Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Grace of Failure

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Abstract
"Rather than 'averaging' grades on discrete bits of knowledge and facts, teachers could track growth in understanding the big ideas over time."

Posting about new ways to assess student learning from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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The Grace of Failure

Dave Mulder

Fear of failure is one of the driving forces behind much of contemporary school culture. Students are afraid of failing an assignment, failing a test, failing a course. Teachers are afraid of failing – many schools and districts are moving toward "value added measures" (read: test scores) as part of the assessment of teaching effectiveness. Administrators are afraid of failing; under regulations of the current version of the No Child Left Behind law, schools (and even whole districts) can be labeled as "Schools in Need of Assistance" — a label proclaiming a level of failure overall.

Fear can be a powerful motivator, but it is not always a productive motivator.

For a student fearful of failing a course, how likely is it that he is actually going to *learn* the material? More often than not, the student will become a grade-grubber; finding out exactly what hoops must be jumped, quibbling over every point, begging for extra credit.

For a teacher fearful of failing — and perhaps losing her teaching position — how likely is it that she is going to be innovative and creative in her teaching practice? More often than not, the teacher will begin teaching only from the text, minimizing any extras, and focusing on the details rather than the big picture of learning.

How likely is it that a school fearful of failing will emphasize authentic, experiential education? More often than not, the approach will shift to a back-to-basics, "just-teach-them-what-they-need-to-know-so-they-will-pass-the-test" culture, one focused not on *learning*, but on compliance.

I believe that the purpose of a school is to create an environment where learning can flourish. But is that the case in contemporary school culture, as fearful as it seems? Out of fear, many schools, administrators, and teachers create a culture of compliance, one where the greatest good is just to behave as you are supposed to, not to ask questions, not to wonder, and not to explore, or innovate, or even dream. I wonder sometimes whether real, rich, authentic learning can in fact happen in such a fearful environment. After all, isn't *real* learning more than just compliance?

The problem, as I see it, is that everyone is so afraid of failing "big." Students are afraid of the repercussions of failing a test or a course. Teachers are afraid of the repercussions of students not performing well on standardized tests. Administrators are afraid of the repercussions of their teachers' and students' poor performance. These "big failures" have many stigmas attached to them.

What if we could change school culture a bit? What if we could make small failures something to celebrate? What if we would think of failure as *essential for learning*?

Imagine with me, if you will, a few changes that could have enormous impacts on the culture of a school…

What if teachers adjusted their assessment practices? What if teachers stopped assessing for a thousand tiny facts that we want students to be able to spit out on command and, instead, focused on a smaller number of big ideas? How could this approach shift teaching and learning? If teachers (and schools) could limit the amount of content to 5-8 really big ideas each term, students could have more time to truly *learn* these big ideas. They could certainly still learn the smaller-scale facts that support the understanding of these bigger ideas, but the *purpose* of learning the facts would shift: instead of memorizing facts as the

end goal, *using* these details as supports for understanding would become the aim.

What if we encouraged students to take small steps gradually to achieve these 5-8 big ideas? What if students had multiple opportunities to learn these big ideas throughout the term? And what if they had multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they had learned throughout the term? If the teacher <u>began the term</u> by giving students an assessment of the big ideas — a "pretest," if you will… like you may have had in your elementary years for weekly spelling lists — the teacher would have a baseline of what the students already know, understand, and are able to do, even before any teaching takes place. Then, they could keep track of students' development and achievement of the big ideas over the course of the term. The small steps along they way might mean they might fail early, and fail often at the beginning, but perhaps that is where the learning happens.

What if we encouraged students to practice? What if we made it okay to fail in small ways? Everyone makes blunders, has missteps, drops the ball sometimes; what if we stopped penalizing students for these mistakes and instead emphasized providing *feedback* on work under development? In my experience, getting a paper back marked with a "B+" (or an "A", or a "D-" … or even an "88%") doesn't really help you. When we're honest about it, the grade usually signifies the *end* of learning. This kind of summative judgment is not really feedback — it doesn't help you know *how* to improve your work, and it doesn't *encourage* you to improve your work. But, if you get a paper back with specific, actionable comments about what you did well and what you can do to make it better next time, this could be just the turn students need to help them actually proceed in learning.

Of course, this implies that students would have the opportunity to take that next step and actually have the opportunity to *act* on the feedback that has been offered. What if we made re-dos and retakes the order of the day? I know, I know… every time I bring this topic up to my fellow educators I get a tremendous amount of pushback. But I encourage you to think about this: in what "real life" situation do adults have to take a test that is so high stakes that they cannot retake it? In the words of master educator, Rick Wormeli:

LSAT. MCAT. Praxis. SAT. Bar exam. CPA exam. Driver's licensure. Pilot's licensure. Auto mechanic certification exam. Every one of these assessments reflects the adult-level, working-world responsibilities our students will one day face. Many of them are high stakes: People's lives depend on these tests' validity as accurate measures of individual competence. All of them can be redone over and over for full credit… How pompous is it for a teacher, then, to declare to students, "This quiz/writing assignment/project/test cannot be redone for full credit because such a policy prepares you best for the working world." This teacher doesn't have a pedagogical leg to stand on. The best preparation for the world beyond school is to learn essential content and skills well.

Are we teachers so audacious that we would suggest our assessments are so high-stakes that there is no possible way they can be retaken? Perhaps we need to reconsider the role of grace in our assessment practices.

And about grades on those assessments: what if we would allow new evidence to replace old? You might have to take your driving test three times before you pass and demonstrate your proficiency as a driver. Is the outcome an "average" of your performance on the previous tests? Or does new evidence of learning replace old evidence? You are just as "licensed" by taking the test three times as you would be if you had passed it on the first attempt! Perhaps we could consider an alternative in school as well: rather than "averaging" grades on discrete bits of knowledge and facts, teachers could track growth in understanding the big ideas over time. We don't all learn at the same pace; some students learn things quickly, while others might need a little more time and practice to really understand it. Providing students with multiple opportunities to illustrate their knowledge, understanding, or skills over time and not penalizing them for practice seems like a much more gracious and supportive approach —as if we actually care about

students' growth and learning! — rather than just keeping track of whether or not they've handed in all of their assignments or passed a test.

Perhaps this is all just a dream and unrealistic in this broken, fallen world we live in. But I am willing to dream! What if instead of something punitive, we began to view assessment as a blessing for our students? Perhaps helping students view themselves as learners and not "performers" is a step in the right direction. Rather than focusing on high-stakes assessments that promote a culture of fear, what if we instead look for ways to make space for grace? Perhaps falling short, receiving corrective feedback, and having the opportunity to put this feedback into practice might lead to real learning? And, dare I say it: perhaps failing gracefully might even result in students flourishing.