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Teacher Talk: Theory to Practice
Failing *to* Learn, Learning *to* Fail: Strategies to Create Empowered and Independent Learners

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Introduction

It's hard to learn if we never make mistakes. The error. The stumble. The near win. These are all powerful self-teachers. Experts, in fact, guide themselves down the error-filled road to mastery. Pierce Brown (2016), in the epilogue to his novel *Morning Star*, provides a profound axiom for his readers: "Everything grand is made from a series of ugly little moments . . . All the works of people you and I admire sit atop a foundation of failures" (p. 523). This is the mindset we lose too often in the K-12 classroom. However, the culture of speed and the need to cover content persists, even in the chaotic aftermath of the recent school years where students juggled the uncertainties of in-person and remote learning. Many students navigated these experiences feeling like failures. Yet voices from inside and outside the education realm celebrate the same truth: *failure* is a key element of meaningful learning. As teachers, it is our responsibility to create learning environments that illustrate this truth in action. By using authentic examples from

real-world innovators and creators, we send signals to our students that risks are the norm, uncertainty is an opportunity, and learning is not linear. When teachers surround students with proof that failure is a powerful learning tool, students will be more likely to start the *unlearning* process and embrace *failing to learn, learning to fail* as a way to navigate themselves down new paths toward deeper learning.

The Language of Failure

Failure quote bank. A first step in creating agency and self-direction in the classroom is learning and using the language of failure. It is important for teachers to explicitly teach about the benefits of failure and actively engage students in conversations about failures. A great place to start is a bank of quotes from authors and researchers on the power of failure as a learning opportunity.

Figure 1

Failure Quote Bank Examples

"In fact, failures (both small and large) tend to make up quite a bit of the terrain on the road to discovery" (p. 172).

—Joshua Eyler (2018), *How Humans Learn*

"Any new quest, even one that is ultimately successful, is going to involve failure" (p. 162).

—Chip and Dan Heath (2010), *Switch*

"Children need to learn that no one can succeed at every attempt and that it's important to keep working" (p. 117).

—Hope and Wade King (2017), *The Wild Card*

"Failure is probably the most important factor in all of my work. Writing *is* failure. Over and over and over again."

—Ta-Nehisi Coates (2018), quoted in Eyler

Building on the examples found in Figure 1, create a gallery walk or put one quote per slide on a PowerPoint. Invite students to read quotes from multiple disciplines on how failure is the key to learning and progression, no matter the field or domain. Provide time for students to discuss and share what the quote means to them and how failure is viewed in both their academic and personal lives.

After finishing the Failure Quote Bank discussions, lead students in co-creating their own failure quote that will serve as a mantra for the class. Some examples might be: *We are strengthened by the struggle*; *We see errors as opportunities*; *Failure now means success later*. Display the class-constructed quote along with the quote bank quotes around the classroom and provide students with opportunities to be enveloped by them throughout the year. Use these as routine self-talk mantras in order to help students continuously persist through roadblocks and impasses as they take ownership of their learning.

Failure self-talk. Children's books can also serve as an effective springboard for conversations using the language of failure and changing the mindset in earlier grades. Through leveraging children's literature, the language of failure provides positive models of failure self-talk (See Figure 2). Consistent modeling that failures are indeed learning opportunities can positively impact growth and possibility (Dweck, 2016).

Figure 2

Failure Self-Talk in Children's Books

Children's Book Inspiration	**Change self-talk from this . . .**	**To this . . .**
Rosie Revere, Engineer by Andrea Beaty & D. Roberts	I messed up. It was a failure. I cannot do this.	That was a great first flop! It's time for the next. The only true failure can come if I quit.
The Thing Lou Couldn't Do by Ashley Spires	What's the point of even trying? I can't do it.	I can't *YET*. But I will try again. Maybe even tomorrow.
A Thousand No's by D.J. Corchin & D. Dougherty	Someone told me no. This is heavy. This is hard to carry. This kind of hurts.	No? Ok! Now I am curious! I wonder how this *no* will help my idea grow and change.

Failure Indices

Another way to get students to embrace error and guide their own growth is to bank their errors and near-hits in *failure indices*. Sawyer (2013) reveals that errors create bookmarks in our minds that become helpful guides during the next try. Physically keeping and cataloging these missteps while tinkering and iterating is crucial because we may never know when an idea—even one that didn't quite work or fit at the time—will be of value throughout the *zig-zag* nature of self-directed learning. According to Sawyer, "If you're never failing, you're never storing failure indices, and that probably means you're playing it too safe" (p. 220). Keeping this bank of errors may feel strange to students at first, so it is crucial that teachers model the process alongside students.

This error-keeping process can look differently depending on the discipline. In a STEM class, create a space for students to display half-built prototypes that did not quite work or have them store computer code that was riddled with errors. In an ELA class, have students create and keep running lists of story ideas or potential titles for a poem or paper. Having these ideas on file and readily accessible may operate as a catalyst for future learning by returning periodically to our "what-ifs" and guesses.

In early childhood education, displaying a Brave Spellers chart (Figure 3) could help young children be bold enough to take writing risks, sounding out words beyond the safety of consonant-vowel-consonant (Schrodt et al., 2020). This risk-taking allows young children to have the power and freedom to write about any topic they want, without feeling limited by the pressure of spelling every word to perfection. Empirical studies show this mindset in young writers can increase academic achievement in young children (Schrodt et al., 2019). At the end of the writing time, celebrate these brave spelling attempts as a class and focus on the incremental growth across time.

Figure 3

Brave Speller Chart Sample

Student Name	**Conventional Word Attempt**	**Brave Spelling**
Tomas	invisible	nvezobl
Leo	stitches	sisches
Adriana	suddenly	sudnle

Leaning into the *failing to learn (F2L)* process as teachers is crucial to the implementation of this approach to self-regulated learning. One of the best ways for teachers to practice storing failure indices is through reflective journaling that captures their own prototypes, sketches, "what-ifs," and guesses. These reflections could be professional—focused on the craft of teaching and the domain under study—or personal, including risks and tinkerings in our real lives. When students see teachers storing up failures and half-built ideas and then sharing them openly, students will be more apt to demonstrate that same vulnerability. Moreover, keeping failure indices reminds students that getting something right the first time is actually quite odd. Eyler (2018) notes that there are "more ways to fail than to succeed. Success, by definition, should be very limited. Failure is the default" (p. 172). When teachers store their failure indices alongside students, whether in the form of half-finished prototypes or in reflective journals, we model *failing as learning* and empower students to own and then learn from their mistakes.

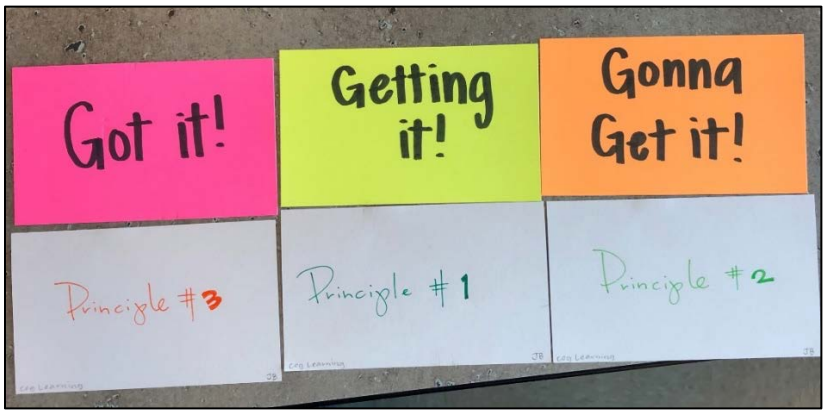
Got It, Getting It, Gonna Get It

Perhaps the greatest challenge to implementing *F2L* is the traditional gradebook found in K-12 classrooms, which too often prioritizes speed. For students to truly feel safe taking risks and directing their own learning, they must be able to try and try again. Pink (2009) notes that mastery is an *asymptote*, meaning that it's something we never quite reach. If experts are continually chasing mastery, then we should honor that quest in the classroom.

One of the easiest ways to make this happen is through using the Got It, Getting It, and Gonna Get It card sorters (See Figure 4). Inspired by the Leitner box strategy as detailed in *Make it Stick* (Brown et al., 2014), these cards operate as ever-shifting formative assessments that allow students to be right or wrong depending on where they are in that very moment of the learning process. The Got It card is for when students know the term or concept without hesitation; they can retrieve it without prompting or prodding because it has stuck. The Getting It card is for when students hesitate, retrieve, and then conjure part of the answer or a half-correct answer of the concept under study. This card is a goldmine for teachers because cognitive science research (Agarwal & Bain, 2019; Brown et al., 2014; Willingham, 2021) reveal that when students struggle to remember and then correct themselves, they will remember the concept longer.

Figure 4

Got It and Gonna Get It Card Sorters



This is the power of retrieval practice in a safe environment that encourages error and self-correction. The best failures, however, come from the Gonna Get It card where students are struggling through what Brown et al. (2014) call *desirable difficulties*. When students truly don't know or haven't grasped the concept at all and have permission to place that term or concept card in the Gonna Get It stack, they know that they are on their way to learning and are empowered to self-monitor in an environment that welcomes another attempt. No matter the grade level, the cards provide feedback that is in-the-moment and future-oriented, allowing students to "see themselves as the owners of their own learning" (Hattie, 2012, p. 132).

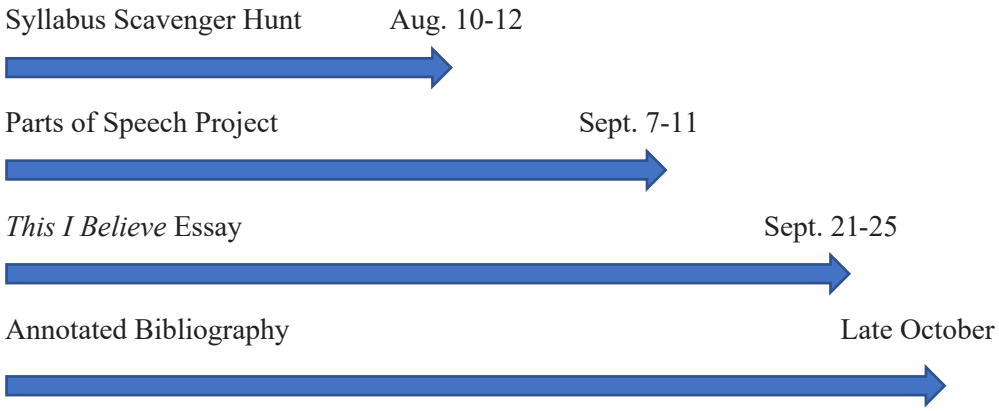
Due Date Windows

Once students are acclimated to the notion that it is normal to not get things right the first time, they are ready to embrace the notion of due date windows for larger projects and tasks with multiple layers or components. Like the preceding card sets, the due date windows push back against the culture of speed and instead advocate for self-regulation, self-assessment, and self-correction. This small pivot can help students embrace the *F2L* mindset at any grade level.

Instead of major tasks and assignments having a specific due date—set oftentimes alongside penalties for lateness—the due date window approach allows teachers and students to co-construct a range for when a robust project or assignment will be due (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Due Date Window Example



(Carter & Tipton, 2020)

As the image shows, teachers and students in this 8th grade ELA class work collaboratively to build the timelines for specific projects but also for longer spans of learning such as a nine-weeks or quarter grading period. When students see the ranges for project completion they helped determine, they are empowered to zig and zag through those timeframes, all while knowing their teacher and their peers are there to help them as they tinker, reflect, and make key adjustments. The due date window concept echoes Fisher and Frey's (2015) argument for self-efficacy and self-monitoring among students: "Collaborative learning arrangements prepare students to demonstrate independence in their learning. By that, we don't mean solitary activities but rather self-directed ones. There's a tremendous amount of self-regulation necessary to be more independent…As students master shorter collaborative learning events, they steadily build their skills and stamina for engaging in inquiry and project-based learning" (p. 10).

As students guide themselves through the windows, they are invited to make mistakes and then capitalize on the learning those mistakes provide. Sawyer (2013) notes that "exceptional creators think differently about failure. Instead of waiting until the end of a project to judge 'success or failure,' they make critical decisions throughout the creative process—every minute, every day, every week" (p. 175). The due date window approach provides grace to students when they take risks and stumble because the window itself *promotes* failure as a way to regroup, recover, and *learn* from failure.

Conclusion

The chaos of the recent school years, coupled with the uncertainties of what the future will bring, have left teachers wondering how to best prepare students to be self-directed, self-motivated, and

self-empowered learners. Many of these key qualities surround the crucial skills of self-regulation and self-assessment. According to Stronge (2018), "self-regulation is widely recognized as a hallmark of 21st century learning and of lifelong learners" (p. 151). Frey, Hattie, and Frey (2018) stress the importance of creating *assessment-capable learners*. This important suite of skills can be developed through a welcoming of *failing to learn* and *learning to fail* strategies. Teachers and students alike are pressured to perform and perform quickly in K-12 schools, and taking the time to slow down, dabble, chase detours, and reflect upon and learn from mistakes is no easy proposition; it is a risk in itself that will result in missteps and miscues. However, adopting and embracing *F2L* is a small step in the quest to create empowered, independent learners.

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