

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

While I hold myself to high standards as a teacher, I fail a lot, and I'm okay with that. The integration of failure into my teaching philosophy is related to something Irish author Samuel Beckett once said. In his short story "Worstward Ho," he talks about having "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." While Beckett was by many yardsticks a success, he recognized the inevitability of setbacks along with the importance of always evolving his practice as an artist. I feel the same way about my teaching.

Every time I leave campus, I think not only about what worked in my classrooms but also about missed opportunities. I belatedly recognize moments when I might have included more members of a learning community by calling on a student in the back corner. After a meeting of Global Science Fictions, I mull over how I might have added commentary on twenty-first century advances in Artificial Intelligence to a lecture about robots in a 1920s Czech book, so students could better connect course content to contemporary life. Although I have enjoyed triumphs as a teacher, I dwell on what Beckett might term "failures," with a view towards the next time I will be teaching. In positive terms, I am engaged in a continuous process of refinement. I know I can always do "better." I know, too, from decades of teaching that my audiences are constantly changing, just like the world around us. (When I first taught Business Writing—more than two decades ago—we did not have units on email messages!) Even tested pedagogical techniques and well-designed lessons applied to the study of writing and literature might be less than optimal on any given day. I will be obliged to "try again," to find new ways to engage students.

Beckett's embrace of failure is also essential to writing, one of the subjects I regularly teach. An effective writer crafts a draft, refines it, then does so again—often many times over. If my students are to become effective written communicators, they need to be able to engage in such a process. To that end, I make group workshops that treat student drafts integral to both my creative writing and my business writing courses. In overseeing workshops, after sharing models and running practice sessions, I try to recede into the background, maintaining a light touch to keep groups on task. The idea is to remove pressure commonly felt about performing in the classroom. I want my students to be able to explore new ideas and to try out alternative techniques before they have mastered them, without worrying about an evaluator who might make them self-conscious and inhibit their growth.

In a similar vein, I incorporate low stakes in-class exercises into every one of my courses. If students make a good faith effort to respond to these exercises, they earn an "A." This approach affords everyone enrolled learning opportunities, while strengthening connections between students as they grapple together with unfamiliar concepts and new material in real time. It also enables me to push students to grow in ways that might not be possible if exercises were graded on a traditional scale; I can ask truly hard questions that can only be responded to with rigor. Again, my rationale is linked to providing students with opportunities to be wrong. They should feel safe as they work through possibilities that might not make sense or even pan out. Furthermore, they should learn to be comfortable with making mistakes. Sometimes they can learn more from reflecting on what is incorrect—and why it is incorrect—than from being told what is "right."

When our students leave Penn State, they are bound to fail. We all do, whatever our direction, whatever our accomplishments. If I have made the most of my time with students, I will have inspired in them recognition that failure is natural as one learns new skills and takes on new challenges. I hope to have inculcated in them confidence, which will help them pick themselves up and continue to pursue their goals as they "fail better" the next time around.