**So You Failed the Test**

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The title of this essay is stated in declarative form but it could also be expressed as a question. In either case, there are times when the expression fits what must be said to a university student. As midterms and term papers flood our desks, it may be worthwhile to try to unpack what “failing the test” means, in terms of an opportunity for more learning.

Recent popular literature in education and psychology gives voice to a manner of understanding what failing an exam might mean. Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist, provides an interesting perspective when she says, “Students who believed their intelligence could be **developed** (*a growth mindset*) outperformed those who believed their intelligence was **fixed** (*a fixed mindset*). And when students learned through a structured program that they could “grow their brains” and increase their intellectual abilities, they did better. Having students focus on the processes that leads to learning (such as hard work or trying new strategies) a growth mindset and its benefits are fostered. A growth mindset fosters hope. That is, failure is given an entirely new context and affective expression. If a professor communicates to a student that failure on an exam invites further research, a new learning approach or perceiving sensory intake information in a different way, the learning experience acquires new and potentially positive meaning from an emotional point of view.

Neuroscience confirms this. An understanding of white matter in the brain and the neurological process of myelination helps us see what is going on. Myelin lines, part of the neurological system, are nerve fibers which protect and insulate neurons. Myelin aids in the quick and accurate transmission of electrical current carrying data from one nerve cell to the next.” Understanding this process is important for teachers. Psychologist Dan Coyle explains how “Myelination is created through what is called deep practice, a repetition of an activity creating skill through the process of neurological change.” Robert Sun expands on what is meant by “deep practice:”

“According to the exercise of deep practice, an immediate and non-judgmental feedback loop is provided, where skill building is suddenly no longer intimidating. The drills allow students to tackle complex subjects in manageable parts—stopping when an error occurs and practicing until that one skill is perfected—they march steadily toward mastery. This is the hallmark of deep practice.”

Can professors relate to their students’ failures in a different way? The concepts and language that a professor has developed during their professional years count. This is because as the professor’s language is perceived by the student, sensory intake occurs, patterns are formed, concepts are made and language is created with that student. What Arwood and Young say in *The Language of RESPECT (2000)* is noteworthy. “Language responds to past experiences through an emotional channel.” Therefore, hearing the word “failure” may call to a student’s mind a number of events and encounters packed with negative emotion. Since the motivation of the student is a crucial goal, the emotionally packed moment is best reframed to inspire hope rather than discouragement.

The reframe to inspire hope can be helpfully understood in the context of our shared Holy Cross mission at the Univeristy of Portland. In “Called to Hope: Some Characteristics of a Holy Cross Educator,” Br. Stephen Walsh, CSC explains Basil Moreau’s sense of hope: “The Christian anchor of hope is about trust not wishing”. Development of trust rather than wishing while dealing with students in a classroom can be challenging in some cases. Surely there are times when a professor’s trust might be abused. However, the risk seems appropriate in the context of a faith-based education where the development of intellect and virtue go hand in hand. Therefore both neuroscience and mission prompt the professor to create an atmosphere of hope in overcoming failure.

This development of hopeful trust and new pedagogical thinking may need to be accompanied by a structural change. If a professor comes to believe that she/he is assisting in the development of intelligence and virtue by encouraging deep practice through perseverance, some stylistic change may be necessary. Although it may not be possible in all cases, it might be conceivable that after having failed a significant project or exam, a student might retake it in different form, after she/he has done more research and spent more time in deep practice. Surely there lies a risk herein whereby a student may fall into a habit of procrastination by believing that he/she will customarily be given a second chance. However, the most current neurological research points to the real possibility that despite occasions of manipulation on the part of some students, both intelligence in the student and positive relationship between professor and student may increase as a result of the opportunity for a second chance to demonstrate what has been learned.

The benefits of teachers and students adopting a growth mindset are supported both by neuroscience and the charism of hope that anchors all of us engaged in education at this Holy Cross institution. It may well be worth taking the chance on turning “you failed the test” into a second chance.