



EMPOWER for Effective Teaching

by JEFFREY D. WILHELM

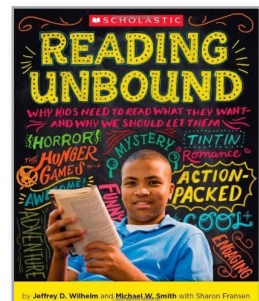
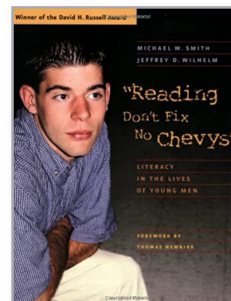
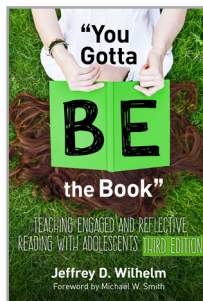
It's important for learners to read for pleasure and to read texts that are at their independent level. But it is also essential for readers (and writers and learners across all disciplines) to be challenged to outgrow their current interests and capacities. To this end, we need the most engaging and effective instruction—as captured by EMPOWER—a mental model which reflects the latest research findings from across the learning sciences.



LITERACY CHAMPION: JEFFREY WILHELM

A classroom teacher for 15 years, Jeffrey Wilhelm is currently Distinguished Professor of Literacy Education at Boise State University and is the founding director of the Maine and Boise State Writing Projects. He is the author or co-author of 40 books about literacy teaching and learning. He has earned the NCTE's Promising Research award for [*You Gotta Be the Book*](#), and the David H. Russell Award for Research for [*Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*](#), which explores

the literate lives of young men both in school and out, and for [*Reading Unbound*](#), a groundbreaking exploration of the powers of pleasure reading and how to promote them. Jeff has devoted his professional career to helping teachers help their students, and he is particularly devoted to equitably assisting students who are considered to be reluctant, struggling, or at-risk in any way. He is an internationally acclaimed speaker.



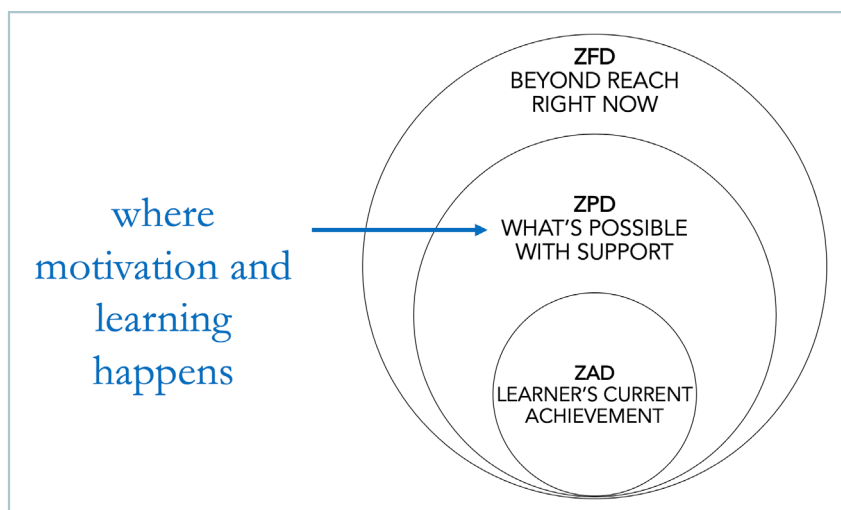
What to Know: The Power of EMPOWER

Every reader needs a continual diet of books that are vacation-y (easy), just right (at their current level of interest and capacity), and challenging—in others words, every reader should continually be reading books at their independent level (in their Zone of Actual Development, or ZAD) and at their instructional level (in their Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD).

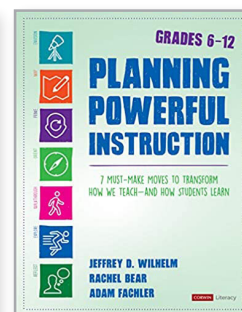
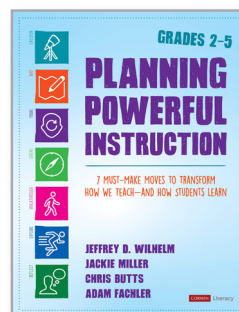
When learners are reading at their ZPD they are attempting a challenge that they cannot yet meet on their own, but could with assistance. They thus have the opportunity to outgrow themselves as readers and people by learning, through the support of various instructional scaffolds, what they cannot yet do, think, and know on their own. This means that we are asking learners to do new hard things that are currently just beyond their grasp. This is what teaching is: helping

learners to engage, know, think, and do in ways that they could not yet do on their own. This instructional support, coupled with deliberate practice, leads to new levels of independent competence and a new ZAD.

What do we know about the kind of instruction that helps learners outgrow their current interests and capacities? These are the most important things to know:

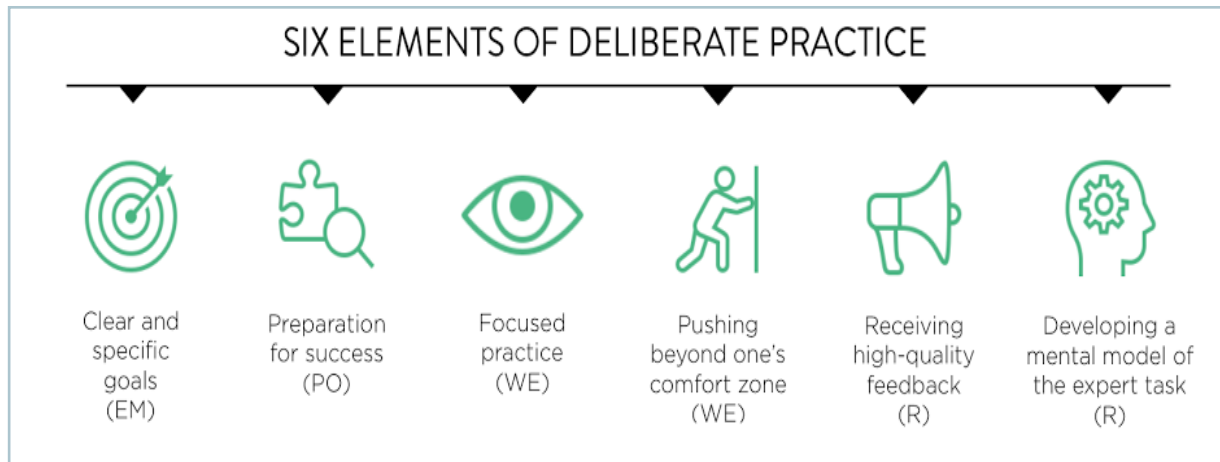


The mental model, EMPOWER, developed by Adam Fachler in collaboration with me and National Writing Project fellows, captures how people from every discipline and walk of life induct and apprentice others into their area of expertise. EMPOWER also reflects the major findings from a wide set of research into effective teaching and learning, cognitive science, educational psychology, development of expertise, motivation, and optimal experience. See Wilhelm, et al, 2020a; 2020b for a full treatment). Here is how the model is expressed, following the instructional moves that are required.



Move 1	Move 2	Move 3	Move 4	Move 5	Move 6	Move 7
E	M	P	O	W	E	R
ENVISION a destination	MAP the mental model & the path to mastery	PRIME for the journey	ORIENT the learning	WALK- THROUGH new skills	EXTEND/ EXPLORE new territory	REFLECT on the journey

For example, here is how EMPOWER captures Anders Ericsson’s research (Ericsson & Poole, 2016) into the features of deliberate practice that is necessary to developing competence or expertise in any domain.



Here is the pattern of apprenticeship-style teaching, captured by EMPOWER:

- Offstage, effective educators **ENVISION** a destination for learners and then **MAP** out each step of the journey, including the knowledge, tools, and mental models (strategy) required for achievement of mastery.
- Once onstage, educators build motivation PRIME students by activating and building background knowledge and **ORIENT** them towards the new destination: a learning outcome phrased in terms of what students will be able to do independently by the close of the unit.
- With motivation built, students now require mentorship. At this point, educators **WALKTHROUGH** new skills and concepts and engage students in extending their expertise in a variety of guided and collaborative practice tasks that increase in challenge/complexity and decrease in scaffolding/support over time. This is the time for modeling, coaching, and feedback as students rehearse, practice, and scrimmage. They are purposeful, contextualized, lower stakes learning experiences that exist to develop students’ abilities.
- With their skills and knowledge built, it is then time for students to put their learning to the ultimate test. Educators challenge students to **EXPLORE** new territory and **EXTEND** all capacities, transferring what has been learned into a novel situation that presents the possibility of failure. This is very much like the “call to action” found in the hero’s journey, the build-up to the “big game” in sports, or an opening night performance in the arts.
- At this point, though, the educator is in the audience or on the sidelines. Their job is to step back and let students triumph or struggle without assistance, else they will never learn how to independently apply what has been taught.
- Throughout this entire process and especially at the end, with the big game, opening night performance, or dragon slaying behind us, we collectively **REFLECT**. What was learned and how? Why is it important and how does it connect to our future goals? How can we use it now and in the future? What are our individual and collective strengths and struggles? EMPOWER is not a formula, it is a mental map—a mental model and representation of how to complete a complex task.

EMPOWER reflects the cognitive science and process behind any guided inquiry approach:

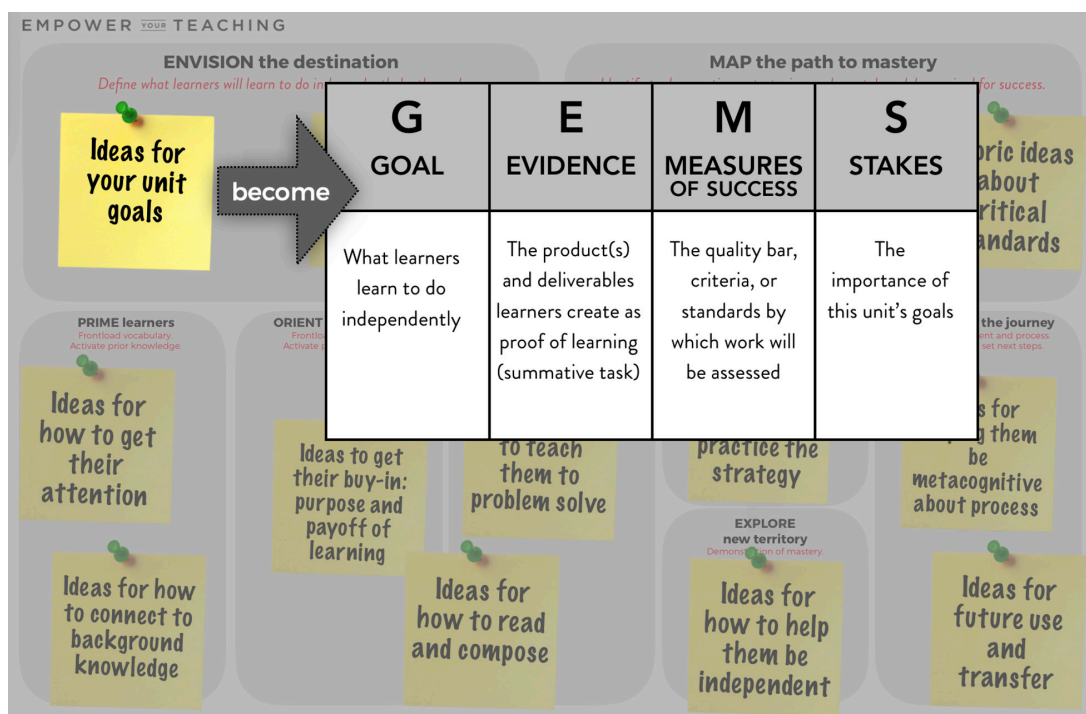
■ FIGURE I.1: CHART COMPARING EMPOWER TO DIFFERENT GUIDED INQUIRY MODELS

EMPOWER	SYSTEMS CONNECT	PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL)	INTEGRATED INQUIRY (INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE)	UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN (UBD)	VESTED	SHELTERED INSTRUCTION OBSERVATION PROTOCOL (SIOP)	6 E'S	TEACHING FOR UNDERSTANDING
Envision	Topic selection and learning objectives	Key knowledge	Transdisciplinary theme	Stage 1: What is worthy and requiring of understanding?	View	Lesson prep	Engage	Use topics that engage and connect to other subjects
Map	Essential/driving questions; context; define issues and measurable changes		Tuning in			Stage 3: What learning, experiences, and teaching promote understanding, interest, and excellence?	Building background	
Prime		Challenging problem or question and student voice						
Orient								
Walk Through	Plan and conduct investigations; analyze and interpret data;	Sustained inquiry, authenticity	Finding out, sorting out, going further, making conclusions		Experience	Comp. input strategies	Explore	Create engaging learning experiences
					Speak	Interaction	Explain	
Extend and Explore	construct explanations; develop claims, informed action	Public product	Going further; taking action	Stage 2: What is the evidence for understanding?	Transform Extend	Practice/application	Elaborate Extend	
						Deliver Perform		
Reflect		Reflect					Evaluate	Develop formative and summative assessment that deepen understanding

(Figure from Wilhelm, et al, 2020a; 2020b)

What to Do

ENVISION: Plan for your goals and how you will achieve them. Use a technique like GEMS to identify your threshold knowledge learning goals, the evidence of achievement you want, the measures or critical standards of success, and the stakes to learners—the importance of the learning.



MAP: Access the major task you will assign from your learner's point of view, Regress the parts and process of the task, Compress the task into a mental model, Assess by creating a rubric or tool that will reflect the mental model and process of completing the major task.

PRIME: Activate what learners already know and care about so they can use these as resources for the learning. Use frontloading techniques like K-W-L or See-Think-Wonder, rankings, or surveys.

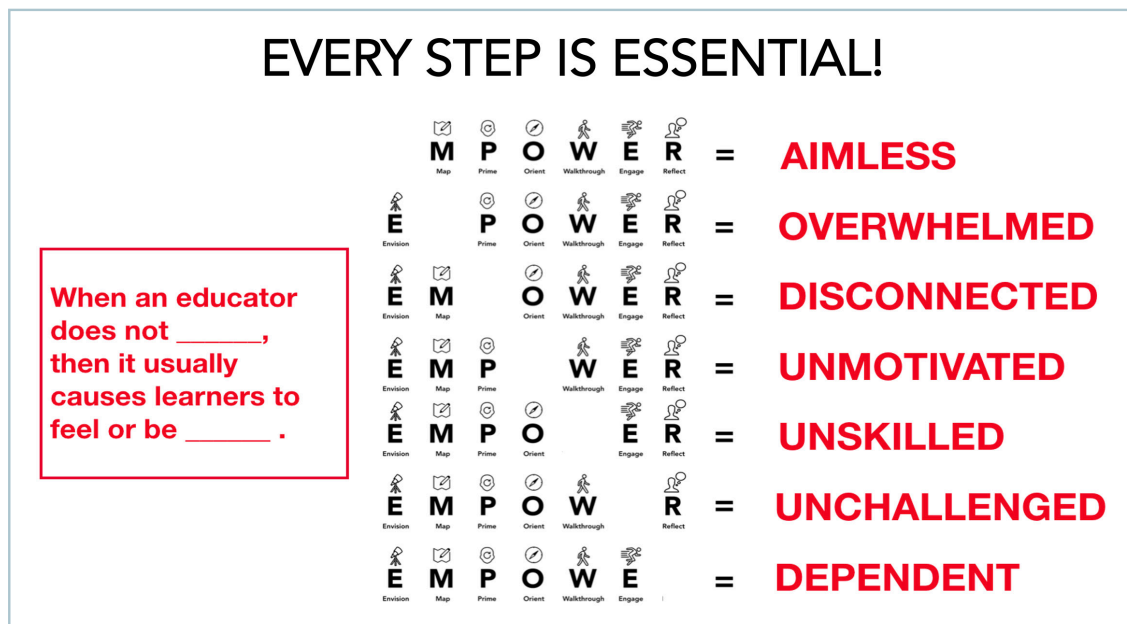
ORIENT: Point learners to the purposes and payoffs of the learning with essential questions, and by introducing the culminating project and the process you'll use to support learning. Make the culminating project an authentic, real-world performance task by using GRASP. As shown below, GRASP is a process for taking a teacher-facing set of goals as expressed by GEMS and turning it into a real world student-centered task by positioning learners into a real world role with a real world audience, situation and product—a product that constitutes what cognitive scientists call a knowledge artifact since it will require and offer proof positive that the threshold learning goals have been met.

Performance Based Assessments have GRASP!				
GOAL	REAL-WORLD ROLE	AUDIENCE	STORY/ SITUATION	PRODUCT/ PERFORMANCE
convince	storyteller	client/customer	You have been asked to...	discussion/debate
analyze	historian	fellow students	The context/ challenge is..	presentation
inform	politician	expert panel	The issue you must address is...	article/essay
explain	engineer	community	The problem is..	podcast
design	scientist	an official	You have an opportunity to...	webpage
test	artist	pen pal		speech
	CEO	reader		story

WALKTHROUGH: Guide students in deliberate practice while gradually releasing responsibility for the task. Use modeling, mentoring and monitoring or the process of for with by. Use visualization strategies, think-alouds, drama in education techniques, questioning and discussion techniques that will make the processes of expert problem-solving visible and available to learners, and allow them to practice becoming independent with these processes.

EXTEND/EXPLORE: Take off the training wheels. Ask for transfer. Have students identify new tasks and problems of personal interest to which they can independently apply the developed knowledge. This step is crucial to consolidate learning and insure transfer!

REFLECT: Ask learners to name their learning and how they can productively address challenges. Use formative assessments and procedural feedback throughout every step of the learning process.



More to Know and Do

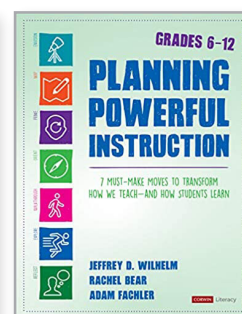
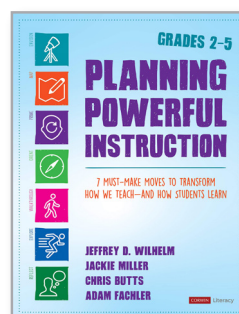
- Read *Planning Powerful Instruction*
- Watch the short 5 Minute University video summarizing [EMPOWER](#)
- Use these [EMPOWER LESSON PLAN](#) and UNIT PLAN templates

Ericsson, A., & Poole, R. (2016). *Peak: Secrets from the new science of expertise*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin.

Wilhelm, J. D., Butts, C., & Miller, J. (2020a). *Planning Powerful Instruction: 7 Steps to Transform How We Teach—and How Students Learn. A practical guide to using the EMPOWER framework to help you engage every learner, grades 2-5*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Wilhelm, J. D., Bear, R., & Fachler, A. (2020b). *Planning Powerful Instruction: 7 Steps to Transform How We Teach—and How Students Learn A practical guide to using the EMPOWER framework to help you engage every learner, Grades 6-12*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Jeff provides free online course and workshop materials for this topic.



How to Reach Jeff

Jeff can be reached on email at jwilhelm@boisestate.edu

You can follow Jeff on [Twitter](#) and check out his [website](#).