

# How Failure in the Classroom Is More Instructive Than Success

By Anne Sobel

*"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."*

—Thomas Edison

**T**here's no shortage of inspirational quotes on failure, but have you ever noticed that they never come from an anonymous source? A good failure quote has staying power only if someone with grand achievements says it. Americans love a nice, meaty failure—as long as it ends with success.

That contradiction is hurting our higher-education system. As teachers and administrators, we know from our own life experience that learning from failure will take you further than an outstanding GPA. We also know that those who make great strides fail time and again before accomplishing their goal, and that sometimes those failures simply end in failure. Unfortunately, we still work from a grading scale that supports only success.

Angela Lee Duckworth, a developmental psychologist and associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has declared "grit," as a personality trait, a greater determinant of a student's future success than IQ or socioeconomic status. Grit is passion coupled with the tenacity to overcome obstacles or challenges. Duckworth notes that grit is a character trait that can be learned over time, but only if students see the relationship between practice and failure, not just the end result of a fruitful venture.

"When experts are doing the kind of practice that makes them better," she says, "they are frequently failing, frequently confused, not necessarily seeing gain for what will feel like a very long time."

Duckworth's findings directly correlate with Tony Wagner's theories on innovators. In his 2012 book, *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*, he highlights several traits of an innovative thinker, including being willing to experiment, taking calculated risks, and tolerating failure. Some of America's most dynamic innovators of the past two decades experienced routine failure, he notes. Unfortunately, because traditional academic settings often penalize failure and discourage risk, many of those innovators had to leave college to achieve their goals. From a young age, students quickly discover that "knowing the right answer is far more important than asking a thoughtful question."

So how can we give our students permission to fail while maintaining a high standard in the classroom, teaching our subject, and encouraging our students to get good grades? Here are five suggestions drawn from my experiences as a film-production professor that might spark ideas for your own classroom:

### **Create an ethos.**

Establish at the start of the term that a certain amount of "failure" is encouraged. On the first day of class, I like to read relevant quotes, play TED Talks, and share anecdotes about personal failure. I let students know that this is a safe space for them to push boundaries. I back this up by supporting students despite the mistakes they make throughout the semester, using discretion when students are trying and failing versus when they lack commitment. I refresh these rituals (readings, anecdotes, inspirational talks) at midterms and finals, when I also allow time for reflection.

### **Find new definitions of success.**

In-class assignments are a great way to create controlled failure scenarios, in which you can establish unique criteria for success. For example, I have a three-week assignment I call the "full crew film." Students have four hours to film one page of a script, each week shooting from a new script and exchanging crew positions. Each film is only one minute long, and while students turn in a final product, that is not what their grades are based upon. Instead, I evaluate

how well they prepare and organize for the shoot and, most important, how they work as a team—supporting each other, solving problems, and keeping a positive attitude during stressful moments.

When I started doing the exercise, I would get upset at students if they ignored my instruction to get the whole script in three to five shots. But as I've gained experience, I've come to see that the value of this assignment is not in getting it "right" or "wrong." Now when students come in with a 10-page shot list, I patiently watch time slip away and let them realize that they won't get all their shots. The only real way to fail at this assignment is by refusing to adapt.

### **Give feedback first.**

We often expect students to know exactly what to do when they turn in papers or projects, and we downgrade them if they don't. Amy Smith is the visionary professor behind MIT's experiential-learning class sequence D-Lab (Development Through Dialogue, Design, and Dissemination).

She based the program on the philosophy that students need to engage in vital projects and get real feedback on those projects, because too often students don't get meaningful feedback on their work. When we hand back assignments, even if we offer feedback, the comments are inert because students are unlikely to go back and revise their work—and that is when the real learning happens. When students have a chance to refine their work on the basis of feedback, it creates a deeper experience with the material.

### **Build it into your grading.**

Classes that are project-based can easily build "failure" into their grading. For my film-production classes, I grade on story, cinematography, editing, and sound design—all traditional markers of a good film. However, I also created a category called "Execution vs. Level of Difficulty." I tell students that if they attempt a challenging project, I will take that into consideration when I grade, even if the film falls short of their vision. Conversely, if they decide to create a simple project, then my expectations are much higher for the final product.

I've had many students take on impressive projects that involve finding vintage cars, a large cast, or unique locations. Sometimes that means turning in a less-polished project by the deadline, or having those elements upend the project entirely. A grading category that takes difficulty into consideration offers a safety net that gives students the confidence to take calculated risks.

### **Reflect on failure.**

One of my favorite classes was an informal session in which students who had just wrapped production on their senior theses talked about their successes and failures on set. We laughed at their big mistakes and brilliant moments alike, discussing what they would do differently next time. Students were encouraged by the hard work and dedication their classmates showed, and they took away valuable knowledge from some of the best problem-solving stories. Moreover, they were relieved to know that they weren't the only ones who had made mistakes.

Duckworth encourages teachers to "reward kids for the struggle," and so throughout the conversation I made sure to let my students know how proud I was of their work, whether the stories they shared were of success or of failure.

There is a popular meme called "Famous Failures," featuring quotations on overcoming rejection, failure, and loss from Michael Jordan, Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, the Beatles, Oprah, and Albert Einstein. The message is familiar: Abundant success lies on the other end of failure. Could guiding our students through their own failures inspire the next groundbreaking physicist, talk-show star, or iPhone inventor? Possible ... but not likely. Even if the results end up being a little less grandiose, I think they are just as important. Learning to fail could help our students become more resilient, self-aware, innovative, and compassionate. Not bad for a bunch of "failures."

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