Getting it Wrong

October 12, 2006

Original link

Anyone who's spent any time around little kids in school, or even read books about people who have, knows that they're terrified of getting the answer wrong. Geez, you don't even need to hang around little kids. When you're out chatting with a bunch of people and you say something that shows you didn't know something, you look embarrassed. When you're playing a video game and not doing well, you try to come up with an excuse. People hate failing, so much so that they're afraid to try.

Which is a problem, because failing is most of what we do, most of the time. The only way to stretch your abilities is to try to do things a little bit beyond them, which means you're going to fail some of the time. Even weirder are the competitive situations. If I'm playing a game that relies solely on practice against someone who's practiced more than me, I'm probably going to lose, no matter how good a person I am. Yet I still feel degraded when I do.

Anyone who wants to build a decent educational environment is going to need to solve this problem. And there seem to be two ways of doing it: try and fix the people so that they don't feel embarrassed at failing or try to fix the environment so that people don't fail. Which option to pick sometimes gets people into philopolitical debates (trying to improve kids self-esteem means they won't be able to handle the real world! preventing kids from experiencing failure is just childish coddling!), but for now let's just be concerned with what works.

Getting people to be OK with being wrong seems tough, if only because everybody I know has this problem to a greater or lesser degree. There are occasional exceptions — mavericks like Richard Feynman (why do *you* care what other people think?) often seem fearless, although it's hard to gauge how much of that was staged — but these just seem random, with no patterns suggesting *why*.

It seems quite likely that a lot of the fear is induced by a goal-oriented educational system, obsessed with grades for work (A, B, C) and grades for students (1st, 2nd, 3rd). And perhaps the fear of being wrong you see in older people stems from having been through such experiences in childhood. If this is the case, then simply building a decent non-coercive environment for children will solve the problem, but that seems like too much to hope for.

Perhaps the solution is in, as some suggest, building self-esteem, so that when kids are wrong on one thing, they have other things to fall back on. I certainly see this process operating in my own mind: "pff, sure they can beat me in *Guitar Hero*, but at least I can go back to writing blog entries". But self-esteem is like

a cushion: it prevents the fall from being too damaging, but it doesn't prevent the fall.

The real piece, it would seem, is finding some way to detach a student's actions from their worth. The reason failing hurts is because we think it reflects badly on us. I failed, therefore I'm a failure. But if that's not the case, then there's nothing to feel hurt about.

Detaching a self from your actions might seem like a silly thing, but lots of different pieces of psychology point to it. Richard Layard, in his survey *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, notes that studies consistently find that people who are detached from their surroundings — whether through Buddhist meditation, Christian belief in God, or cognitive therapy — are happier people. "All feelings of joy and even physical pain are observed to fluctuate, and we see ourselves as like a wave of the sea—where the sea is eternal and the wave is just its present form." (p. 191)

Similarly Alfie Kohn, who looks more specifically at the studies about children, finds that it's essential for a child's mental health that parents communicate that they love their child for who they are, no matter what it is they *do*. This concept can lead to some nasty philosophical debates — what are people, if not collections of things done? — but the practical implications are clear. Children, indeed all people, need unconditional love and support to be able to survive in this world. Attachment parenting studies find that even infants are afraid to explore a room unless their mother is close by to support them, and the same findings have been found in monkeys.

The flip side is: how do we build educational institutions that discourage these ways of thinking. Obviously we'll want to get rid of competition as well as grades, but even so, as we saw with Mission Hill, kids are scared of failure.

While I'm loathe to introduce *more* individualism into American schools, it seems clear that one solution is to have people do work on their own. Kids are embarrassed in front of the class, shy people get bullied in small groups, so all that really leaves is to do it on your own.

And this does seem effective. People seem more likely to ask "stupid" questions if they get to write them down on anonymous cards. When people fail in a video game, it only makes them want to try again right away so they can finally beat it. Apparently when nobody knows you're getting it wrong, it's a lot easier to handle it. Maybe because you know it can't affect the way people see you.

Schools can also work to discourage this kind of conditional seeing by making it completely unimportant. Even Mission Hill, which ensured every classroom was mixed-age, still had a notion of age and clear requirements for graduating. What if school, instead of a bunch of activities you had to march through, was

a bunch of activities students could pick and choose from. When people are no longer marching, it's hard to be worried about your place in line.

But can we take the next step? Can schools not just see their students unconditionally, but actually encourage them to see themselves that way? Clearly we could teach everybody Buddhist meditation or something (which, studies apparently show, is effective), but even better would be if there was something in the structure of the school that encouraged this way of thinking.

Removing deadlines and requirements should help students live more fully in the moment. Providing basic care to every student should help them feel valued as people. Creating a safe and trusting environment should free them from having to keep track of how much they can trust everyone else. And, of course, all the same things would be positive in the larger society.

Too often, people think of schools as systems for building good people. Perhaps it's time to think of them as places to let people be good.

Tomorrow: Getting it Right