

The Benefits of Failure

By **Peter DeWitt** on June 2, 2016 7:00 AM

 Tweet



Peter will resume writing the Finding Common Ground blog in mid-June. We will be posting some of his most popular blog posts from the last few years. Today's post originally appeared on January 8th, 2012.

When looked at correctly, failure can teach us where we went wrong in the first place, and how we can learn to pick ourselves up again in a pursuit to succeed.

We seem to have a problem with failure in America. Not in the sense that everyone is failing, but more in the way that failure is seen as the thing that must not happen at any cost. We are surrounded by children who get a trophy just for showing up, while we have others who will never get a trophy even though they work hard every day. Unfortunately, in an effort to make sure no child is left behind, adults are trying to make sure that children do not have to experience failure, which is an unrealistic goal.

When we think of failing our minds quickly go to testing or being retained in a specific grade. Failure happens in so many different areas of life and is not contained to high stakes testing. It can happen on an assignment, at recess and is a part of our daily lives. Unfortunately, too many people do not want to focus on failure because it is often equated to weakness, which cannot be

any further from the truth.

Why is failure considered so bad? Besides the obvious reasoning that failing doesn't feel good; failure can offer many learning lessons to the person failing. No one wants to fail. Few people wake up in the morning and say, "*I hope I fail.*" However, if failure was not an option for people, it wouldn't exist, and we all know that failure is something everyone will have to deal with in their lives.

For full disclosure, I have failed many times. I have failed as a friend, and as a teacher. As a young student I was retained in elementary school and spent a great deal of my formative years failing a variety of subjects. I dropped out of a couple of community colleges and that was after barely graduating from high school. I have seen failure many times and learned a great deal. First and foremost, I never wanted to fail again.

When I began writing and sent manuscripts into publishers, I was equipped to receive rejection letters. It didn't matter if I received a few hundred *no's*, just as long as I received one *yes*. Students need to understand the same. Rejection, when looked at positively, can help us work harder in an effort to succeed. The reality is that when we do not prepare students for failure we are doing our students a disservice. They must learn resiliency and how to move forward in the face of failure.

Learning from Failing

When looked at correctly, failure can teach us where we went wrong in the first place, and how we can learn to pick ourselves up again in a pursuit to succeed. There are valuable lessons in failing. Too often people keep trying the same solution and keep getting the same result. Failure can teach us that it is not that we are bad at something, just that we have to try a different method to find success.

Many students enter college not understanding what it means to fail. They have spent years in their formative schooling where they had an adult who catered to their every need. If they began to fail there was an adult, whether a parent or teacher, ready to intervene in an effort to help get them back on the right track. This is after all, the job of the adults around them when they are in school. However, they enter college and lack the number of adults around to keep them on track and find the freedom equated with college to be intoxicating. Very often they cannot maintain the important social and academic balance and end up dropping classes or dropping out of school.

Some students learn from this experience and enter the college setting again with a new set of expectations. Very often they seek help when they need it and find a better balance between their social functions and academic obligations. Other times there are students who cannot handle failing and end up never trying again because they have a fear that they will not succeed. Sadly, they never take it one more step to figure out where and when they went wrong.

In the End

Failure comes in many forms. It happens when students or educators try something new and it doesn't work out the way they thought. These situations are a perfect time to learn how to deal with failure, or even better, teach students how to work through it. Failure can offer great learning lessons for us all if we choose to approach it with a positive attitude.

As adults, we should share our stories of struggling and failure with our students so they understand that it is a part of life. The resiliency students can gain and the lessons they can learn from failing will help them find success in the future.

Peter DeWitt, Ed.D. is the author of several books including [Dignity for All: Safeguarding LGBT Students](#) (2012. Corwin Press), [Flipping Leadership Doesn't Mean Reinventing the Wheel](#) (2014. Corwin Press), [School Climate Change](#) (2014. ASCD) and the forthcoming [Collaborative Leadership: 6 Influences That Matter Most](#) (2016. Corwin Press). Connect with [Peter](#) on Twitter.