

# Why Glorify Failure to Enhance Success?

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Recent social media posts by standards-based advocates extol the virtues of failure: "Failure is success in progress." "Failure is an initial attempt at learning." "Failure is the best way to learn."



Statements like these give the impression that failure is a good thing—maybe even an essential thing—in the learning process. In order to succeed, you must experience some level of failure. But is that really true?

There is an important difference between an error or mistake and failure. Errors and mistakes involve inaccuracies that require adjustment or misunderstandings that need to be corrected. Failure implies a complete breakdown, disaster, and disappointment. Failure cannot be remedied with an easy solution or quick fix. Failure requires recovery.

This distinction was noted by Thomas Edison when he described his many unsuccessful attempts to create the light bulb. "I never failed," he said. "I just found 1,000 ways that didn't work."

When toddlers are learning to walk, for example, few achieve immediate success. But no one looks upon their stumbles and falls as failures. Instead, we see them as missteps that need to be adapted or modified. Similarly, when children learn academic skills, we don't think of their mistakes and misunderstandings as failures; we consider them to be learning errors that need to be resolved.

Failure implies the ultimate level of nonsuccess. Failed peace talks are an example. So are failed marriages, failing a grade level, and failing a test. It's not just a mistake or minor misunderstanding. Failure implies not coming close. It's missing the target by a mile. It's not even being in the game.

Learning is never a smooth, uninterrupted process. Acquiring new knowledge or skills always involves errors, mistakes, and occasional setbacks, especially when learning challenging material or complex tasks. But to see these setbacks as failures invokes unnecessary negativity and pessimism. In addition, there is an important qualitative difference between "I made a mistake" and "I failed." The first suggests, "There's a problem, but it can be fixed." The second intimates, "I bombed. I crashed and burned. I flunked!"

Benjamin Bloom recognized this point when he applied the term *formative* to assessments of student learning nearly 50 years ago. Bloom stressed that the primary purpose of formative assessments is to identify learning errors and mistakes so that they can be corrected before they accumulate and become major learning problems and failures. According to Bloom, if formative assessment is done right, the results of a culminating summative assessment should be self-evident and almost always positive. There should be no "failures." If there are, then something was terribly amiss in the formative process.

## Taking Personal Responsibility

We certainly want students to endure occasional slip-ups and persist in their learning efforts. We want them to develop perseverance, resilience, and grit so that they can move past blunders and mistakes. We also want all teachers to develop practical and efficient strategies for offering students multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency on specific learning goals so that they don't see learning success as a one-chance endeavor.

But learning from a mistake or misunderstanding is one thing; learning from failure is quite another. Learning from failure is a far more complicated process than many perceive it to be. With failure, it's not about simply overcoming letdown and disappointment, although that's important. It's also about taking personal responsibility.

When people fail, they immediately identify a cause for that failure. In most cases they either blame the outcome on external circumstances or take personal responsibility for it. Students, for example, may blame the teacher for their failure ("She didn't explain that to me very clearly") or blame the assessment ("Those were really hard questions"). Or, they may consider the fault to be theirs. Researchers refer to this as the *attribution of responsibility*.

Studies have shown that students who take personal ownership for their failure are much more likely to learn from it. In other words, it's better to take personal responsibility for learning disasters than to blame others or the assessment itself. But here's where things get tricky.

Research by Carol Dweck shows that personal attributions can be attached to stable, fixed factors or to alterable, growth factors. Students who attribute failure to personal fixed factors believe they simply lack the intelligence, talent, or ability to do better. In other words, they take personal responsibility for the failure but feel helpless to do much about it. Students who attribute failure to personal growth factors, however, think that talents and abilities are alterable and can be developed through hard work. Therefore, they believe they have the power to get better and improve their performance.

So it's not just taking personal responsibility that matters; it's taking the right kind of personal responsibility. Students with growth orientations are likely to learn from their failures and continue to work on the learning goal following an unsuccessful experience.

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## **Preventing Minor Mistakes from Becoming Major Failures**

What does all this mean for us as teachers? There are three important actions we can take to help students avoid failure.

First, when planning instruction and designing curriculum, we need to anticipate the learning difficulties students are likely to have so that they can be addressed directly. When approaching any learning goal, experienced teachers typically know the misunderstandings students are likely to have and the kinds of errors they are likely to make. The key is not to wait for these problems to be verified through an assessment but to build lessons around them. This will help make our lessons more relevant, more meaningful, and far more effective.

Second, we need to use regular formative assessments to identify unanticipated misunderstandings and difficulties as early as possible in the learning process. Then, we must take specific steps to remedy these difficulties by carefully designing corrective activities that present concepts and engage students in new ways. Regular formative assessments paired with structured, high-quality corrective activities can prevent minor errors from becoming major learning problems and failures.

Finally, we must help our students understand that the conditions for success are within their control and that we will help them remedy their learning errors when they occur. In other words, we, as teachers, must have a growth orientation to learning, and we must help our students develop the same orientation. As Dweck reminds us, a growth orientation creates motivation and enhances productivity. When shared by both teachers and students, it also builds positive relationships.

If we help students recognize their learning errors and then guide them in correcting those errors before they become major problems, all students will see that academic success is within their grasp. As a result, we may never have to worry about helping them recover from failure. **EU**