

or requirements to fulfill their majors. While external motivation can be powerful, it's often not enough to carry a student successfully through a semester. Its power wanes over time. We all need intrinsic motivation — to want to do something for ourselves, for the sake of it.

Does this mean that we should try to get all students to want to learn our subject for its own sake? I'm not sure that's possible for all (though it may be possible for some) and instead I try to get students to find some kind of value in the work we're doing. Perhaps it helps them build skills for the major they are interested in; perhaps the skills have value for other contexts in their lives.

Lowering the Cost

What's most salient to me in this moment is the cost part of the equation. I have found myself in many conversations (or workshop prep sessions) lately talking with colleagues about safety for failure in our classrooms. What I mean is that when we feel that the cost of failing or losing face or screwing up is very high, it prevents us from trying. While I think we may all know this a bit, it's worth slowing down for a second and putting ourselves in the minds of our students. If I have a student who is used to doing well in high school, they may be motivated to push themselves to do work that confirms that image they have of themselves. But when the work intensifies or new elements are introduced, their confidence may drop as they worry about how they will look if they don't get it perfect the first time. This hesitancy can be amplified when it's a completely new subject or a subject that a student may have been able to avoid up until now. I have seen in this in a lot of my classes. I have also seen, in students who aren't used to doing well, a hesitancy to risk losing face.

For both groups, the cost of looking bad or not having all the answers is an oversized weight on that equation scale — it massively outweighs their expectancy of success (if they have it) and obscures the value the learning might have. Students who fall into this trap don't learn, and that shows up in assessments, and a bad feedback cycle begins to take shape.

So how do we get students to lower the cost of failure? I have found myself talking about two ways in particular, repeatedly. First,

making the actual grade resilient enough to withstand failure. Perhaps that's a chance for revision or a retake-to-replace structure, perhaps it's the opportunity to try a smaller or low-stakes version of an assignment before submitting for a grade, perhaps it's requiring scaffolded parts of a major assignment so that you can provide feedback as they go, allowing students the chance to adjust and grow. The other strategy is more philosophical and abstract, but can be successful. I'm a big fan of transparency in curriculum and assignments, but also about failure. I talk a lot about drafting as a path through failure in my writing classes. I try to establish that failure is a necessary part of the writing process — I do so through repetition, readings which support that thesis, and sometimes my own writing failures. I know professors from all kinds of classes who do this as well — they talk about failed lab experiments, equations that never worked, the language phrases which result in unexpected food orders, and theories which never apply. The main idea is to get students to see failure not as a cost, but as a benefit.

This isn't easy — the resistance to countenancing anything that even looks like failure is high, but I suspect that gentle yet determined iteration and reiteration of the payoff of failure can help students integrate it into their “studenting” practices. I hope that this gives you the encouragement you need to try and fail and try again. ❖

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NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Learning through Failure across the Disciplines

Fiona Rawle, Nicole Laliberté, Mairi Cowan, Ken Derry, Dan Guadagnolo

From the social sciences to STEM to the humanities, failure is a fundamental part of the learning process even as it manifests differently in different disciplines. Failure is integral to the scientific method; it helps test hypotheses. In the humanities, a common experience of failure occurs when research sources do not yield expected data; it helps push researchers to ask better questions.

No matter the discipline, failure can be a learning opportunity, but in educational contexts failure is often stigmatized. Students are rarely taught how to meaningfully engage with experiences of failure.

We are part of a cross-disciplinary team, FLIP (Failure: Learning in Progress), that develops evidence-informed resources to help students and instructors learn from failure (see: www.LearningFromFailure.ca).

In our work, we define failure as the inability to complete a task to a desired level/outcome at a particular moment in time. This definition highlights two things. First, failure is part of a process. It is not necessarily an end state. Second, failure is a subjective experience. What is desired can vary from person to person or in different institutional contexts. Experiences of failure are informed by multi-scalar processes — the interactions of individual, familial, institutional, and societal forces — that create inequities in who can learn from failure without risking significant consequences.

The FLIP project asks how failure can support and facilitate student learning rather than obstruct or undermine it. As educators, we often focus on what we can control — our course design. However, we must also be aware of other forces that inform our students' experiences of failure such as institutional gatekeeping, processes of discrimination, and individual trauma. In light of this, we share a few key insights that are important to keep in mind when implementing failing-forward activities.

Acknowledge the Power and Privilege of Failure

Teachers and students are often advised to develop resilience and grit in the face of failure. Such an emphasis on the power of perseverance, however, ignores the structures that make failure relatively painless for some, and very costly for others. It is easier to take risks and recover from failure when you know that you have a support team and guaranteed second chances. As educators, it's important to pay attention to power and privilege in the learning space. Power differentials between students create inequities in their ability to learn from failure (Ross et al., 2022). For example, if the option to re-take a course is available, only students with enough resources (e.g., time, money, support) can take advantage of this opportunity. Having flexible course policies (such as offering test re-writes or marking schemes that allow students to drop the lowest mark from a series of quizzes) can help in offering students low stakes second chances, however we still need to be cognizant of resource inequities that impact their ability to take advantage of these policies. For example, students with jobs or that have familial responsibilities may not have the time to prepare for and complete a test re-write. Of course, the development and implementation of such practices require time and attention from teachers and administrators, and not all people in these roles are equally supported in their work. Power and privilege affect their abilities to address failure too.

Establish Supports for Learning through Failure

Learning through struggle and failure is more effective when students understand that failure is part of the learning process rather than a finite event or end in itself. A learning scaffold that supports learning through failure starts with establishing relationships and trust in the classroom, is followed by transparency with students about why failure-forward activities are incorporated into the course, and then includes moments of failure, reflection, and iteration throughout the term. Students have reported to us how important both this scaffold and broader structural supports are for meaningfully embracing learning through failure (Nunes et al., 2022, 2024).

These supports can take the form of test/exam wrappers that allow students to repeat certain test question (Sobel & Higgins, 2024), flexible assessments with advance feedback (Cowan, 2024), and revision assignments (Riddell, 2015).

Acknowledge the Stigma of Failure and Take Steps to Destigmatize

When we surveyed students on their perspectives about what can be done to decrease the stigma of failure, both within and beyond higher education, they emphasized the importance of formal and informal discussions of failure (Nunes et al., 2022). Students specifically noted the value of having professors and teaching teams discuss personal examples of failure, in addition to failure narratives being woven into course content. They also requested shifting the emphasis from competition to collaboration. In addition, students asked for specific supports, such as building community in the classroom and policy changes to decrease manufactured failure (such as eliminating policies related to requirements of class grade distributions).

Choose your Language around Failure Carefully

Bounce back. Fail fast, fail often. Try again, fail again, fail better. This “failure talk” around embracing and moving through failure seems to be increasing both in media and higher educational institutions. We've seen multiple university webinars with titles such as “How to be a resilient student” or “How to have grit” evolve over recent years. Grit, resilience, and pushing through failure are promoted as attributes of success; however, the contemporary discourse around these themes tends to perpetuate the role/responsibility of the individual, rather than shining a light on systems. In pop culture narratives of “grit” and “grindsets,” we often see individuals who succeed despite systems and structures that are aligned against them. This narrative trope comes with a damning subtext: “If you haven't succeeded, then you don't have enough grit. You haven't hustled. You have a personal failing.” By avoiding language that individualizes failure, we can try and reframe the narrative to contextualize experiences of failure with attention to systems that create vulnerabilities.

Open Educational Resources for Learning through Failure

We have developed a bank of open educational resources to support students, instructors, and administrators in learning through failure (www.LearningFromFailure.ca). Examples of resources include: student and instructor wish lists; links to scholarly literature; annotated bibliographies and glossaries; case studies; learning through failure journals; and other in-class activities. We invite you to explore and download these materials and reach out to us if you have resources you'd like to share through this site.

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NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Student Stress and the Classroom: Do Teaching Choices Matter?

Abbie Wrights

College. Stress. Two words that seem inextricably linked. Today's college student is navigating a complex interplay of academic rigor, the pursuit of high grades, social engagement, and, for some, the demands of employment. In fact, according to the National College Health Assessment, 78% of college students report moderate to high levels of stress, and 37% report that stress negatively impacts their academic performance (National College Health Assessment, 2023). However, should we simply resign ourselves to this being an unavoidable element of college life? The reality is that as college educators, we are capable of having a significant impact. Although some student stressors are beyond our influence, we can shape their academic journey and either heighten or lessen their perceived stress levels through our teaching methods.

Our recent study reveals valuable insights into academic practices that increase and decrease student stress, highlighting the importance of equitable and effective teaching. To explore this, we investigated the impact of various teaching practices on student-perceived stress at a liberal arts university. Data was collected via a survey administered to students enrolled in a required university health course during the

2023–2024 academic year. Participants (n=600) utilized a sliding scale to indicate the extent to which 19 different common teaching practices increased or decreased their stress levels. The scale ranged from +99 indicating that a factor increases the student's stress a great deal to -99 indicating that it reduces the student's stress a great deal. We also examined potential differences in these perceptions based on student gender, underrepresented ethnic minority status, and achievement status (defined by the presence or absence of merit scholarships). Table 1 reports the average score for each of the pedagogical practices assessed.

Key Findings

The study's findings revealed a clear hierarchy of academic stressors and stress reducers. Topping the list of stressors was the phenomenon of “work clumped together,” indicating that concentrated workloads across all classes are a major source of stress for the majority of students. Conversely, the most effective stress-reducing pedagogical practice was identified as “policies that allow for grade recovery,” underscoring the positive impact of flexibility and support in grading structures.

Interestingly, the findings highlight differential experiences of