Letting Students Fail So They Can Succeed

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Creating a quality learning environment must include the opportunity for students to experience temporary failure on the road to success. Failure in academe is typically associated with students who perform poorly and do not understand the material presented in college classrooms. This module attempts to demystify the concept of failure in the learning environment and illustrates how failure, when managed appropriately by faculty, can be a catalyst for the growth, development, and improved performance of the adult learner. This module begins with a definition of tough love, it examines some issues that faculty face in practicing it, and suggests several techniques to assist faculty as they encourage students to take risks and learn from failure.

What is Tough Love?

The concept of tough love is typically associated with a child-rearing practice whereby parents purposely limit their child's freedoms and privileges so that the child will experience the angst associated with "growing up." Tough love attempts to build accountability and responsibility in children for the decisions that they make. Because faculty may lack candor and honesty in dealing with students' poor classroom performance, they need to practice a similar tough-love strategy and hold students accountable for all facets of their learning (Fram & Pearse, 2000). This approach shifts to students the responsibility for their own growth and accomplishment, and it helps them build confidence in their performance *(Profile of a Quality Facilitator)*.

Just as tough-love parents protect the child from unsafe situations, faculty should set boundaries determining which types of failure can be tolerated and which must be avoided. For example, faculty should not permit serious physical or emotional harm when letting students fail. Also, when students are working in project teams, failure of one individual, while it may help him or her grow, could have negative consequences for other team members and for the project sponsor.

In addition to setting boundaries, faculty must set high expectations. Like athletic performance, academic performance requires expectations that challenge students to move somewhat beyond their comfort zone. If a high jumper successfully clears a height of six feet and two inches, raising the bar to a height of six feet and six inches would motivate this athlete to improve his or her performance. High academic performance also entails establishing clear expectations of performance at a level well beyond a student's comfort zone (Accelerator Model). For example, requiring students to learn an unfamiliar software program on their own creates an expectation that is challenging to an uncomfortable degree.

Mediocre performance in a tough-love classroom is not acceptable when an individual is capable of operating at a higher level. Faculty should challenge "average" performance from students who could perform better: they should have students reflect on the causes of their sub-optimal work and seek guidance toward improving future outcomes.

What Does Failure Really Mean?

Research suggests that experiencing failure can result in a wide range of subsequent behaviors (Burnstein, 2000). Like punishment, failure can have strong negative consequences. For example, failure stimulates students' tendencies toward risk aversion, avoiding the areas in which they have failed so that they do not appear to be foolish or inadequate. Bandura (1977) posits that repeated performance failure, especially failure that occurs early in the course of events, lowers a student's self-efficacy; he defines self-efficacy as judgment about one's own capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain desired performance. In order to facilitate student growth and improved performance, faculty need to effectively manage student failure. If faculty do not manage failure; if they instead let students fail without adequately assessing their performance and without giving them the opportunity to rectify the poor outcome, students can attribute their poor performance to external factors like task difficulty, poor teachers, and unfair grading techniques (Noel, Forsyth, & Kelley, 1987). When students attribute poor performance to external factors beyond their perceived control, they experience decreased motivation, lack of goal directedness, and negative expectations of future performance.

When it is well managed, however, short-term failure can have positive results, leading to long-term goal directedness and improved self-efficacy. The affective dissonance associated with short-term failure can be used as a catalyst to improve subsequent performances. When performance failures occur, faculty should help students develop short-term goals and explore the need for increased effort; they should coach students on the benefits of perseverance and commitment to the learning process. When students engage in metacognition and explore and discuss the causes of their failure, they become able to

use learning resources more effectively, they process information at a deeper level, and they devise strategies to more effectively monitor their future performance (Nietfeld, Cao, & Osborne, 2005).

The Role of Failure in Creating a Quality Learning Environment

This module is designed to help implement Step 5 of the *Methodology for Creating a Quality Learning Environment*. Step 4 in this methodology is fostering and supporting risk taking while Step 6 is setting high expectations for students. Permitting the learner to fail establishes the link between these steps; when students see that short-term failure leads to long-term success, they are encouraged to take risks.

Faculty will only be able to set high expectations, however, if they are comfortable addressing short-term failure through a philosophy of tough love. Faculty who adopt a tough-love philosophy offer students explicit and frequent feedback, thus providing affirmation that the students have potential for growth (Griffin, Combs, Land, & Combs, 1983). When faculty encourage students to take risks and reward them for it, they enhance student self efficacy: students become better able to judge their own abilities to organize and execute the courses of action that are necessary for them to reach their desired goals.

Academic goals that are specific and challenging will contribute to higher levels of task performance if two conditions are present: the goals must be achievable, and students must be committed to reaching them (Spieker, & Hinsz, 2004). Given the complexity of life today and the significant demands it places on college students, it is vital that instructors set achievable short-term and intermediate goals to which students can commit. Research suggests that establishing realistic and achievable short-term goals will improve student self-esteem in the college environment, even for new students who tend to be overanxious and avoid the risk of making mistakes (Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001). If students can celebrate the achievement of short-term goals and not lose sight of the overall desired performance, it is more likely that their performance will continue to improve.

The degree of commitment to academic achievement is a key ingredient for reaching future goals. Typically, those who lack a sense of commitment will be easily discouraged and will try to withdraw from further attempts at a task. Self-efficacy may be the crucial component in predicting levels of performance. When students engage in an academic performance, even if the performance expectation is well beyond their perceived attainment, students who have positive self-efficacy are more likely to persevere and complete the task than are students whose

self-efficacy is low due to repeated academic failures. With encouragement, support, and a non-judgmental approach by faculty, students can realize that failing at a task means only that they have not succeeded yet, and that they need to increase effort when they attempt the task in the future. Burnstein's (2000) research suggests that setting more difficult goals after academic failure can trigger increased effort, thereby improving task performance; however, this can only occur if the failure is treated as a growth opportunity.

Issues Associated with the Successful Implementation of Tough Love

The following issues highlight critical areas in which faculty can grow to avoid enabling mediocre academic outcomes and ensure that students are accountable for their own performance.

- **Having personal and emotional toughness**

  It is a human tendency to want to step in when a student begins to experience failure. Typically, faculty will not let the student experience the full phenomenon of the moment, but will intervene with a content-related strategy to assist a student in improving performance. This behavior is contrary to a tough-love approach and must be resisted. Allowing students to feel the full cognitive and affective experience of failure is necessary if they are to grow and develop skills to successfully handle similar tasks in the future.

- **Not allowing students to quit**

  Once students are faced with failure they tend to quit. When failing students are not effectively coached, students become frustrated, faculty alienate themselves from students, and retention suffers. If students feel they are not supported, or if they feel embarrassed when they do not meet academic expectations, absenteeism will also become more pronounced. If faculty express a strong belief in a student's ability to succeed, if they encourage students to take risks, experience failure, and develop successful learning strategies, it will enhance students' commitment to try again.

- **Sharing experiences of failure**

  Faculty must be empathetic when students fail. This does not mean that they should "feel sorry" for students who fail; instead they need to realize that they themselves have also experienced failure. When faculty reflect upon their own academic failures and poor performance, they can then share those experiences with students. As a result, students are encouraged to persevere.

- **Allowing students to experience frustration**

  Faculty must also gain the confidence necessary to allow students to feel uneasy in the classroom and not to immediately intervene when this happens. New faculty members are particularly susceptible to the temptation to intervene immediately when students are failing in order to preclude negative student reactions. Although it is often uncomfortable for faculty to remain silent during a failed student performance, doing so provides the student with the full affective and social experience.

- **Experiencing failure in small steps**

  Setting high expectations and allowing students to fail in incremental steps will actually build trust and commitment between the faculty member and his or her students. Small failures are more easily coached and will allow for immediate feedback on specific areas of performance. Coaching students through various stages of performance will improve their self-efficacy and will allow them to make necessary course corrections to be successful. This will also improve the students' confidence and emotional resilience when failure occurs in the future.

- **Avoiding enabling behavior**

  Faculty must recognize the difference between coaching behaviors that allow for growth and enabling behaviors that produce dependency. One may provide temporary success by overlooking or acquiescing to poor or low-quality performance or by assisting students with task performance, but these behaviors will eventually lead to students not reaching their full potential (***Differentiating Growth from Acquiescence***).

- **Questioning instructor performance**

  To facilitate student growth, it is essential to set high expectations for performance on new and challenging subject matter; but when students begin to experience short-term failure, faculty typically question their own teaching skills. Faculty must recognize that it is not necessarily a reflection on their ability to teach effectively when they allow students to fail in their first attempt at a new academic performance. If expectations are set at the appropriate level for growth, the majority of students will experience short-term failure throughout the learning process.

- **Using peer interaction**

  College provides an opportunity for students to grow in the social domain (***Social Domain***). Relating to others, developing communications skills, and performing on a team are key areas of growth for students. Peer modelling and the social comparison of one student's performance against the performance of other students are rich sources of feedback for students who have recently experienced failure. If classmates are willing to discuss their own sub-standard performances with each other, they may become more resilient and will engage in similar tasks more readily. Faculty can help facilitate this process by planning challenging cooperative activities during which group interaction can help mitigate the consequences of failure. If tough love is shared proportionally in a group activity, individuals will perform to a higher standard due to the synergistic effect of the group.

- **Providing feedback**

  Continuous and immediate feedback can also assist faculty in instituting a tough-love strategy for student performance. Faculty, however, should not be the only source for providing appropriate feedback on failed performance. Peer review can be used to generate encouragement and commitment to difficult tasks. Peer feedback is often less threatening than faculty feedback; it motivates students to take necessary risks and to try new methods. A student may be more willing to accept constructive criticism from a classmate because of the perception that the classmate has probably experienced the same type of risk and failure.

Concluding Thoughts

Failure in today's college environment is typically seen as a grade or evaluation after the conclusion of a specific course: it is associated with students not being able to "cut the mustard." Too often students are surprised to find themselves faced with a choice of abandoning a major or repeating an entire class, with little additional feedback. This module gives tips for turning failure within the classroom environment into an opportunity for growth and performance improvement. This module cautions faculty against enabling students by allowing mediocre performance to persist. Student success must be earned: it is not an entitlement. Therefore, it is important for faculty to adopt both sides of tough love; being willing to set high expectations, but also being willing to foster learning environments that are growth-oriented and nonjudgemental.

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