



Foreign/Second Language: Failure and Community

What if failures were seen as opportunities to serve?

David taught a class of older modern-language students, and after the first major test it was clear that the makeup of this group was going to be a challenge. He had become concerned about what he saw as a tendency for his students to think in a very individualistic way about their learning, focused mainly on their own success or failure.

“Almost half of my students did very well on the test; almost half did very badly. There were relatively few scores in the middle of the range. I decided to treat this as a learning opportunity. When I gave the tests back, I explained the scores and intentionally stated that ‘we’ (not ‘I’) had a problem, because some students needed to move ahead faster and others needed to go much slower. I also handed around two kinds of cards, telling students that they could choose one of them to sign and return if they wished. One card said, ‘I think I am struggling with this material. I would appreciate having someone available to give me some help.’ The other said, ‘It seems like I am doing really well—I would be willing to give a little time each week to serve as a tutor to another student who is finding this hard.’ I explained to them that this was a chance for us to build a learning community in which we took care of each other and grew together.

“About half of the students returned one or the other of the cards, and I used them to connect students with each other, having them agree how to contact one another outside class. This of course was not the only way I tried to keep everyone learning. However, it became one of the ways we worked together to keep everyone engaged.”

What's going on here?

David saw poor test results as an opportunity to help students consider their responsibility to help others, and wanted his students to see others’ learning struggles in a communal context, as an opportunity to show that they valued their fellow learners.

He engaged learners in identifying their needs and reflecting on how they could use their abilities to serve, leading them to make a voluntary but specific commitment.

He reshaped his practice by choosing his language intentionally to promote community (“we” have a problem), using response cards to structure students’ responses, and providing a concrete way for them to help one another rather than a general exhortation.

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

Love, writes Paul in 1 Corinthians, is not self-seeking or proud; instead, it protects and perseveres in kindness. A Christian community is, among other things, one in which weaker members are honored and cared for, and the strong do not boast in their strength. This lesson was an attempt to apply “Love your neighbor as yourself” to the classroom community.

What difference does it make?

David helped his students take some responsibility for one another’s well-being in the class and moved the focus from individual success to class success and serving.

Where could we go from here?

It is good to celebrate individual achievement, but it is also worth considering whether our classroom practices, such as the ways we report test scores to students or structure group assignments, encourage mutual responsibility among students.

Digging deeper

Individual achievement is celebrated in the Bible, whether that success is in battle (David), wisdom (Solomon), faith (Esther), skill (Bezalel the craftsman), or intelligence (Abigail). Yet there also is a strong emphasis on mutual serving and responsibility. Christianity is not a

religion of lone rangers; faith grows in community and is practiced in community. Christian fellowship is about a quality of community between Christians, where all are interdependent and each person is important and works for the good of the whole. Christ is the head of the community, and all are dependent on him. ([1 Corinthians 12:22](#) ; [Ephesians 1:22](#)). The Holy Spirit binds the community together ([Ephesians 4:3](#)).

The duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position in life. Abraham Kuyper

All the blessings we enjoy are divine deposits, committed to our trust on this condition, that they should be dispensed for the benefit of our neighbors. John Calvin

Our society looks for freedom and happiness in wealth, fame, and power. The Bible sees it in giving and serving others. One Anglican prayer describes the service of God as “perfect freedom.” Those words translate *cui servire, regnare est*, “to serve is to reign.” To serve God and others is the highest honor; it is what we were created for.

One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve. Albert Schweitzer



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