

Failure Preferred, Actually¹

By Rick Wormeli

Let's stop demonizing failure. It will be our undoing.

I'm not advocating that we celebrate low test scores or students' dashed dreams. I am calling for a shift in metaphors from failure as student's foe to failure as student's ally and a move away from the presumption of F's and zeroes on inadequately performed tasks as the best way to build students' self-discipline. Failure can teach us in ways that consistent success cannot.

Multiple industries advance as a result of failures: medicine, bridge construction, dentistry, investment firms, culinary arts, and space travel are just some of the industries that have improved dramatically due to insights gained from past failures. In some cases, there was a horrific outcome of these failures: people died, but greater losses might have occurred if we had not learned from those mistakes and taken steps to make sure they never happen again.

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Likewise, students should feel safe and invited to experiment and fail in the middle of class or at home as they learn new material. Unfortunately, the way we've set things up in many schools, students consider academic struggle and undeveloped skills weaknesses. Instead, we should demonstrate that failing and persisting while learning is a sign of strength.

One of the most vivid ways to do this is modeling our own struggles to learn something new. We can set up real situations in which we do not know answers or how to solve problems - really not know something, not just faking it - then find the answer or solve the problem constructively in front of students. Many students do not push themselves to explore different talents or new thinking because they are focused on protecting their reputations as the persons who always get the right answers or who answer questions first. What potential is lost because a student needs to protect his personal status quo!

To make it acceptable to fail in the pursuit of learning, we also have to remove the grade myopia placed on many of our assignments. For example, some students find it easier to say they forgot the homework or didn't have time to complete it rather than attempt an assignment, do poorly, and acknowledge that they did not understand. Our students should have every

confidence that their attempts to wrestle with content and skills as they practice will be met with only support and encouragement in our classrooms.

One of the worst perpetrators of an unhealthy avoidance of failure is the pressure we feel from state or provincial testing. Due to the nature of standardization protocols, it's almost impossible to create a test that is financially feasible and legally defensible that also allows for more than one correct answer. As a result, schools promote the philosophy that there is just one answer from a selected group, or just one way to write an essay. Such tests encourage formulaic reasoning that limit students' growth and creativity. Remember the old analogy questions on the SAT test? Some of us often thought we could argue for two or three of the choices, depending on the context, but instead we dutifully spent our test time trying to guess what the test-makers intended, even though we knew it showed limited imagination. Conform, or show the divergent and synectic thinking that we are truly capable of performing – what kind of choice is that to foist upon the next generation?

Check out NCTE's flagship publications, *English Journal* and *Voices in the Middle*. The National Council for Teachers of English frequently calls on English teachers to question the teaching of the 5-paragraph essay as the only way to write an

academic paper. Instead, we teach students that some paragraphs are too weak to stand alone and therefore should be combined, or that that one paragraph has too many topics and should be broken into two or more. Rather than giving students a template in which they fill in the missing spaces with a teacher's pre-determined correct answers, we serve students better by helping them develop the mental dexterity to choose writing structures that suit the intended audience and purpose.

Skills for the 21st Century

In his 2008 book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner asked dozens of employers - both blue and white collar professions - to identify the No. 1 characteristic they want to see in employees. No matter the level of the job, every employer responded with the same characteristic: "Do they know how to ask good questions?" In his 2006 book, *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink claims that high-concept right-brain thinking which is often messy but full of "outside the box" thinking will be the new "it" skill for future employees to have on their resume as we evolve beyond left-brain protocol thinking in manufacturing and business. If our students are going to be prepared for the 21st century professions, we have to make it safe to ask questions, to see adults and culture as fallible, and to experiment.

Russian composer, Igor Stravinsky, once said, "I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge." Imagine the beauty and insight that would have been lost if he had succumbed to the "correct answer" dogma or if he never allowed himself to fail in his attempts at composing. We don't want a generation of citizens to spend their days avoiding failure when it so readily leads to a positive future.

In our classrooms, let's make failure a valued route to learning. Here are thirteen specific suggestions to get started:

1. Privately or publicly affirm students who attempt something initially beyond their reach, regardless of their success. Make this a weekly recognition.
2. Make sure all students experience failure once a grading period, particularly your high-performing students. School years are the times to experience what it's like to hit a brick wall, then develop the coping strategies to navigate around or through it. We want students to learn these skills now, while the stakes aren't so high and they have a solid "pit crew" (us) to get them back on track again. Students who

coast unchallenged in school often don't develop these skills. They may fall apart in later years of college and career training when the stakes are much higher.

3. Model how to fail at something and to handle it constructively. Ask students who are willing to help promote this message to demonstrate it as well. Invite administrators, other teachers, and members of the community to stop by and give testimony to failure as well.
4. Frequently relate the stories of famous figures in history, science, sports, politics, entertainment, and other professions who failed in some way but learned from the experience and grew as a result. Students are consummate story-receivers; they'll remember the lessons learned.
5. Overtly teach problem-solving skills regardless of whether or not it's an official part of your curriculum. This is often referred to as, "the hidden curriculum," values and skills that all citizens should have. Skills to develop in students include task analysis (breaking down tasks into smaller pieces); revising one's thinking in light of new evidence; developing more than one response; looking

at something from multiple angles; weighing the benefits and drawbacks of different options; using trial and error; seeking advice from trusted others; thinking critically about arguments and ideology; learning from mistakes; controlling impulsive thinking; considering consequences; and knowing which questions to ask.

6. Create a "Wall of Failure Success" in which you identify students (with their permission) who failed at something initially, but learned from the experience and eventually became successful with that skill or topic. Be specific in telling their stories.
7. Frequently brainstorm constructive responses to what appears to be initial failures. Use hypothetical situations so students can safely converse about failures without feeling the added pressure of having erred. They'll remember some of the solutions, but even better, they'll feel comfortable asking for help when they do fail. These conversations set the tone that failure is acceptable.
8. Teach students about the formative nature of class work and homework, then live up to that promise. This means we reduce the influence of formative assessments

and assignments on the overall subject grade. Return homework to its true role: to practice, reinforce, and expand students' skills and knowledge as they come to know our topics, not as the final declaration of proficiency. Give them license to explore and extend themselves without worry.

9. Ask students questions to which you do not know the answer. This can be a scary thing for teachers who are used to controlling classroom interactions, including eliciting pre-determined responses from students. But acknowledging that we do not know everything is a good model for students. It builds empathy for what they are feeling as we ask them to take risks.
10. Make it possible for students to ask more questions in class than you do. If they're asking the questions, they're doing the learning.
11. Don't bail out students when they struggle to respond. Give them the time, including silent time for idea percolation, to come up with a valuable response. If we give them too many templates, too many hints, they quickly learn that we'll rescue them from ignorance. This doesn't mean we're insensitive, just

that we give them tools and let them find their way without our interference.

12. Remove all posters and promotional materials that express the sentiment, "Failure is not an option." There's a popular book and program with this title that I heartily recommend, but the title alone is misleading. The statement means that we don't give up on students or claim our hands are tied due to circumstances beyond our control. Nor do we allow students to give up; we build resilience. But students who see only this phrase on a cafeteria banner may take it to heart without the benefit of the author's full explanation. Alan M. Blankstein's ideas for working with struggling students are very appropriate and should be implemented in schools, but students who see just the catch phrase do worse than miss the point; they think failure is something to avoid. My heart sinks every time I see the phrase paraded in front of students and teachers without the full explanation.

13. Allow re-tests, re-takes, and re-dos for 100% full credit. I know this will frustrate some teachers, but at some point we have to accept the fact

that re-doing something is one of the most powerful teaching tools we have. In the training for every profession, including teaching, we are encouraged to make initial attempts and as we fail, we are given descriptive feedback about what to do differently in order to be successful in our subsequent attempts.

Why would we take this highly effective strategy away from students who need it most?

Understand the Adolescent Mind

Of course, shifting the mindset about the positive aspects of failure only works if teachers don't let failure become a liability. For example, a student who says, "I don't care if I fail; school sucks!" is not someone who should be left in charge of his own learning and destiny. Most of our students do not have the maturity and training to make those determinations. They need mature guides and direction to the future. Some teachers, however, abdicate their teaching responsibilities by turning learning over to their students completely. They declare, "Students have to meet me half way," and, "An F on that quiz will teach him to straighten up."

Neither statement is true. If a student doesn't "meet [the teacher] halfway," does the teacher back off and say there's nothing he can do to help the student? No. Like a good editor

working with a writer, the teacher saves the student from himself. He investigates and takes corrective action. He does not allow the students' immaturity to dictate the extent of the student's learning. In addition, getting an F on a quiz without facility to learn from the mistake and revise one's preparation and later performance on that quiz does not teach students self-responsibility. It breeds resentment, divestiture from the class, and in some cases, unethical behaviors such as cheating and lying. We can turn around both of these experiences by viewing initial failure as students' first round of learning and providing the support they need to excel.

F's and zeroes without remediation and hope do not teach students. If a student fails to do an assignment and we tell him that he's not allowed to re-do the assignment and be assessed anew, we've just told the student that the assignment had no educational value and that it's okay if he doesn't learn the material. Both of these positions are unacceptable: We shouldn't be assigning anything that is "skippable" or without value. If it's important enough to be assigned to students to learn, we don't undo that by letting them off the hook later. The consequence for not doing the learning is doing the learning, not escape from that learning.

Effective teachers embrace the opportunities afforded by failure. Failure is an important tool of learning. Snowboarders who appear at the end of the day with no snow on their pants are often considered slackers by their fellow boarders: they weren't trying hard enough to learn new tricks (which involves a lot of failing), and they'll never build their skills. So with our current and future students, let's get snow on our pants and much more. Let's walk beside our students as they wander, fumble, and mix the wrong ingredients - and let's marvel at what they discover.

Haven't failed at something yet today? Get busy: You're not trying hard enough.