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But I Didn't Die: The Power of Mistakes in the Classroom

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My name is Teacher, and my mistakes are Legion.

None of these mistakes are catastrophic. I haven't lost my temper and pulled my hair out by the roots. I haven't made grading errors that led to a 75 percent flunk rate. I haven't written such colossally terrible letters of recommendation that my students were denied entry to their dream grad school. Rather, mine are minor errors that speak to the mistake-prone nature of human beings: calling students by the wrong name; forgetting to unmute myself when simultaneously teaching in person and over Zoom; neglecting to post students' pre-writing activities before class and then scolding said students for not completing the tasks.

I am a good teacher not *in spite* of my mistakes but *because* of them. These mistakes speak to my humanity; they illustrate that despite my best efforts I am not perfect (although, damn, do I try!).

I teach an introductory business communications class to undergraduates who come to my classroom with a range of expectations: that they will ace my course without trying; that they will fail for sure no matter what they do; that they are amazing; that they are worthless. Filled with the enthusiasm and wild emotions of youth, my students rarely inhabit the middle ground. More often than not, they take themselves, and their performance in my class, very seriously.

Too seriously.

In the *HBR Guide to Better Business Writing*, Bryan A. Garner (2012) discusses the struggle that many writers have when it comes to putting words to page, noting that "the worry [about writing well] can take more out of you than the actual writing" (p. 13). This performance-based stress is something I witness frequently in my students. They are afraid to take risks because they are afraid to make mistakes. They become easily overwhelmed by basic writing tasks for fear that they might make the wrong choice and somehow ruin their assignment, and their grade, and their future career, and the careers of their future children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. I exaggerate a little, but in service of a point: students need to know that it is okay—*more than okay!*—to make mistakes. I believe that witnessing the mistakes of their highly educated and intelligent teacher (again, perhaps, I exaggerate) is a great way to get this message across.

When I tell my students that perfection is rarely achievable, or even desirable, and that done is better than perfect, I point to myself as a shining example of that fact. I draw their attention to errors in my PowerPoint slides and my tendency to go on pop culture tangents mid-lecture. I relate tales of my own minor classroom failures: mush-mouthed stumbling mid-lecture, technical

mistakes, syllabus errors. "I have done these things, and more," I say, "and I am still here; I have not given up; I am still trying."

This lesson is critical in my communications course, which culminates with individual student presentations, because few things terrify undergraduate students (and many people who are much older and more experienced) more than a public presentation.

They worry about forgetting what they were going to say. They worry that people won't care what they have to say. They worry about talking too loudly or quietly. They worry that they will sweat uncontrollably, start crying, or bolt from the classroom. This fear can be paralyzing, and it's a shame because it prevents students from achieving their very best in the classroom and in their future careers.

Students are not alone in this problem: public speaking is one of North American adults' most common fears, a task more onerous than handling spiders or scaling great heights (Ruscio et al., 2008). But there is an advantage to the pervasiveness of this fear, I tell my students: if they can overcome their nerves, step by baby step, then they will eventually stand out among their classmates and colleagues. They will be the person in the staff meeting who is willing to speak up when no one else does. They will gain positive attention and career success in the workplace when they volunteer to present their company's latest findings to the board of directors. When so many people are reluctant to stand in the spotlight, their willingness to take the podium will make them stand out as stars.

But how do my teaching mistakes help my students to become more comfortable giving presentations in front of the class? It's simple: I am *constantly* speaking in front of my class and I am *constantly* making mistakes. Sometimes my brain will freeze mid-lecture and I'll gawk at my students without a single idea in my head. Then I'll recover. I'll apologize for my lapse, find my spot in my notes, and simply carry on.

I made a mistake, and I didn't die.

My students laugh the first time I tell them that, but it's true: most mistakes, at least within the classroom, won't kill you. A student's worst fears about public speaking are unlikely to happen: the floor won't open up and swallow them; birds won't attack them mid-talk; they won't run shrieking from the classroom as their classmates point and laugh. If they do make a mistake, they can take a breath and carry on—just like I do.

I point out to my students that I've had a lot more practice at screwing up. I'm easily twice their age and I've been comfortable with giving presentations since I was in my teens. But, despite my experience, I make mistakes all the time. The difference between me and my students is that my experience has given me the confidence to handle these errors with aplomb. I have grown as a professional and as a human being because I no longer let my mistakes hold me back or define me.

Through my example, students learn that they are capable of responding to their inevitable mistakes with grace and humor. We mispronounce someone's name or drop our notes during an

important presentation. We load up the wrong PowerPoint slide deck or talk too fast or get the hiccups or make a joke that falls flat.

So we take a breath. We apologize. We laugh a little at ourselves. We carry on.

We didn't die, and so we live to make mistakes another day.

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