

Sharing Personal Stories of Failure

Make students feel they can be successful by normalizing struggle through personal stories.



Basic Information

Time Required

Instructor Prep: 15 min

In-class: 5 min

Out-of-class: 0 min

Context

Area/Group: Physics

Affiliation: UT Austin

Source: TxMI

Course Size: Medium (50-200)

Author



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Practice Overview

Instructors describe their own stories of struggle to show firsthand that even those who are successful in the field had challenges and failures along the way to their eventual success.

My Story

There is a stereotype in Physics that you have to be born with a natural ability or certain type of brain to be a successful Physicist. I was concerned that students may be bringing this idea into the classroom in ways that could reduce their persistence and success in my class.

I teach general Physics, and I know there are many students who are concerned that struggling in the first part of class could mean that they don't have what it takes to be successful. Prior to the TxMI fellowship, I never really thought how students' belonging and confidence was really important for learning and performance in my Physics classes.

When I started teaching, I was told, "Don't tell your students about your mistakes or failures because you'll lose their respect." So I used to only tell the positive side of my story--all the successes I've had so students would look up to me. This biased story just propagated the idea that I was perfect and was born to be a Physicist. So I tried something totally different. I went to the opposite side and talked about my failures.

What does this practice look like?

Throughout the term, I took time in my classes to tell a bit about my personal stories of struggle and failure.

Here's one example of what I said to my students:

"I failed a Physics exam when I was a student. I'm not particularly proud of that moment, but life is not straightforward. Many of you will have times when you may feel down because you are failing something, and that's normal. Nobody is perfect. We all go through dips for a variety of reasons, and everyone can still succeed in the course and field. Whatever happens, it doesn't matter in the long-run. You just need to find solutions so you can learn from those failures. Failures are not the end. They are a starting point, where you see that something doesn't work, and you find a way to get out of it."

How did it impact students?

I was amazed at the positive feedback I got from my students after I started telling my stories of struggle and failure. Below is one student survey response I received that made me feel that sharing my stories really benefited them:

“I absolutely loved Dr. Markert! I was resenting having to take Physics as it has always been a hard subject for me. Dr. Markert was so intentional about sharing her own experience and encouraging everyone to feel confident in themselves. That did so much to boost my confidence and make me feel prepared to handle the material. I have truly never had a professor thus far who is as attuned to student needs as Dr. Markert. She made physics an amazing experience!”

My participation rate throughout the whole semester was 95%, and I was blown away by how much students engaged: they asked questions, they came to my drop-in hours and my Learning Assistants’ office hours, and seemed to be more open to say, “I don’t understand” which helped them to clarify specific questions they had so they could learn the material on their path in Physics. My students this semester earned the highest scores ever in my Physics exams.

Implementation Tips and Resources

Here are a few tips that can help you be successful with this practice:

1. Don’t be worried about talking about your own failure. It feels odd the first time, but it gets easier with time. It helps if you can observe the positive impact on the students and their performance. You start believing in the practice and in yourself. (I was skeptical at the beginning.)
2. Collecting students’ comments in the [PERTS survey](#) was very helpful. We also had weekly meetings with the TA and LAs to discuss feedback from students and the material for the next week. Be sure to tell students that their feedback matters and that you are open for their feedback. Every problem has a solution and we are all in this together.
3. Think about what you would have liked to know when you were a student.
4. Show your feelings in the classroom. I learned that showing feelings and being sensitive is a good thing and not a weakness.

Here are a few pitfalls to avoid with this practice:

1. Do not minimize the challenges students are facing or suggest “easy” solutions. Rather, acknowledge that it will take time and effort to overcome challenges.
2. Do not be unrealistically positive or needlessly negative. Rather, share both positive and negative aspects of your experiences.
3. Do not assume that students’ experiences will be similar to yours. Your story is just one example they can learn from; students will forge their own belonging journey.

4. Do not try to categorize anything as right or wrong or blame someone else for challenges you faced. If you tell a story, use the word “I” and say “this is how I felt.”

Anything else to consider?

Although this practice was intended to support my students, it also allowed me to address my own concerns and stressors about teaching Zoom classes and everything else going on. So as I was describing my failures and seeing students' responses, I became more comfortable with my own hiccups and obstacles, and learning from them. It really let me enjoy teaching more and feel like we were all in this together.

I implemented other things in my course to support this practice:

1. Every exam had a make-up exam so that students can work on their improvement right away. We also had in-class quiz questions where students discuss their answer choices in a group (In Zoom we had breakout rooms). This includes 4 LAs in my lecture who helped to facilitate the discussion among the students. I give a 90% score for the participation and 10% for the correct answer (Conveying it is ok to not have a correct answer. It is more important to start the discussion about the physics concepts).
2. I started giving a 5 min break in the middle of each 75 minute lecture.
3. To build community, the Fast Friends questions and “how do you feel” questions were helpful.

I asked students for suggestions and got them involved in the solution finding process. This applies to Physics questions and to any other question of technical nature and syllabus layout.