

# TEACHING TODAY'S LEARNERS #6



## How Can We Help Students Learn from Failure?

*"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."*

*—Thomas Edison*

Oh Disney, once again you cleverly embed important life lessons into your world of magical make believe. Take a peek inside the [life of Lewis](#) in *Meet the Robinsons*, a young scientist who is encouraged by the adults in his life to “keep moving forward.” From them he learns to use his failures as a springboard to continue to follow his natural curiosity and imagination. We live in a world where the message is predominantly that “Failure is Bad,” and so the ideas unleashed in *Meet the Robinsons* are refreshing and in some ways, daring.

In the gaming world, that’s really the only way to learn: by making mistakes, by failing. The only way to succeed in most games is to explore. In exploring, your avatar will probably walk off a cliff or something. You lose a “life” in the game, but you gain essential knowledge - you shouldn’t walk over by that cliff again. You try a different path and become more knowledgeable, more experienced, and thus more successful due to your previous failure. So you lost a life? Who cares; there are always more where they came from!

So why can’t learning at school be more like gaming? Why is failure avoided and viewed as a negative experience? Reading [Mark Prensky’s](#) and [Carol Dweck’s](#) work really made this message hit home with me, and challenged me to increase my efforts not only to help kids understand failure, but also to create an environment in the classroom that is similar to “gaming.”

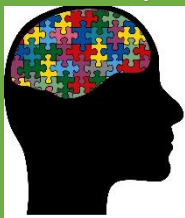
As a teacher, it can be difficult to see one of your students fail, especially if much effort was put into accomplishing a particular task. But, fear of failure can prevent true learning, and keeps kids from taking risks. Making failure normal — even celebrated — may be uncomfortable in the “right now” but makes for happier and more productive kids in the long-term.

Many of the strategies listed on the next page most educators would connect with great teaching: challenging students, scaffolding difficult material, providing think time, prompting academic conversations, and developing a critical lens. But it wasn’t until I learned about the growth mindset and began teaching it to students when I really saw learning transform for my students. Developing a growth mindset through these strategies ensures that we are helping to develop habits of mind that will set students up for a lifetime of growth and success.

# Developing Growth Mindset: Encouraging Struggle & Failure

## Provide Brain Fuel

- Challenges help students grow, so we should present them often. If we only provide tasks that students are able to quickly master, we aren't accessing their full potential. It is similar to going to the gym. If all we ever lift are easy weights, we won't grow our muscles.



We need just as much a challenge to grow our brain as we do to grow our muscles.

## Articulate Thinking

- Justifying thinking means students are prepared to explain their thinking with evidence.
- Critique means students are pressing one another and questioning validity.
- Being prepared to justify ideas and being open to critique requires a level of vulnerability that can only be developed with a growth mindset.



“**IF IT DOESN'T CHALLENGE YOU, IT DOESN'T CHANGE YOU.**”

## Seek to Understand

- Asking students to elaborate on their answers and ideas increases accountability and also student understanding.
- When students press their classmates – “Can you explain that in a different way?” “Can you share more evidence?” - they are working to understand for themselves as well as pushing the understanding of their classmates.
- Sharing/articulating thinking is important to show what we know and what we misunderstand.

## Live in the Struggle



- It's uncomfortable to watch someone struggle and moreover it's uncomfortable to experience it yourself. But that's when the good stuff happens!
- To use an exercise metaphor: It is the moment in the gym when you are lifting really heavy weights and are nearly to the top. You may be sweating (and frankly, looking a little crazy intense) but once at the top you feel amazing. You know the struggle was worth it because it made you stronger.
- Instead of moving past struggle, spend more time in it – seeking it, celebrating it. We can foster those moments in the classroom when we get to see our students in their sweet spot, about to “get it.”
- Help students recognize struggle and understand that it is a necessary part of their learning process.
- To extend the exercise metaphor: Don't steal the weight from your students just as they are about to reach the top! Let them get there as you spot them and cheer them on!

## Give Wait Time

- Cultivating a class of kids who are curious, engaged and eager takes time!

If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything **ORIGINAL**.

*Ken Robinson*