presentation altogether, but you cannot allow your students to be humiliated.***

“The more public the presentation, the more risk you’re asking students to undertake. Bringing in outside experts, other classes, even parents, may simply be too much to ask of beginners, and forcing them into a situation that pushes them beyond their zones of proximal development not only is miseducative but will do serious damage to students’ trust in you as their teacher. Even if they succeed this time, they may not take a risk for you again.” (Thomas, 2023)



## Grouping

While working in groups is not appropriate for every learning experience, challenging work is often better accomplished in groups.

When creating student groups, aim for heterogeneity.

Heterogeneity in a group ensures a lively flow of interactions and has many social benefits. Students often discover that those students with whom they may not normally associate have valuable talents to be shared. There are three fundamental ways to group students:

- teacher selection
- random selection
- student choice

Teacher choice is a way of ensuring that students with different levels of ability and different talents have a chance to work together. Gender, interpersonal skills, resourcefulness and status characteristics can be used to balance various groups. We recommend that you use this option sparingly— especially as the year progresses and student collaborative skills grow. You can’t micro-manage true collaboration.

Students often see random group composition as the fairest approach. Random choices can be made by using numbers, colors, favorite rock groups, flavors of ice cream, heights, shoe sizes, etc...the only limit is that of imagination. A handy technique for creating randomly composed groups is to make a deck of file cards with a student’s name or xeroxed photo on each one. They can be sorted in a number of ways to try out different combinations of kids. It is important to shuffle the deck regularly

A good balance between teacher selected and student selected is to pass out role cards (i.e. facilitator, recorder, time keeper, etc.) and then tell the class they need to find a group with one of each role. Throwing in nonsense criteria (such as having one member of your group having curly hair can add fun and make it more difficult to get all friends together.)

Students should be given the option to work with others of their choosing during some activities. One way of giving them choice, but avoiding the best-friend-syndrome, is to let students choose their own group members, including the condition that they must work with at least one person with whom they have never worked before.

### Considerations for Grouping

#### Low Risk

- Individuals/Pairs
- Teacher assigned groups
- Silent
- Lots of time to prepare (“Tomorrow we will”)
- Facts-based (First letter of your last name, hair color, buttons vs. no buttons on your shirt)
- Individual, written or one-on-one debriefing

#### Medium Risk

- Pairs/ Groups of 3-4
- Randomly assigned groups
- Talking with a partner
- Some time to prepare (“in 10 minutes we will”)
- Neutral opinion-based (Mayo vs. Miracle Whip, Pepsi vs. Coke)
- Individual reflection time followed by small group discussion and larger group report out,

#### High Risk

- Full class Randomly assigned groups
- Choose your own group/partner
- Speaking to the whole class
- No time to prepare (“Turn to the person next to you and...”)
- Requires personal disclosure (favorite memory, the story of my name)
- Large group discussion

### CHOOSING PARTNERS, TEAMS, SIDES OR GROUPS by Patrice McDonough

You may share my experience of not being quickly chosen when it was time to choose softball teams during gym class. These were always anxious moments which felt too long as I stood in line waiting to be chosen last to a team. For me however, there was a flipside experience at spelling bee time because I was a good speller and was either captain or first chosen. Today as a teacher and parent, as I reflect on my own schooling experiences and attempt to make changes in education, I often think about the feelings of classmates who didn't excel at softball or spelling-classmates who excelled at music, art or a subject where we didn't "team up". Or perhaps the classmate excelled in an area that didn't show up in the school curriculum at all.

It is important to create a safe and supportive environment for learning and playing to take place. There are unlimited ways to get people into pairs and groups without anyone feeling left out or anxious. When choosing partners, teams, sides or groups you can create as playful and safe a space as when you play or engage in any game or activity. I've put together some ideas to get you started. Remember that not every idea is appropriate for every group or every circumstance.

Potential categories for choosing: **PREFERENCES, CHARACTERISTICS, TRAITS, TENDENCIES, COMMONALITIES and DIVERSITIES**

## Here are a few ideas for dividing into several groups of varied sizes ...

- Everyone sings the first vowel of his name. When the a's, e's, i's, o's, u's are all gathered there will be five groups that can be easily adjusted to equal numbers ready for a cooperative activity or game.
- Have everyone hold up any number of fingers between one and five. Without talking, have them gather with others who held up the same number of fingers.
- Everyone finds others with the same birth state. All born in foreign countries can gather as one group.
- Think of the last digit of your phone number and find everyone else who is thinking of the same number.
- Get into groups of five so that everyone has at least one item of clothing the same color.
- Get into groups of four so that you all share two things in common.
- Find three others who were born in the same season as you.
- Get into a group of three and form the letter N.

## Divide into two large groups by:

- Tongue curlers and non tongue curlers
- Raise your hand .... those with their left hand in the air are in one group and those with their right in the other group
- Fold your hands ... those with their right thumb on top will be in one group and those with their left in the other group
- Look at your nails and freeze ... those with their palms up will be in one group and those with palms down will be in the other group
- Watch-wearers and non-watch-wearers,
- Heeled shoes and those with no heels
- Laced shoes and non-laced shoes
- Herbivores and carnivores
- Those with more than four siblings, those with four or fewer
- Vanilla lovers and chocolate lovers
- More like the mountains or more like the seashore
- More like a sandal or more like a sneaker
- Those who would prefer a Hawaiian vacation and those who prefer a Caribbean vacation
- You have just won an all expense paid vacation! Would you rather go to Hawaii or to Bermuda? New York or San Francisco?
- How many letters in your first name? If it is an even number, join others with an even number of letters and an odd number of letters with the same.
- Close one eye. Those with the left eye closed join each other and the right eye closed with the same.
- Put either a pinky or thumb in the air, and join with others who did the same.
- Do you feel more like having an ice cream cone, root beer float, or milkshake?
- Do you feel more like a ping pong ball or a ping pong paddle?
- Those born in a leap year, those not born in a leap year (Who knows? This one could take a little research and may not work for a spontaneous activity or for a classroom where all students are the same age.)

## Benching a Student

In sports, players are often asked to sit on the bench for a while to receive individual coaching or to be asked to watch a particular part of what is happening in the game.

This works well in the classroom, too. Students can be taken aside for individual coaching or to observe the actions of other students.

- *“Dena, let’s take a look at your research plan. You’ve identified several different resources here. Do you think that all are equally reliable?”*
- *“I can see that you are getting frustrated with the decision making in your group. I would like you to watch the group in the corner and compare how they are working to arrive at a decision with how your group is approaching decision making.”*
- *“Take a 10-minute break to cool down and then return to the work.”*

These moments can make or break a relationship, so be thoughtful and careful about how you approach it. If a student is being pulled aside for misbehavior, beginning from a place of empathy and concern will reap better outcomes than authority.

- *“J, are you okay? You don’t seem like yourself today.”*
- *“How can I help? What do you need?”*
- *“I work really hard to create an atmosphere where everyone is treated with respect, but I think I may have missed something. Did I do something that made you feel disrespected? Can help me understand?”*

Sometimes a student just needs a break, or a moment to vent, or a redirection towards strategies or tools that they’ve used in the past. Sometimes they need you to understand their experience with, questions about, or concerns about the work. You may find that you need to adjust the parameters of the experience so that the issue is addressed (or maybe you just need to call a time-out and address confusion). Ultimately, the goal of “benching” a student is to provide an opportunity for reflection, regulation, repair, and finally for the student to rejoin the group.

## Calling a Timeout

A time-honored function of the coach is to call a halt to a practice or a game when it is apparent that some problem requires immediate attention.

- *“Okay. Timeout. Let’s huddle on this. It is clear that we have a problem. The problem seems to have something to do with how tasks are being assigned. Can someone help us to put this problem into words so that we can begin to sort it out?”*
- *“Could you all gather around for a minute? The whole group seems confused. What directions were you given? Where are you getting stuck?”*
- *“Whoa. Hang on a minute before you go rushing off. We have some clear safety issues here. No actions can be taken until we can put together a plan that is safe for everyone involved.”*

## More on adjusting & troubleshooting

[Block, J. Troubleshooting PBL. Edutopia.](#)



[Fester, J. 5 tips for helping students adjust to PBL. Edutopia.](#)



[Thomas, L. 5 questions for troubleshooting project-based learning. Edutopia.](#)



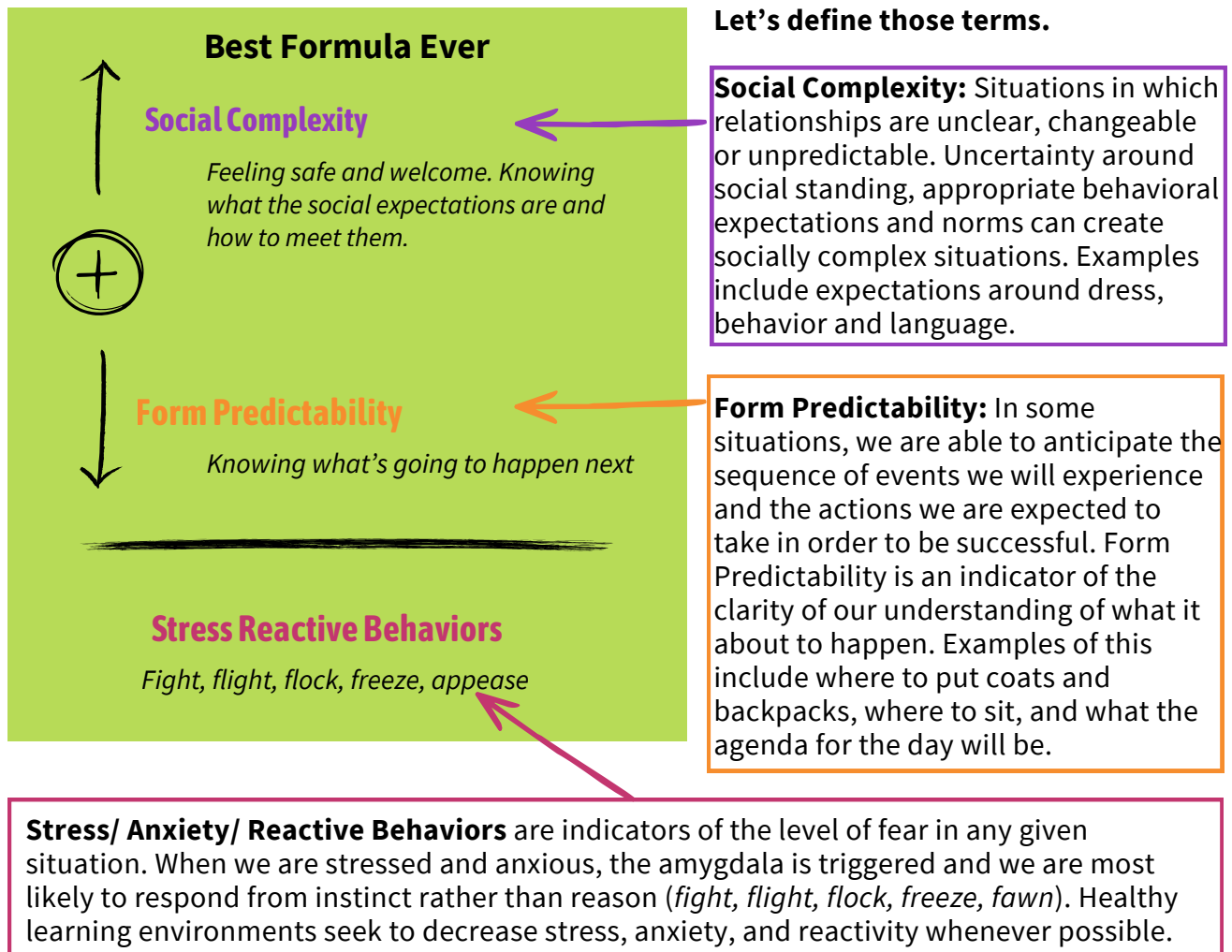
[McCarthy, J. 3 common PBL problems —and solutions. Edutopia.](#)



## The Best Formula Ever

As human beings, we are naturally risk-averse. Research shows that, when a threat is perceived and the amygdala (the most primitive part of the brain, responsible for instinctive reactions to danger) is activated, the ability of the frontal lobe of the brain (where reasoning and learning occur) is diminished by up to 80%. As the image below illustrates, the areas of the brain capable of learning are bypassed when a student is afraid. Quite simply- they can't learn if they don't feel safe.

Sometimes, however, problems move from the relatively simple issues of common classroom conflict. One need only turn on the news or open a newspaper to see an increased level of violence, bullying and harassment in schools- often with tragic consequences. According to author and clinician, Kim John Payne, (Payne, 2021) bullying and harassment are predictable and preventable with the application of a simple formula which we refer to as the Best Formula Ever



By applying this formula and identifying risky “spaces” (both physical and chronological) in the school day, we can anticipate the conditions that will trigger stress/ anxiety/ reactivity and either change the conditions or be prepared to offer additional support and an increased adult presence. Some examples of typically “risky” environments include hallways, lunchrooms, buses, and recess.

**Additional resources including books, white papers, challenges, tools, and links to classes and events can be found at [antioch.edu/csc](http://antioch.edu/csc)**

## Acknowledgements

This excerpt is one of a series designed to support educators in the process of making new connections and enhancing practice. **It would not be possible without the efforts of Wendy McGrath, the original author of the Critical Skills Level 1 and 2 Coaching Kits.**

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