



# Tests: Triumphs and Disasters

## What if review classes taught students to share each other's burdens?

Beth taught history and felt that review was a difficult time for students, so she decided to change her review sessions and encourage the students to support each other.

"I began my weekly exam-review sessions with an activity called 'Triumphs and Disasters.' Each student got two balloons. On one balloon they wrote an example of one thing that they felt had gone well during the review; on the other balloon they wrote one thing that they were still having trouble with. We discussed these and looked to see whether we could match anybody up. Quite often, one student will feel confident about something that another student has written on their disasters balloon. We talked about the disasters and suggested ways to help one another with strategies—some studying together or time with me. Once we had at least one way forward for every disaster, we popped the disaster balloons in order to put them behind us and move on.

"This only takes about ten minutes, the key is to do it every time to build up a pattern. I have found it knits the group of students together and can spill over beyond my subject. I had pastoral responsibility for a cohort of students taking standardized tests and introduced 'Triumphs and Disasters' to the voluntary review sessions I used to run. These originally were aimed at students who didn't have a quiet place to study at home, but they quickly became popular with everybody. The practice of taking responsibility for gaps in each other's learning had a noticeable outcome on examination days. I overheard conversations along the lines of 'That question, that's the one from my balloon, you helped me with that.' When the final scores arrived, the students were still mostly interested in their own results, but there was a sense that they were a little more interested in others' achievements too."

## What's going on here?

Beth saw review as an opportunity for building a supportive community of students, addressing their anxieties and helping them take responsibility for helping one another.

She engaged students in expressing their concerns to one another (balloons) and led them to focus on mutual support through an interactive activity .

She reshaped her practice by using balloons as a focusing device, planning appropriate student interactions to create a cooperative and encouraging atmosphere (mutual support, recognition of problems and successes).

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The exam culture can reinforce a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, implicitly suggesting that loving others and sharing their burdens has less value. There is little sense that it matters if you work together on something, making a gift of the knowledge and skills you have to someone else. The Apostle Paul tells Christians to rejoice with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn and to encourage one another (Romans 12:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:11). We can't share in one another's "triumphs and disasters" if we don't know each other and if we are preoccupied with our own lives. Loving others in this way involves a move from self to others.

## What difference does it make?

Stress can turn us inward and make us self-absorbed; we may not even see that somebody else is struggling too. Review turns us inward too, concentrating on getting the grades. Grades are important, but they can be achieved within a different atmosphere and can be turned into a chance to strengthen community.

## Where could we go from here?

Beth says, "Triumphs and Disasters" can be adapted to lots of different contexts. I have done it as part of team building, in residential activities, and in tutor groups. The key in all these settings is that it becomes a pattern for that group of students, not a one-time activity with a bunch of people they will never meet again."

## Digging deeper

Some modern societies tend to stress the individual, but the Bible stresses the connection between people and community. God is the father of all (Ephesians 4:6). As members of the same family, all Christians are brothers and sisters regardless of gender, nationality, or status (Galatians 3:28). Christian community is based on all being one in Christ and expressing that oneness in a compassionate lifestyle (Romans 12:9-10). It is lived out in supporting each other, sharing in working together for others, and giving of time, wealth, and self. The model for this is Jesus, who bore the burden of the sins of the world. This shows us that loving others means sharing in their suffering and helping them to carry their burdens and share their highs and lows (Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:2).

*We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community. Dorothy Day*

There is a sense of mutual responsibility that the Bible takes for granted. When Cain asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” he already knew the answer was yes.

*A man of a right spirit is not a man of narrow and private views, but is greatly interested and concerned for the good of the community to which he belongs, and particularly of the city or village in which he resides, and for the true welfare of the society of which he is a member. Jonathan Edwards*

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