

Learning Opportunities

Learning opportunities are designed to encourage creative problem-solving at lower levels and reward characters for thinking outside their usual skillset. This slightly increases the non-combat power level of PCs, but it does so in a way that is easy to regulate. This system is most beneficial to new or low-level players, or when new skills have become available through expansions or prestige classes.

When a character uses an untrained skill, success can trigger a learning opportunity. These are granted at the GM's discretion, and give the player a chance to earn a single point in the untrained skill they just used. A d20 opportunity check determines whether or not the player learns the skill. Often GMs prefer to roll this check themselves, or even refrain from telling characters they've earned an opportunity unless the roll is successful. There is no hard and fast rule for which unskilled checks offer learning opportunities, but it is common to award them for critical successes, risky tasks, deliberate plans, and clever roleplaying.

Unlike Hero Points, which can only be learned and used by player characters, Learning Opportunities can be gained and used by NPCs. This can provide interesting developments for NPCs that join the party as followers or cohorts: a villager the party hires to watch the horses might end up earning a point of Ride if he successfully flees a particularly nasty goblin attack. Parties often go out of their way to protect an NPC who has learned a valuable skill, sometimes going to lengths disproportionate to the character's actual utility – knowing they were instrumental to the character's growth makes them more invested.

The DC of learning opportunities can vary widely. A good rule of thumb is to start with a baseline DC of 15 and modify the roll based on circumstances. The chart below is a partial list of possible modifiers.

Opportunity Check Bonuses and Penalties

Circumstances	Opportunity Check Modifier
Character risked severe negative personal consequences	+5
Skill check was a critical success	+4
Turned the tide of an encounter	+3
Used in-character knowledge creatively	+3
Organized a plan	+2
No special circumstances	+0
Task was simple or routine	-5
Used an untrained skill when a trained party member was available	-5

Example

The grizzled forester returns from his scouting mission. His report is troubling: the Sherriff and his men are on the way, and they will arrive at the village in two days. Rumor is that they have a warrant for Rudir's arrest, and the Sherriff's usual tactics mean there is unlikely to be much left of the village after they leave, if they fail to obtain their prize. The party makes the decision to stay and face down the Sherriff. The GM asks how they would like to spend the next two days.

Seela: I gather the able-bodied villagers and plan battle tactics.

Harsk: I want to set some traps.

GM: What did you have in mind?

Harsk: I want to set up a shed with a ceiling that's rigged to collapse when someone pulls a hidden lever outside, to see if we can trick them into going in.

Harsk does not have skill in Craft: Traps, but he can make an unskilled check. The GM determines that the check to construct the ceiling trap will be a DC of 25. Investing a substantial amount of time will earn a +5 circumstance bonus, and enlisting skilled labor will grant an additional +5.

GM: This will be extremely difficult without help.

Harsk: Is there a carpenter who lives in the village?

GM: You find him at his shop.

Harsk: I explain my plan to him and ask him to help out.

GM: Make a diplomacy check.

Harsk has a few points in diplomacy, and he rolls a 10, plus his +4 bonus is a 14. The villagers are obviously invested in defending their home, so this is enough to enlist his aid.

GM: He's eager to help out, but he needs supplies from some other local tradespeople who might not be willing to part with their wares unpaid. It'll cost 3gp.

Harsk: Sounds good. I pay him and we spend the whole day working on the trap.

Harsk rolls a d20 and gets an 18, +10 for the circumstance bonus against a DC 25. He successfully creates his trap and triggers a Learning Opportunity. The GM rolls the opportunity check, gets a 14 and adds a +2 bonus based on Harsk's expenditure of time and resources. The result is a 16.

GM: During the long hours you spend constructing the trap, you start to feel like you're getting a sense of how these things work – balancing stability with the ability to easily spring the mechanism. You learn from the experience, and gain 1 point in Craft: Traps.

Harsk: Great! I meet up with Lem and tell him about the trapped building.

By making an attempt with an untrained skill, Harsk has been able to provide his party with a strategic advantage they otherwise would not have had. Now that he has the skill to make traps, he'll likely remember to use it in the future.

Optional Rule: the Painful Lesson

Why provide negative modifiers in the circumstance chart, instead of simply not offering an opportunity? GMs can choose to give players negative consequences when a character succeeds at a skill but fails the resulting opportunity check by five or more. Remember – Learning Opportunities are triggered after achieving a success, and failing an opportunity check does not negate the success. Instead, the original skill check succeeds with some unforeseen negative consequences.

Example

The map leads to a sealed warehouse belonging to the Seneschal family. The floor is paved in slate tiles, and the walls are smooth, old wood. The interior is unlit, but using the light from your lantern you can barely make out rows and rows of dusty crates and sealed barrels. Ghostlike forms draped in waxed canvas stand out in the gloom; carefully preserved statues or antique furnishings. A ladder leads to a lofted platform near the rafters. Footsteps leave visible tracks in the dust – no one has been here to check on these treasures in quite some time.

The warehouse may have been sealed, but it is apparently not abandoned. The intrusion must have set off some far distant alarm - a trio of night watchmen armed with cudgels block the doorway. Two of them hold leashes that barely restrain slavering hounds. The lead watchman eyes the party warily. "What's all this, then?" he asks.

GM: You still have a moment while the guards decide what to do.

Ezren: I run for the ladder and try to climb it

GM: The ladder is rickety and old, using it will require a climb check

Ezren: Those dogs do not look friendly. I'll take that risk.

Ezren rolls his unskilled climb check against a DC of 10. Success! It's a 19. The GM Rolls an Opportunity check, and the result is a 3.

GM: You successfully climb to the landing, but as you pull yourself up, your foot kicks the ladder. It tips backwards and the dry wood shatters on the tiles below.

The climb check was successful: Ezren is safe and out of melee range. His success offered a learning opportunity, but the low roll triggered a painful lesson. As a result, we have a success with complications: nobody else is getting up to the landing anytime soon, but Ezren may have considerable trouble getting down.

Optional Rule: Alternative Rewards

Learning Opportunities can be offered as a reward, similar to a magic item, spellbook, or scroll. This can take the form of a situation the player can take advantage of, or an item designed with an instructional purpose.

Example

A search of Rudir's chambers reveals a small chest constructed of intricately fitted cedar and rowanwood blocks and seamed with fragile gold wire. This ancient puzzle box was a toy for the royalty of the Thieves' Kingdom, designed to be both challenging and instructive. Attempting to open it is risky, but it could provide a Learning Opportunity.

Item: Wire and Jointwork Puzzle Box

Learning Opportunity: DC 15

The player must take a full hour free from distraction to attempt to learn from the device. Roll a D20 and consult the result table.

Puzzle Box Result Table

15-20: The box unlocks. Rather than opening conventionally, all the wooden blocks gently tumble loose from the golden wire, revealing an intricate jade figurine suspended in a golden web. Grants a single point in disable device.

10-14: You fail to open the box. A different character can attempt immediately, or the same character can attempt in 24 hours.

5-9: You hear a horrible, golden twang and a sickening crunch. The box is no longer symmetrical, and no longer responds to attempts at manipulation.

1-4: The box explodes in splinters of wood and shards of wire, causing 1D6 damage to the person making the attempt and 1D4 damage to anyone else in a 5m radius.

Designer's Notes – Additional Rules and Variations

While Learning Opportunities appeal strongly to lower level characters, the basic rules may be less interesting for players who already have a wide array of skills, or for whom the simple +1 granted by a single rank in a skill is not very significant. As our original play group carried the concept to new campaigns, we've experimented with granting *Advanced Learning Opportunities* to players who regularly and cleverly use skills outside of their wheelhouse, with a success turning that skill into a class skill. Another variation is *Teaching Opportunities* – where certain varieties of collaboration lead to teaching NPCs or other players new skills.

Though balance has never been a serious issue in the campaigns where I've seen the system used, some GMs expressed concern that players might attempt to game the system, so we've experimented with variations that would prevent abuse. One variation involves requiring a small expenditure of experience or a Hero Point in order to learn the skill. Another grants learning opportunities only on critical successes. Some GMs prefer to treat the learning opportunities themselves more like Hero Points, awarding them very rarely – as part of a session where players are expected to level up, or only when a player accomplishes something truly spectacular.

One of my favorite variations was the *Moment of Opportunity*. When a GM noticed one character was being left out of the action, they'd be given a chance to do something risky that could potentially have substantial effects on the encounter, and trigger a learning opportunity. For instance, a conversation with the local lord is going badly, but his daughter is fascinated by the Druid's animal companion. The GM offers her an opportunity: make an untrained Diplomacy check and see if you can turn the tide with a conversation about falconry.

As we used this mechanic, related skills and feats emerged as well. *Craft: Opportunity* allowed players to assess and assemble the resources that would allow them to make an untrained attempt at a skill that usually cannot be used untrained. *Improvise Opportunity* was a feat that resembled a gated version of the Bard's *Jack of All Trades* ability, allowing a player to make a perception check to see if anything in the room could allow them make a check that otherwise cannot be attempted untrained – like finding a elvish/demonic rosetta stone in the Seneschal's collection which allows a player who speaks elvish to at least *attempt* a linguistics check on that cursed sarcophagus.

When a player gets an idea, we want to at least allow her to attempt it. That is the main design principle at work here – enable and encourage flexibility.