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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Feeling of Failure

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A few weeks ago, my eight-year-old daughter decided to grade the weekend we spent together. I don't know where she got this idea. I didn't love it.

Our weekend scored a 70/100.

Readers, over the course of this weekend, we ate pizza, hot dogs, and fried chicken. We went to the pool, twice, where she played with two different sets of friends. We got her favorite ice cream flavor at our favorite ice cream place. We watched an animated film of her choosing. We went rollerblading at a nearby playground. We went to a park where she participated in a kid's mud race. We attended a local Bach concert. We walked down to eat breakfast one morning at a beloved brunch place, which had just recently reopened after having been closed during the pandemic.

There were some challenges. I made her rollerblade. Even though they were rollerblades she herself requested from her grandparents for Christmas, rollerblading is still hard for her, and she doesn't like doing it, and she grumbled throughout the entire experience, and I got annoyed, and we butted heads.

But we cuddled, chatted, and laughed a lot too.

And this was a C-?!?

I felt disappointed, hurt, even, by the low score. I wanted to protest about how hard I had tried to create a good weekend for her. I wanted to detail all the effort I had put into our plans. I wanted to point out all the good things about my weekend “performance.” I wanted a different score. And I definitely wanted to put way less effort into future weekends, if my best efforts were, at most, going to earn me a 70%.

And then I realized precisely what—or rather who—I felt like.

I felt like one of my students who had tried really hard, on a paper or a test, and who still didn’t get the grade they wanted, that they thought they *deserved*. The same students who send seemingly entitled emails late at night or come by my office hours to do the dreaded “grade grubbing.” The same students about whom I sometimes privately think: *Tough noogies. Effort isn’t everything. You can work hard and things still won’t necessarily go your way. This is life.*

Oof.

Researchers are coming to better appreciate the role of emotions in learning (see here and here, for instance). Grading, in particular, is an “emotional practice,” for students and instructors alike. Getting this score from my daughter was a good reminder for me—and for all of us—of just how difficult the learning process can be for students. Failure (or even a C-level grade, which certainly isn’t failure), on top of everything else going on in their lives (e.g., living away from home for the first time, working part-time jobs, health problems, relationship issues, etc.), can hurt. It can feel frustrating, demoralizing, *unfair*—even if it is also “a necessary component of learning and growth.” When we get a low score, or other negative feedback, it can affect our motivation, our self-efficacy, our self-worth, our willingness to take risks, as well as our desire to continue.

I think it’s important to put ourselves in the shoes of students once in a while, to remember what these feelings—and their potency—are like. As we get older, there’s less of a demand on us to get out of our comfort zones. Kids are learning constantly: how to hold their own heads up, how to use forks, how to not run directly into oncoming traffic. As adults, we can usually opt out of uncomfortable learning experiences. When was the last time you tried to learn something? When was the last time you really struggled with a new skill or knowledge? When was the last time you failed—and it was public and someone else gave you a *grade* for it?

One of the skills that’s important to me to teach in my religion courses is empathy, which I hope students will apply to the people and traditions we study. But this skill is applicable to us too. Experiencing our own failures can be a good reminder that students are people too and that they bring a mix of emotions into our classrooms, all of which affect their learning. This reminder may help us consider how we might, perhaps more delicately or kindly, facilitate those situations in which failure is possible or even inevitable.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2023/10/the-feeling-of-failure/>

