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Teaching Life Lessons: When Millennials Fail

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ABSTRACT

Background: Students who fail may face feelings of diminished self-perception, decreased sense of achievement, and experience negative emotions or moods such as: guilt, embarrassment, thoughts of reoccurring failure, feeling of letting others down or disappointing teachers and parents.

Aim: This paper is to discuss the topic of failure and providing thoughts and reflections on the topic. The authors believe that faculty can help students learn to fail and also maintain their self-worth and dignity. Helping students learn from these failures and promoting resilience and humility when faced with life adversities may be one of the best lifelong lessons faculty can teach.

Results: Failure is never an easy experience. When a student is faced with failure, it is critical for faculty to help the student find the positives of the experience. This as an opportunity to promote personal growth and character development. Educators are in a precarious position because learning outcomes are based on successful performance and failure can be looked upon negatively for faculty.

Conclusions: Faculty are perfectly positioned to help reframe failure for students struggling in college and help them find their true passion in life. College is a transformative experience, a time for self-discovery and finding one's true identity. It is a time to learn life lessons and how to manage adversity facilitating strong, emotionally healthy, driven men and women of future generations.

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Keywords: failure, millennials, helicopter parents, relationships, and success

The college experience can be exciting, liberating, and a period of tremendous personal growth. Alternately, it can be stressful and filled with anxiety. Attending college is a significant time of transition that offers students opportunities to find their identity and their passion. As with all life transitions, the college experience provides occasions for success as well as failure.

Educating in today's academic environment poses interesting dilemmas as faculty are charged with teaching students who have grown up with the internet and the power of social media in a generation referred to as millennials. The millennials have also been labeled the trophy generation, meaning that everybody receives a trophy for participation and there are no winners or losers. Additionally, millennials have involved, sometimes overly involved, parents often referred to as helicopter parents. The construct of helicopter parents first appeared in the mainstream press but now has empirical evidence indicating there can be more harm to children than good (Schiffrin & Liss, 2017; Kouros, Pruitt, Ekas, Kiriaki, & Sunderland, 2017). Helicopter parents are overly protective and controlling of



their children. They decrease autonomy and simultaneously provide warmth and support. There is mounting evidence showing this type of parenting is not healthy for children and some reports have concluded that children of helicopter parents have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and medication use for such disorders (Schiffirin & Liss, 2017). The parents have high expectations of their children and want them to succeed at all cost and failure is not an option.

However, failure is part of life. Due to these societal influences, students today often arrive at the threshold of higher education without the benefit of experiencing much failure in their young lives, and when faced with failure, or the risk of failure, often do not know how to respond. It is important that faculty have the ability to help students grow from failures they encounter in their college experience, as a means to help them discover their true passion in life.

The intent of this paper is to discuss the topic of failure and provide thoughts and reflections on the topic. The authors believe that faculty can help students learn to fail and also maintain their self-worth and dignity. Helping students learn from these failures and promoting resilience and humility when faced with life adversities may be one of the best lifelong lessons faculty can teach.

BACKGROUND

Children learn early in life to avoid failure and to be successful. Achievement is measured by applause, ribbons, trophies, high grade point averages (GPA), making honor roll, or receiving merit scholarships. Children realize that successful performance brings affection and rewards whereas failure can lead to isolation, embarrassment, and withdrawal (Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007). Fear of failure is socialized in childhood and conditioned by aversion to consequences associated with failing; therefore, a high priority is placed on not failing (Conroy, Coatsworth, & Kaye, 2007). Consequences of failing in school have both far-reaching and emotional results for the student.

Students who fail may face feelings of diminished self-perception, decreased sense of achievement, and experience negative emotions or moods such as: guilt, embarrassment, thoughts of reoccurring failure, feeling of letting others down or disappointing teachers and parents (Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007). Additional ramifications of failure can include low regard from others, criticism, loss of respect, and mockery (Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007). Failing a course may negatively impact the student's GPA, jeopardize financial aid, result in a change of major and ultimately impact the goals of reaching a dream job that cannot be actualized if failures persist (Lucier, 2017). For some students, interest in learning is diminished and anxiety from school-related stress overwhelms the learning environment. This results in decreased intrinsic motivation and engagement, pessimism and self-handicapping behaviors such as cheating (Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007). A subtle shift is experienced in the student, so that feeling good about oneself becomes the ultimate academic goal. Strength of character can develop from failure by learning that life does not end with one failed course. Students can learn from mistakes and discover ways to start over and adapt to life challenges (Fiamengo, 2013).

Fear of failure is part of the human condition. The way in which humans respond to failure varies widely. In some cases, resilient behavior predominates. This behavior is influenced, in part, by the ability to find meaning in failure, and in part, by self-determination in deciding if the current pursuit is one of passion, or if that passion would be better placed in an alternate direction. Other factors contributing to resilience involve self-esteem, attributional style, and lower sense of perfectionism (Johnson, Panagiotti, Bass, Ramsey, & Harrison, 2017).

Millennials, born after 1980 and before 2000 are generally described as being the most catered to, ethnically diverse, lateral thinking, multitasking generation. This has led, in general, to a tendency toward a sense of entitlement, which

can make teaching these students a challenge. Fortunately, millennials' tight bond and connection with technology represents a great strength associated with this age group, especially in simulation experiences. Many millennials are "hyper-connected," considering their connection with cell phones and electronics as an extension of their person; sleeping with cell phones (80%) and having them at their side at all times during the day (Ford, 2014). Other themes associated with millennials include the desire for immediate feedback, a greater affinity for electronic devices than relationships, and a fear of failure.

The "Great Recession" of 2008 had a major impact on this generation. Those who graduated in June 2009, faced an overall unemployment rate of 9.5 percent, with employers slashing 500,000 jobs that month; the 18th month in a row of job cuts. The unemployment rate for people between the ages of 20 and 24 stood at 15.2 percent (Brainard, 2015). Since then, the intersection of higher enrollments, higher tuitions, reduced family resources, and uneven job prospects have caused outstanding student loan balances to more than double since the start of the Great Recession (Bricker et al., 2014). At the same time, public colleges and universities, which had long been the most affordable option for students were forced to impose some of the steepest rises in tuition due to the recession (Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014). The number of adults under age 30 living with parents or family members rose significantly and has remained at a high level (Fry, 2017). As a result, more millennial households are in poverty as compared to any other generation (Fry, 2017). Many of today's traditional college students were in grade school during the recession and know firsthand the challenges of this era.

These realities are having an impact on society as a whole. It is a small wonder that this generation tends to be more cautious and less likely to take risks. The proportion of people under the age of 30 who own private businesses fell from 10.6% to 3.6%, a 24-year low, as documented by Federal Reserve data (Simon & Barr, 2015). A Babson College survey (2016) found that 41% of people aged 25-34 years cite "fear of failure" as the biggest barrier to starting a business, up from 24% in 2001 (Kelley, 2016).

A recurrent theme of millennials is doubt regarding academic readiness for college (Pardue, 2008). Consistent with that theme, college students are described as physically present, mentally dislocated, surface learners, influenced by unspoken peer pressure, and distrusting of others though possessing an integral desire to belong (Toothaker & Taliaferro, 2017). Research suggests that students who fear failure are more likely to utilize self-handicapping strategies that serve to perpetuate failure, but somehow seek to reduce the shame and embarrassment related to failure. Self-handicapping strategies protect self-esteem in the event of failure by allowing the individual to avoid attributing failure to lack of ability (Ferradás, 2016). The millennial generation may be more likely to employ these strategies to shield their self-esteem and defend against the emotional consequences of failure.

The academic arena is a performance-based environment in which goal setting and attainment is valued and rewarded. A student's success or failure is determined by a variety of measures, but none so powerful as by the grades they earn. Their successful progression in a program of study depends upon learning the content well enough to earn a passing grade that demonstrates evidence of their intelligence. Intelligence is the primary currency in the world of academics. Gardner (1999) defines intelligence as the "bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture" (p. 33). Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences proposes that intelligence can be differentiated into several specific modalities, including logical, linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical-rhythmic, and existential. In the academic setting, it is logical and linguistic intelligence that are predominant in the evaluation of performance. Gardner posits that

institutions of higher learning would do well to widen the borders of the track that is used to evaluate a student's intelligence that measure academic success.

Stanford University psychologist, Dr. Carol Dweck, presents that mindset plays an important role in approaching challenging situations as well as responding to failure (2006). One of two mindsets predominates in each of us: either the fixed mindset or the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Those with a fixed mindset view intelligence as a static characteristic—one that a person is either born with, or not. The amount of intelligence that each person has is “fixed”. Those with a fixed mindset tend to place themselves in situations where they appear most intelligent. They avoid challenges, as these may jeopardize the image they have worked hard to establish as an “intelligent” person and are often threatened by the success of others who may make them appear less intelligent (Dweck, 2006). Due to this deeply held belief, those with a fixed mindset tend to become defensive when provided with constructive feedback and look for excuses to explain poor performance outside of the level of intelligence they possess (Dweck, 2006). Common phrases excuses include, “No. I didn't really have time to study,” or “I would have gotten a higher score on that exam, if I weren't so sick with this flu bug.”

Contrast this behavior with the person who has a “growth” mindset. These individuals view intelligence as a characteristic that can be developed, a process, a work in progress (Dweck, 2006). Failure is not a setback but an opportunity to learn and grow. For this reason, individuals with a growth mindset are not as threatened by failures. They tend to embrace challenges and see effort as the pathway to improvement and mastery. The famous statement attributed to Thomas Edison illustrates the growth mindset well: “I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.” Or more pointedly, John F. Kennedy stated eloquently, “Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.”

Recognizing the differences in students' responses to failure is only the starting point. It is clear that the way a student responds to failing impacts their ongoing motivation for studying, their willingness to enter into future intellectual challenges, productivity and, even sense of self-worth (Dweck, 2006; Hartley, 2011; King, 2017). The connection between achievement, motivation, mindset and self-perception, largely due to Dr. Dweck's research, supports the notion that a person can move away from the fixed mindset and toward the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Zurawski, 2016). This information can have significant impact for educators helping students to navigate the art of failing with grace and humility.

DISCUSSION

Failure is never an easy experience. When a student is faced with failure, it is critical for faculty to help the student find the positives of the experience. This as an opportunity to promote personal growth and character development. Educators are in a precarious position because learning outcomes are based on successful performance and failure can be looked upon negatively for faculty (Tawfik, Rong, & Choi, 2015). Additionally, faculty are cautious of failing students because of the fear of poor student evaluations, especially in educational systems where student evaluations are a cornerstone to the tenure process. A study by Larocque and Luhanga (2013) concluded that faculty abstained from failing nursing students for fear of legal action, lack of support from college administrators, and the reputation of the college. These factors challenge faculty to arduously analyze their own perception of student failure and to develop strategies that facilitate students to achieve success, even in the face of a failure.

Recognizing Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal response to every day stress in life and is prevalent among college students and can interfere with their performance. Anxiety in small doses can produce an environment that promotes learning, but in high amounts it can be paralyzing. According to a report by the American College Health Association over 24.2% of respondents reported they experienced anxiety and 30.6% respondents reported high levels of stress (American College Health Association, 2017). Furthermore, students reported that anxiety and stress interfered with their academic performance, resulting in a lower grade on an exam, or a lower grade in a course (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2017). Additionally, 87% of respondents reported they felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, 51.1 % felt things were hopeless, and 60.8% felt overwhelming levels of anxiety.

High levels of anxiety have been known to interfere with successful performance making it important for faculty to recognize early signs of anxiety for proper interventions (Rice, Vu, Butler, Marra, Merullo, & Banderet, 2009). Such signs exhibited by a student experiencing anxiety and fear of failure include procrastination, changes in mood, escalating family or personal problems, or decreasing efforts in trying to succeed. These self-handicapping behaviors have a negative effect on learning leading to lower self-esteem (Rice, Vu, Butler, Marra, Merullo, & Banderet, 2009).

Students experience tremendous anxiety when trying to decide on a major and career path (Pisarik, Rowell, Thompson, 2017). They fear making the decision that may lead them into a poor career choice, perpetuating uncertainty as to what the future holds. This self-doubt results in second guessing thoughts about their major. Good-intending parents may also contribute to this anxiety by suggesting a major and career based on “good jobs” rather than matching the skills, competency, or passion of the student (Pisarik et al, 2017).

Students with high levels of anxiety that causes test or performance issues, panic or self-defeating behaviors need referral to a mental health professional (Raufelder & Ringeisne, 2016). Anxiety becomes problematic when it interferes with daily function, such as missing class or not turning in assignments (Raufelder & Ringeisne, 2016).

Building Trust and Commitment

Faculty are responsible for creating learning environments through building trust with students. Faculty builds trust by having clear expectations, leaning objectives, opportunities to correct misunderstanding of concepts or course content and treating all students equally and objectively. Building trust includes promoting personal responsibility of the student. Students must be held accountable if they are not spending enough time in preparation, asking for help from professors, or communicating with professors if they are experiencing personal problems (Billings & Halstead, 2015). Faculty can have an open-door policy and it is up to the student to take advantage of these opportunities to meet with faculty or their advisor for assistance.

Faculty must convey a high level of commitment to help students succeed. Faculty and students must enter into a relationship that enhances learning, synthesizes knowledge, and integrates ways of knowing (Poorman & Mastorovich, 2014). Furthermore, faculty who have rigid and unfair treatment of students have more difficulty failing students because of the repercussions faculty experience. These repercussions include being verbally abused by the student, involvement of parents, and university administrators. These reactions are disruptive to the learning environment, creates increased stress for faculty and students, and damages the faculty-student relationship. This reinforces the need for clear learning expectations of students to mitigate misunderstandings between faculty and students (Poorman & Mastorovich, 2014).

Developing Healthy Relationships

It is critical that faculty have a healthy working relationship with students and avoid paternalistic relationships. Students entering college are vulnerable and can become dependent on faculty for advice regarding their personal issues which can spur a negative chain of events. For example, faculty with good intentions socializing with students outside of the classroom might convey mixed messages and blur students' perception of the faculty role and responsibilities. Furthermore, university administrators promote faculty-student engagement outside the classroom with the hopes of attracting helicopter parents and young students needing more personalized attention (Chory & Offstein, 2017). Additionally, students are social media aficionados and quick to befriend faculty through social media. The questions faculty must ask: "Is this helpful or confusing to the student?" and "How does this lead to creating a learning environment?"

Faculty must avoid enmeshed relationships with students because they are unhealthy and it is more difficult to identify the boundaries. An enmeshed relationship is defined as a dependent relationship pattern with little differentiation between people involved and blurring of personal boundaries (Walzer & Nottis, 2013). If a faculty member develops such a relationship with a student, it will be extremely difficult for the instructor to fail the student causing unnecessary stress and anxiety for both parties.

Viewing Failure as a Symptom

Failure provides the student an opportunity to explore goals regarding their chosen major. Faculty must guide student to deeper levels of reflection as to the reasons for choosing a certain major. This will result in closer approximations in finding passion for studies and career choice. As many millennials have been told "you can do anything you want;" leading to the assumption that a person can accomplish anything if they are eager and passionate about their goal.

Failure can be a symptom of being unmotivated for their area of study. This is the perfect opportunity for a faculty member to question the student's motives. When students become failure acceptors, they lack the motivation to succeed (De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013).

Normalizing Failure

Faculty can normalize failure for students to help them move forward and to grow from experience. The college experience represents the transformation from being dependent in high school to becoming independent in an adult environment. Students have at least four years to discover themselves and get closer to their true identity. In other words, failure can lead to self-discovery. Failure can be a wake-up call to something deeper in life, a transformational movement in a new direction. Failure can transform students, leading them to find meaning and purpose in life.

One of the goals in Jesuit University tradition is transforming men and women for others. Being a man or woman for others positions students to move from doing something beyond the self, and "what's in it for me," to doing something for the greater good (Rohm, 2017). Designing curriculums with life lessons and meaningful experiences that challenge students and, in some cases, allow them to fail at certain levels, is critical. This provides students with opportunities to reflect on lessons they learned about themselves, their goals, and how failure is a lifelong lesson and personal growth experience.

Everyone experiences moments of failure. Faculty sharing failures may help students to better cope with the failures in their lives. Many successful entrepreneurs have experienced failure, such as Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple.

Steve Jobs was fired partly because of his desire for perfection. When he was fired, he took the opportunity to continue on with what he loved, creating high quality technology and giving the user a meaningful experience. Steve Jobs did not give up on his passion even through adversity because he had the drive and the ambition to make a difference. He is now credited for transforming the phone, music, computer, and movie industry (Isaacson, 2011). This may be a lofty goal for many people, but the bottom line is that passion drives a person whether they fail or not; if they have the passion they will continue until they succeed because they have the mindset that failure is a learning opportunity.

CONCLUSION

Failure has a negative connotation in our society, especially among college students. The need to succeed and avoid failure has emotional and mental health consequences such as low self-worth, anxiety, and depression. Students entering college are vulnerable due to leaving their parents and experiencing loneliness therefore they can easily develop dependent relationships with faculty. Faculty must have strong boundaries and avoid blurring their role with students. Blurred roles make it difficult to hold students accountable. However, clear role delineation between students and faculty create healthy learning environments and help students learn from their failures by taking personal responsibility.

Faculty are perfectly positioned to help reframe failure for students struggling in college and help them find their true passion in life. College is a transformative experience, a time for self-discovery and finding one's true identity. It is a time to learn life lessons and how to manage adversity. It has the potential to transform strong, emotionally healthy, driven men and women of future generations.

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