

Failing to Grow: Embracing Mistakes in Drama Classrooms

by Sofia Lindgren Galloway

We usually think of failure as not getting what we want, letting down someone we love, or making an embarrassing mistake. As teachers, we have a responsibility to help our students feel safe and supported in the classroom. *So isn't failure an experience we should shelter our children from at all costs?*

What happens if we start accepting mistakes as opportunities for growth and essential to how we learn? Through drama we can help our students fail more, fail better, and feel great about failing. A process-based drama classroom gives students space to make mistakes and try again.

Take Chances, Make Mistakes, and Get Messy

Drawing from Ms. Frizzle's motto on *The Magic School Bus*, educators need to remember that getting messy is an important part of the learning process. Educator Diana Laufenberg (2010) argues it is through our mistakes that the best learning happens. Likewise, Doug Lemov (2015) devotes an entire chapter in his guide for teachers to failure. He argues for establishing a "culture of error" in which students recognize mistakes as critical steps on the path of learning (p. 64). The National Theatre Institute (NTI), a world class theatre training program, has embraced failure so deeply they adopted the mission statement, "Risk, Fail, Risk Again." *Okay, you say, I get that I should give my students room to take risks and get messy, but mistakes and failure? Really?*

Mistakes or "mis-takes"?

Learning to embrace failure is a necessary Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skill for students (Snyder, 2019). In fact, making mistakes sets off necessary brain activity (Edutopia, 2021). Embracing mistakes, or as drama educator Brian Edmiston calls them, "mis-takes," is an important part of building a safe classroom community. Edmiston argues that "mis-takes" are simply actions that don't fit a particular social context and offers students a chance to "re-take," their actions while prompting the classroom community to celebrate the opportunity for second chances (2014, p. 80) He goes on to quote Bob Echo saying classrooms should not be "free from risk but... safe to take risks" (Edmiston, 2014, p. 94 quoting *Teaching for the Students*, Fecho, 2011, p. 114). The keys to a failure friendly classroom include building a community where students feel supported and giving students the chance to practice the ideal outcome of their actions and choices within that community. When we combine opportunities for failure with arts instruction in a risk-safe space, we are creating an ideal environment for students' growth.

Make mistakes a habit

Okay, you say, I'm ready to start failing, where do I start?

One way to introduce techniques for embracing failure in your classroom is through the *Eight Studio Habits of Mind*, from Harvard's Project Zero. Three of these habits, Engage and Persist, Reflect, and Stretch and Explore, imply that a level of risk and failure is intrinsic to the artistic process (Project Zero, 2003). When students Engage and Persist, they develop a habit of working that is separate from artistic inspiration or productivity and they continue working in the face of

great challenges (Hetland et al, 2013, p. 52). The Project Zero team recommends pairing Engage and Persist thinking with Reflection, asking students to compare what they were trying to do with their final product and make predictions for a next attempt (p. 81). For true embrace of “mis-takes,” planning Stretch and Explore opportunities for your students means encouraging them to see mistakes as inevitable, opportunities for growth, and a routine part of art-making. It asks students to lean into “what-if” questions and dive down those rabbit-holes gleefully (p. 91). Our goal as arts educators, is to encourage students to persist through their failures, stretch through their uncertainties, and reflect on their mistakes.

The drama classroom is the perfect place to help your students start making mistakes. Drama is not concerned with presenting a final product to an audience, rather it is process based and uses performance as a tool to explore ideas and content. Teachers who want to introduce a safe space for risk taking and failure should consider using strategies from the book *Drama Based Pedagogy* (DBP) in their classrooms (Dawson & Lee, 2018). DBP prioritizes process over product, leaving ample opportunities for failure and second, third, and thirtieth attempts to learn and grow. Additionally, DBP emphasizes “affective” learning, or social, emotional, and cultural learning (p.21). Any of the following strategies from *Drama Based Pedagogy* will help them take risks, fail boldly, and make them excited to risk again. To establish a risk-safe community, try Circle Dash or Crumbling to model support in your classroom. To practice persistence and problem solving, Group Counting, Stop and Go and Jump, and Who Started the Motion, continue the collaboration of the first two activities with inevitable failure.

Content choice can also help your students understand mistakes as an inherent part of life. As educator Joan Lazarus states in *Signs of Change*, drama teachers should use text in their classrooms that include “realistic consequences for characters’ actions and raise questions about characters’ choices” (2012, p. 170). By learning through someone else’s problems, students will experience failures and consequences from the aesthetic distance of drama. Going back to DBP, your students can practice outcomes of potential failures through Real and Ideal Images, Conscience Alley, Paired/Group Improvisation, and Voices in the Head. These strategies allow students to embody someone else’s journey, explore multiple perspectives, and practice success and failure in the safety of the classroom.

You can fail too!

Don’t leave all the fun of failing to your students! As educators, it is imperative that we embrace our own mis-takes and model persistence and reflection for our students. A constructivist approach to teaching and learning through drama relies on a reflective and reflexive practice for teachers in which mistakes are processed and solutions are offered. When implementing something new, like the Studio Habits of Mind and DBP strategies above, we have to allow ourselves space for failure and growth. So I encourage you to take risks, get messy, embrace failure, and most of all, grow.

Works Cited

- Dawson, K. and Lee, B. K. (2018). *Drama Based Pedagogy Activating Learning Across the Curriculum*. Intellect, The University of Chicago Press.
- Edmiston, Brian. (2014) *Transforming Teaching and Learning with Active and Dramatic Approaches: Engaging Students Across the Curriculum*. (p. 80, p. 94). Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group
- Edutopia. (2021, January 7). *How to Create a Mistake-Friendly Classroom*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/video/how-create-mistake-friendly-classroom>
- Hetland, L., Winner, E., Veenema, S., Sheridan, K. M. (2013). *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (Second Edition). Teachers College Press
- Laufenberg, D. (2010). How to learn? From Mistakes. https://www.ted.com/talks/diana_laufenberg_how_to_learn_from_mistakes
- Lazarus, Joan (2012). *Signs of Change: New Directions in Theatre Education Revised and Amplified Edition* (p. 170). Intellect, University of Chicago Press.
- Lemov, D. (2015). Chapter 2: Acting on the Data and the Culture of Error in *Teach like a champion 2.0: 62 techniques that put students on the path to college* (Second edition). (pp. 57-81) Jossey-Bass.
- National Theatre Institute. (Accessed February 11, 2022). <https://www.nationaltheaterinstitute.org/>
- Project Zero (2003). *Eight_habits_of_mind.pdf*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2021, from http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/eight_habits_of_mind%20.pdf
- Snyder, A. (2019, April 19). Why Teachers Should Celebrate Failure in the Classroom. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/inspired-ideas-prek-12/success-failure-the-key-to-learning-cc337cc286c>