

Question 9:
***What has been your biggest failure in the classroom,
and what did you learn from this failure?***

“My greatest classroom failure was my first attempt to teach a special topics course on interracial communication in the spring of 2009. At the time, I worked at a large, southern, predominantly white public university. The campus culture, in the eyes of many minority students, was less than welcoming, as evidenced by the effigy of soon-to-be-President Barack Obama found in front of the campus library during the previous semester. From the first day, few students were willing to speak about the course’s subject matter. I responded by expressing my belief that classroom dialogue was necessary in order to generate lasting learning experiences in our class. I stressed the importance of openness and honesty in the dialogue I hoped to facilitate throughout the semester. However, in my attempt to generate worthwhile dialogue about communication and race, I failed to prevent the classroom conversation from deteriorating into a shouting contest among unoriginal, superficial monologues. In one class meeting, tensions between two students escalated to such a degree that I placed myself between them to prevent a fistfight.

Upon reflection, the two main reasons for my failure become clear. First, I praised dialogue as a mode of learning, but I failed to sufficiently explain the concept. I was so concerned about avoiding awkward (and, I thought, meaningless) silences in the classroom that I failed to stress that dialogue requires participants to be open to the possibility of being changed by what they hear from others. Instead of reminding students of that responsibility, I often settled, figuring that any classroom discussion was better than none at all. A second source of the failure was my desire to have every student speak in class. In retrospect, I see my erroneous assumption that speaking up would empower each student and that more talking was inherently better for everyone involved. In addition, I spent so much time and energy trying to drag the silent majority into the conversation that I likely lost sight of potential conflicts that were simmering among the active participants in the class. I also undervalued the degree to which some students might have been processing the course material and classroom discussions silently, elaborating on the course material internally.”

Michael Irvin Arrington, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Sam Houston State University
2013 John I. Sisco Excellence in Teaching Award, Southern States Communication Association

“My biggest failure was assuming too much about myself and my teaching abilities. I learned this throughout my teaching career and especially during my teaching practicums. I, like many, began my teaching career believing that I knew enough about everything to be a competent and effective teacher.

I could not have been more wrong. No matter how much I prepared or thought I knew, there was always more to learn. The lessons learned in the classroom could not be taught easily in my instructional courses or teaching practicums. I had to experience them firsthand. I had a certain kind of arrogance about myself that said to students, “I know more than you and you *will* like me because I am your teacher.” Wow, was I wrong. There were a number of times in the classroom or in teaching situations when I didn’t know as much as I thought I knew. It was at those moments that I could not let my ego or defensiveness takeover. Instead, I began to learn from my inadequacies. I learned from my students and how they reacted to me as a teacher—and I began to improve. That was how I prevented future similar failures. It is this lesson that should never be ignored.”

Bill Seiler, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
2015 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award

“I had two abysmal teaching experiences, each in my first semester at two different institutions. In one case, I had selected books that were much too difficult for the level of the students; they just didn’t get it. I finally revised the entire syllabus and course readings, which was tough, but at least the students knew that I knew it wasn’t working. In the second case, the students enrolled in the course thinking that they would get a much-beloved professor, but because her section was overloaded they got me instead. Part of the difficulty was trying to overcome the hostility that I wasn’t her. Part of the difficulty was figuring out that although the students were bright enough, they didn’t have the kind of cultural knowledge I had expected (e.g., when I asked them to create innovative twists on maxims, I discovered that most of them had never heard of the maxims!). In that case, I made some changes; but mostly, we just soldiered on through the semester. It did help me become a better teacher for future semesters.”

Kathleen J. Turner (Emerita), Davidson College
2007 Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching in Higher Education

“I don’t think I had a failure. I learned things and changed my approach but I don’t regard my actions prior to any of those changes as failures they just didn’t work as well for me as I matured. For instance, when I graduated from teachers’ college, I had the firm belief that it was my job to motivate students. In order to accomplish that I spent a lot of time trying to entertain them using tactics I thought they would relate to. In the long

run, that was a hopeless enterprise, I found that the older I got the less well I related to student interests and no matter how hard I tried the general approach seemed less and less effective.

Eventually, I stopped trying to motivate students and took the position that their motivation was their problem. I focused instead on motivating myself (to learn more, to be more enthusiastic about the subject, etc.) and stopped worrying about 'relating' to students. Rather, I now expect them to relate to me more than I need to relate to them. It isn't so much that my earlier approach was a failure . . . it's that the approach was less and less effective as I matured and the students stayed the same age."

Joe Ayres, Washington State University
2005 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award

"Nearly a decade ago, I taught a special topics course on interracial communication. To this day, I regard my efforts in the course as a noble failure. As I prepared for the course, I feared that students' reticence to speak about matters of race would present an obstacle to the learning experiences I hoped to facilitate. To preemptively address this problem, I introduced the class to the concept of dialogue on day one. I stressed my desire for the classroom to become a safe space in which students could speak openly and honestly. Unfortunately, I failed to balance that concern with an equally important one: that the participants in the dialogue balance their honesty with a genuine openness to the possibility of being changed by their classroom interactions. I did not realize the potential impact of my omission until the day when I had to place myself between two students whose respective viewpoints led them to the verge of fisticuffs. The experience taught me the importance of establishing a clear and thorough set of expectations at the beginning of each course. Doing so can make the difference between a noble failure and a notable success."

Michael I. Arrington, Mercer University School of Medicine
2013 SSCA John I. Sisco Excellence in Teaching Award

"I was an instructor, teaching in the days when lecture was the dominant mode of instruction. While lecturing one day, I stopped mid-sentence. I realized how positively bored I was at the sound of my own voice. I looked out at the students in my class to see them equally glazed over. But my sudden stop jolted many of them into a state of semi-consciousness. I asked them directly, 'How many of you are bored?' No one raised a hand. I told them, 'I'm really bored just talking to you. I know that everyone lectures and that this is what you are used to. But isn't this just boring?' A few students nodded their heads. The rest, I think, were quite concerned that I had totally lost it. I never felt like such a complete failure as a teacher than I did at that moment. And I resolved to never feel that way again. I asked the students, 'Without sounding too much like the computer in the movie *War Games*, would you like to play a game?' More of them nodded. So I made a deal with them: We would slog our way through the rest of the day's lecture, and from there on out I would try to find a way to make every lesson active and enjoyable. They agreed. In the next class session, I played a version of

Scattergories with the class to help them learn about brainstorming topics. Today, people would tell me that I was into gamification before it was cool. Back then, all I had done was realize just how awful the lecturing mode was.”

Alfred G. Mueller II, Neumann University
2013 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

“In my doctoral program, I taught small group communication for the first time. And it was a disaster. During my master’s program, I realized I had been too lenient as a teacher. So I came into the small group classroom wanting to ratchet up my rigor—and ratchet it up I did, to the point that I overshot the mark. Students soon became frustrated with my draconian attendance policy, for example. In my zeal to enforce classroom rules, I forgot to engage in instructor immediacy and express empathy for my students. My teaching evaluations were the lowest I’ve received in my career. In subsequent semesters, I was able to find a better balance of rigor and kindness, but I think I’ve also learned that ‘balance’ isn’t the best way to conceptualize it. Relational dialectics theory 2.0 provides a number of conceptual tools for allowing discourses to interpenetrate each other. Therefore I try (in my best moments at least) to voice an integrative stance toward the discourses of instructional caring and instructional rigor. Therefore on syllabus day, my tone is warm, upbeat, and friendly, but I also clarify the course procedures and stick to them. When students know that we really do have their best interests at heart, a space where we can engage in rigor that affirms the student rather than discouraging them.”

Andrew M. Ledbetter, Texas Christian University
2011 CSCA Outstanding New Teacher Award

“Whether we like to admit it or not some days our classes are mediocre and other days we stink!! When you feel that you stink, don't be afraid to admit it. Don't blame your students, take ownership for the problem and learn the factors that may make your class go poorly on a given day. For me it can be a number of factors:

1. I am not as prepared as I should be--I have learned that I cannot just walk into a class and ‘wing it’ and have it go well. I have friends who tell me it works for them [first of all I'm not sure I believe that it goes well] but it does not work for me. For me I have learned that I need to spend time before class to go over my notes, think about examples that I will use, think about any tech support I will use in this class and make sure its ready. In seminar classes if I have assigned readings, especially journal articles, I re-read them before I go to class so I can remember every nuance of the article. It helps discussions go well. Show your students it is the norm in your class that everyone reads the articles before class, including you. If the norm is being prepared, students then worry about being embarrassed by not being prepared.

2. Some of my examples are stale and need to be retooled--I had to learn to recognize

when some of my old 'greatest classroom hits' no longer worked. Learn when to replace with newer better stuff.

3. I am dead tired or distracted and am phoning it in--Teaching takes a huge amount of energy. Whether we like it or not there is a lot of good theatre in teaching. You need to figure out how you get yourself to the energy level you need to make your class go well. You owe it to your students. When you hit a good prep and energy level teaching the class will be tremendous fun."

Bonnie Jefferson, Boston College

2006 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award