

# **Nurturing Creativity, Fearlessness, and Academic Success for All: A Teaching Philosophy**

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Educators should inspire, challenge, and support students. This requires a broad range of interests—embodying the Renaissance ideal of a cultured, well-educated person—as well as an open and trustworthy nature, strong listening skills, and the ability to identify and solve problems. But to truly inspire, an educator needs to surprise students, to connect seemingly disparate bits of information in meaningful and beautiful patterns, weaving together the humanities and sciences in novel ways, with intellectual rigor and a sense of playfulness. This is the ideal toward which I strive.

“Try. Fail. Fail *better*,” Samuel Beckett once advised actors performing “Waiting for Godot.” I help students understand what that really means.

Research on learning, motivation, and the development of expertise suggests that if we’re trying to solve meaningful problems or generate innovative ideas, we should expect to fail between 30 to 70 percent of the time. Less than that often means that we’re not working to our full potential, settling for problems that are too easy for us, and more than that means that we’re choosing problems that are too difficult or not learning effectively from our mistakes.

The science is clear: taking risks and failing are fundamental to success. Yet failure is rarely lauded. In fact, the opposite is too often true.

Many people are terrified of failure, and that fear can lead to behaviors and attitudes that stifle learning, creativity, and development. For example, once they experience the rigors of college, many talented students—especially those from underserved populations and students who are underprepared for college—find themselves working very hard with unsatisfying results. They may not recognize the cause of their difficulties and may lose confidence and motivation. The consequences can be far-reaching and severe. Some students enter college with a weaker connection to academic achievement and no academic role models, making them more vulnerable to educational myths, such as “talent is inborn.” If they’re also struggling with the feeling that they don’t belong in college, or have any of the social, financial, logistical, or safety concerns that are more common in these populations, they may drop out. Worse yet, they may give up on themselves.

As an educational psychologist and researcher in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I’m committed to mustering all of our best teaching practices to help prevent that.

I believe some of the solutions can be found in effective teaching practices (most of which are, by their nature, inclusive) and through a commitment to promoting diversity by integrating examples from a wide range of cultures, perspectives, and identities into our courses, as well

as a wide range of ideas. For example, I often discuss nanotechnology, sculpture, music, art, engineering, and literature, using examples from many cultures. When discussing a construct, such as parenting styles, the understanding of consciousness, or definitions of normality and abnormality, I weave examples of cultural variations in these ideas throughout our discussion to help counteract the Eurocentrism that's prevalent in our culture and many of our textbooks and other teaching resources. (When I have the opportunity to work on textbooks and ancillaries, I advocate for a global viewpoint and introduce examples that reflect the many aspects of human diversity.)

This is possible because I've worked and taught in the arts, the social sciences, and the physical and natural sciences. I am a psychologist, a historian, an actor, and a computer geek. I am a writer, photographer, and storyteller. I've lived in major cities and small towns and have a very interesting international network of friends and colleagues. These distinct perspectives help me to connect with students and encourage them to think critically, to delve into unfamiliar subjects and different perspectives, so they can envision the familiar in new ways.

To promote inclusiveness and diversity, I also employ a variety of innovative, evidence-informed teaching methods and assessments to give each student many opportunities to succeed.

First, to help underprepared and first-generation students acclimate to the college environment (part of my current research), I've integrated learning skills training and information about how to succeed in college into all of my courses, inclusive practices that help many other students, too. I cover such topics as time management; active listening and note-taking skills; motivation; learning and study skills; how to read textbooks, do library research, and write academic papers; and strategies for effective test-taking, as well as stress management and healthy habits that support success.

Other basic ways in which I address some of the practical obstacles to academic achievement include providing access to a plethora of course-related materials and other aids to student learning on my website; specifying free or low-cost alternatives for everything needed for the course; and assisting my students in obtaining grants, scholarships, and financial aid.

And then there are the Jedi mind tricks, the application of principles from social psychology to address attitudinal obstacles to achievement and reinforce learning.

I integrate inclusiveness at every step of course design and execution, from setting objectives through choosing content, designing assignments and assessments, and selecting the appropriate instructional technologies.

At the course level, it begins with transparency, which guides my work as an instructor and mentor. I discuss goals, assignments, and expectations with my students, explaining the rationale behind every assignment and assessment. From the first day of class, students have access to all of the rubrics used to ensure fair grading, as well as examples of successful assignments. Because the major work in the course is scaffolded, we debrief on all completed work before continuing to new assignments.

Some examples of the effective and inclusive teaching techniques I prefer include student-designed hands-on research; team-based learning; scaffolded assignments that allow students to improve their skills (and grades) across the term; and advance organizers that orient students to the topic of the day. I also employ end-of-class writing that helps students consolidate their learning before they leave class while also providing a nonthreatening way for them to ask questions or air concerns.

Another important aspect of my inclusive teaching style is intervening effectively when students engage in stereotyping, shaming, or other problematic privileging behaviors. After reasserting acceptable group norms, I use the situation as a teachable moment and discuss the psychological science related to that behavior, such as the development of cognitive biases and the effects of prejudice on all of us. This promotes cultural sensitivity and critical thinking skills.

Dust has no chance to collect on my syllabi (although coffee always seems to find a way). Inspired by Arthur Coladarci's idea that all teaching is a form of hypothesis testing, I view each semester as a chance to grow as an instructor, and am always experimenting. I evaluate my courses and revise them based on my ongoing analyses of what worked in each class session, as well as student feedback, recent research, and exciting ideas I've gleaned from teaching institutes.

Finally, I don't simply advise my students to learn how to fail effectively, I design my courses to allow them to practice this critical skill. In Intro Psych, for example, they can fail one paper and one exam and still earn an "A."

They can revise their papers as often as they want before the deadline and bring them to office hours for my review and suggestions. This gives me the opportunity to help them understand how to improve their work and their approach to research and academic writing.

I allow and encourage my students to retake their exams in order to learn from their errors. These corrections, which must be cited and include reflection on why they made those mistakes, can raise their scores significantly, a reinforcer that helps them develop a healthy, productive attitude toward failure. And to remove the stigma from failure, I share stories about my own struggles as a student and scientist, as well as famous examples.

As they learn how to "fail better," some students open up and begin to explore the rich cultural and intellectual opportunities presented by their college and communities fearlessly, embracing intellectual and cultural diversity.

In the end, everything is about perspective: how we learn, the ways in which we envision and understand our problems, our definitions of success, and even our identities. The wider and deeper our perspectives, the happier and more successful we can be. I believe that we can achieve this greater perspective by adopting a multidisciplinary Renaissance approach, allowing us to enhance our understanding, connect with a broader range of people, and contribute to our own growth and the betterment of our world.