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Failure Toss

INTRODUCTION: In addition to my counseling duties, I also teach a college strategies class for women in transition. The women in this class have returned to education after being away from it for five years or more. Most of them are twenty-five years of age or older. Most work, are married, and have children. The class meets one night per week for eight weeks.

When I read my students' papers about their self-defeating patterns and limiting core beliefs (discussed in Chapter 6 of the *On Course* text), I noticed a major theme. Most expressed how past failures had led to low self-esteem and diminished self-confidence. I asked myself, "What activity can I do to address the issue of failure?" After reviewing exercises from the "On Course Facilitator's Manual," I decided that "The Failure Toss" (pp75-6) might be worth a try.

This activity could be used in any academic setting where "failure" is a big issue. For example, this could be a helpful exercise for students suffering from math anxiety because of past failures in math courses. It would provide an opportunity to explore the students' past challenges with math and shift their inner conversation from the failure to the valuable lessons learned.

PURPOSE:

- To gain wisdom from a past failure
- To reduce anxieties about future failures
- To promote lifelong learning

SUPPLIES/SET UP:

- Paper and pen for each student
- Trash can

DIRECTIONS (my variation on the directions in the On Course Facilitator's Manual):

1. Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5. (1 minute)
2. Ask the class to define failure and invite several responses. After discussing the definition of a failure, share a couple of your own failures to get the students thinking about the ones they have had. (For example, "Failure #1: I was divorced from my husband after only 9 months of marriage." (5-10 minutes)
3. Instruct the students to fold their sheets of paper in half vertically, creating two columns. (You may want to demonstrate this.) At the top of the left-hand column, have them write the word FAILURES. Below that, have the students write a list of their failures in school and in life. Tell them that no one else is going to see their failures, and even though they are in groups, this part of the exercise will not be shared. Have them number each failure. (5 minutes)
4. At the top of the right-hand column, have them write the word WISDOM. In that column, have them write any valuable wisdom they learned from each of their failures. Give an example such as: "Wisdom #1: I learned that I can never look to someone else to make me happy." Tell them they can have many "wisdoms" for each failure. (5-10 minutes) (Note: You'll find some great examples of Wisdom from students on page 166 of the On Course text.)
5. Have a volunteer in each group read one wisdom to the rest of their group (not the failure). Instruct them to keep going around the group clockwise, with each person reading one wisdom each time (with the option to "pass" if they wish). Tell them to read only the wisdom and not to go into detail about how they learned the wisdom. Have them keep going around the group until all in the group have stated all of their wisdoms. (You may choose to end this earlier if time is an issue.) (5 minutes)
6. Instruct the students to tear their papers in half along the fold. This leaves them with their FAILURES in one hand and their WISDOMS in the other. Have them choose from the following four options: (2 minutes)

1. Keep both your FAILURES and your WISDOMS.
2. Throw away your FAILURES and keep your WISDOMS.
3. Throw away your WISDOMS and keep your FAILURES.
4. Throw away both your FAILURES and your WISDOMS.

7. After students make their choice, tell them that if they chose to throw anything away, to ball up the papers and toss them in the trash can. (1 minute)

8. In a journal or as a class discussion, have the students answer the following questions: (3 minutes)

What choice did you make? Why? What is the life lesson in this experience?

Approximate time for the entire activity: 25-35 minutes

OUTCOMES/EXPERIENCES

This activity was a success right from the start. When I asked the group for a definition of failure I was delighted by the responses. One student said, "I don't think there is a thing like failure because we always learn something from our mistakes." Another student said, "Failure is when we don't match up to the expectations we have of ourselves." Still another said, "Failure is when we can't meet the goals we set for ourselves – probably because we didn't use the DAPPS model." I was so impressed with their answers that I congratulated them all on thinking like true Creators.

When I asked the group to write their failures, I heard a few groans and some jokes and comments about their not being able to fit them all on one sheet of paper. As they began to write, however, the room quieted down and people began to write in earnest. When it came time to say their "wisdoms" to their group, the students jumped right in. I walked around the room listening to their wisdoms. I did, however, have to remind them several times to read only the wisdoms and not go into a lengthy discussion about how they had learned them.

What choices did the students make? Two students chose to keep both their failures and their wisdoms. One wrote, "I chose to keep my failures and my wisdoms. They are learning experiences in my life, and they are choices that I made." Five students chose to throw away both their failures and their wisdoms. All indicated that they wanted to put them both behind them and start over. No students chose to keep their failures and throw away their wisdoms.

The majority of the students (15) decided to throw away their failures and keep their wisdoms. One student wrote, "I want to keep my wisdoms because I am not a failure anymore. I would always like to keep wisdom and throw away failure." Another wrote, "I threw away my failures because I don't need them any longer." This was my favorite, "I threw away my failures because they are only necessary to get the wisdom that we keep."

One of the purposes of this exercise was to help the students gain wisdom from their failures. I believe the majority of the class succeeded. Here are some of their comments:

I think this exercise was really cool. I would have never thrown my failures away like that before. I have been sitting and dwelling on them in my subconscious mind. Just tonight I realized that I have actually gained from my failures. Things are better now.

The lesson in this exercise is to know that you can always get something good out of a bad thing.

You need to acknowledge your failure and move on with your wisdom – learn from your mistakes!

The exercise was pretty cool. When we followed with a wisdom I realized that I'm OK. Now I look back at my life – I don't know of any failures I made!

Did this activity address the issue of lifelong learning? Indirectly, I think it did. A few of the students gave advice for "learning from their mistakes" in the future. Here's what they wrote:

Never let failures get you down. Look for the wisdom in your failures and let them be a guide of sorts for future failures so that you will always learn from your mistakes.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again! Always be looking for the lesson learned, be it good or bad, from the decisions made in life.

Don't give up or let life's setbacks negatively affect you. Always ask why did this happen and how could I respond differently next time. And remember, there may be many next times!

We are who we are because of the choices we have made in our life. We have the power to change.

PERSONAL LESSONS