

# FREEDOM TO FAIL

*How do I foster risk-taking and  
innovation in my classroom?*

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**MILLER**



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Redefining Failure.....	1
Components of Positive Failure .....	4
Strategies for Modeling Risk Taking, Failure, and Celebration.....	21
Failure and Assessment.....	24
Failure as an Opportunity for Teacher Growth.....	30
Encore .....	35
Acknowledgments.....	37
References .....	38
About the Author .....	40

## Redefining Failure

Failure, for most of us, is a negative concept. Students who fail to do their work do poorly in school, and workers who fail to do their jobs get fired. But failure can be positive, too: in the worlds of technology and design, for example, taking risks that generate failure is considered necessary for innovation. If failure is the end of the road in some instances, it can be the beginning of an innovative journey in others.

Unfortunately, schools tend to treat failure as almost exclusively negative. Think back to a time when you failed a test or a quiz or failed to complete an assignment. Do you remember that sinking feeling that there was nothing more you could do? I remember preparing for a big history exam in middle school. There hadn't been any quizzes leading up to the exam, so I didn't know what to expect—short-answer questions? An essay question? Multiple-choice questions? Because I was unprepared for the format of the exam, I got a mediocre score, and I wasn't given an opportunity to retake the test. My failure, in this case, was treated as exclusively negative and *final*. But when treated as a necessary step toward innovation, failure can help students to

- Promote and establish a growth mindset,
- Build resiliency and a life-long learning mentality, and
- Prepare for the real world.

So, what are we waiting for? Isn't it time we encouraged students to embrace failure as fun, exciting, and filled with possibility rather than as something to dread?

## Changing Mindsets

Fear of failure is one of the leading causes of anxiety for students. We've all been fearful of screwing up a presentation or getting an *F* on a test. But if we frame failure through a growth mindset, we can mitigate students' fears of it and even have them embrace the idea that they can "fail forward." What if we recast the word *fail* as an acronym that stands for "First Attempt in Learning"? By talking about failure in this way, we reinforce the idea that failure is a beginning rather than an end. And our actions should match our words: We should do what we can to encourage students to grow from failure.

According to Judy Willis, a leading expert on the brain and learning, "fear of risking mistakes reduces the active participation and construction of knowledge because the sensory input (instruction) cannot pass through the RAS (reticular activating system) and amygdala to the prefrontal cortex" (Willis, 2014). When we fear failure, the chemistry of the brain literally gets in the way of more learning. Indeed, research has shown that people who don't have a growth mindset are much less likely to seek out constructive feedback on their work or to be interested in further learning than those who do (Dweck, 2006).

We all want to protect children from failure, but we are actually doing them a disservice if we protect them too much. If students are never given the opportunity to fail,

they'll never know how much they can improve. Students who are unaccustomed to failure may become impatient with challenging schoolwork and devalue anything that they don't get correct on the first try (Dweck, 2006).

## **Resiliency and Life-Long Learning**

One reason to prepare students for failure is that it is inevitable; as Thomas Hoerr says, "failure is something we will all face and fostering grit prepares us for it" (2013, p. 40). By allowing and even promoting productive failure in the classroom, we can help students build their resiliency. After all, failure is an indication of what still needs to be learned. Resiliency and perseverance, which are honed through failure, are key life-long skills for students.

When we fail in safe ways, we want to learn more. Our frustration in the face of failure can help us to develop the grit we need to succeed. Consider sports teams: They may lose game after game, but they always get right back to practicing—that is, to learning new strategies, plays, and skills to improve their success rate. If a team never failed, it would never be motivated to improve.

## **Real-World Learning**

Rote learning is a thing of the past. We now know that students learn best through authentic experiences connected to the real world (Miller, 2014). It is important, therefore, to communicate the real-world relevance of basic skills to students. We must know how to write properly so that we can one day communicate effectively at work; we must learn