

How to be a Successful Failure as a College Teacher

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Having noticed the paucity of articles and the little attention paid by faculty to the important subject of successful failure in the classroom, I thought it was time to share my observations and notes taken these many years. These recommendations may be followed in part or in toto, depending on the seriousness or the ambitiousness of the instructor.

First: Don't be Coherent

Some instructors try to follow an outline for each class. They even try to have the fifteen classes follow a logical sequence. Ridiculous. This is pure obsessiveness. I recommend "wandering". If a student asks about a different topic or if the question is not really on the subject as you are lecturing, excellent. Follow this new path for the rest of the hour. This way you demonstrate flexibility, an important virtue for the students to emulate. Also, students should see that you are knowledgeable in other areas besides your own field, e.g., baseball, making flapjacks, where to get bargains on Long Island. At the end of each wandering lecture, you should hope to hear the students calling you "cool" from the hallways.

The second principle is: Don't Be Interesting

Some instructors feel driven to find interesting stories, articles, movies, technology. They are misguided. Students are here to learn, not to be entertained. They can listen to their iPods after class for entertainment. Some instructors use humor. I say students can watch the Comedy Channel for humor. Some instructors try to generate class discussion. I believe student discussion should be considered only an exchange of inchoate knowledge.

My strong recommendation: each class should be pure lecture. Bring in your detailed notes. Sit in the instructor's chair. Try to read slowly and carefully with no feeling. The goal of teaching is imparting knowledge. If you speak slowly, students are able to take careful notes. By speaking without feeling they can learn the importance of reason. Emotion is for the uneducated.

Third: Don't Be Serious

What does this mean? If students come in late you pay little attention. Some come in late occasionally. Some come in late regularly—ranging from two to forty-five minutes after class starts. Your correct response is to smile, never ever discussing this with them. Because they probably got caught in traffic. Or they changed their minds about what to wear just before coming to class. Or they simply got up late. When you stay up all hours listening to music or watching old movies, it isn't easy to get up on time. The instructor should be understanding.

Now on to absences. Forget them. Some instructors have a rule permitting no more than three or none at all. This is silly. Students have a lot to deal with. Traffic can be bumper to bumper each week at exactly the hour of your class. They can get unexpected flat tires; their car batteries can blow up. Or a student may have been baking a luscious pie, then burnt it by mistake, filling the apartment with thick smoke. Someone else may have a grandmother whose funeral regularly coincides with class. Also, students have many relatives who are sick and need visitation. What is more important, your class in humanities or human instincts to help family and friends? Case closed.

Talking in class should never be discouraged. Students need to improve their socialization skills and this is an opportunity. And demanding that students do the assigned readings means that you forget that they have busy schedules.

The most important part in not taking things seriously is to never be clear in your presentation of ideas. Some instructors agitate about presenting concepts clearly. What a waste of effort. Students need to think through things themselves. They should struggle mentally to figure out what you really meant – and thereby grow in the process. When you give a test and see that they really don't get it, you have been successfully obscure.

Finally: Don't Be Friendly with Students

Our model is not Willy Loman —to be well liked. We are there to teach.

Mistakes I have seen:

- * Asking students how their week is going.
- * Trying to be helpful.
- * Finding out if they're better if they've been sick.

I've heard of professors having lunch with students at the U.C. I even heard of a professor who made a barbeque at her home during the summer and invited the whole class. Unbelievable.

In sum: I hope these four principles will be a small contribution to the failure literature.