



EXERCISE: LEANING INTO AND EVOLVING FAILURES

Subject(s): English and Theatre

Goals: Students will be able to:

- Use background knowledge to expand ideas and add depth, utilizing reference materials when necessary.
- Use reflection to evaluate one's own role and the process in paired or small-group activities.
- Report orally on a topic or text or present an opinion.
- Describe a personal response to a theatrical experience using theatre arts vocabulary.
- Describe how personal experience, culture, and current events shape responses to theatre performances.
- Create and maintain character traits with body and voice.

Show Connection: *Failureland!* begins with a relatable moment. A young girl is panicking in the moments before submits her CommonApp application. She's worried that she hasn't done enough, hasn't *become* enough. What follows is a journey that exposes her to new ideas and people related to success and failure. There may be reasons for difficulties and failures. They may not be things we have to run and hide from.

Materials:

- Paper
- Writing utensils (pen/pencil /marker, etc.)

Set Up: Clear a section of the classroom space free of desks, tables and other materials to give the room an open area to work.

Description:

- Invite students to create partnerships and stand somewhere in the room facing their partner. Each partnership should decide who is Partner 1 and who is Partner 2.
- Partner 2 should stand neutrally. Partner 1 will now "sculpt" them into a physical representation of one of the prompts listed below. Partner 2 should not move unless sculpted by Partner 1. Partner 1 uses their hands to mold and shift Partner 2's body into whatever positions they need to create the sculpture they envision in their head. (Think macro and micro with the adjustments you can make to your sculpture. There's more than just arms and legs on a sculpture but facial features, fingers, toes, knees, backs, etc. These should be *expressive*.)
 - A representation of something they were doing last Saturday.
 - A representation of how they feel when they ace a test.

- A representation of what being yelled at looks like.
- A representation of eating a large meal when you're incredibly hungry.
 - If touch and consent are not regular parts of your classroom's practices and vocabulary, eliminate touch and have them mold the other person from several feet away, manipulating the air as if their partner were inches away from them. What you don't want is for them to make the statue and to have their partner mimic them.
- Do several rounds of sculpting work as practice, making sure to give each partner an opportunity to work as both the sculptor and sculpture clay.
 - Students can use chairs, desks, other larger scenic type objects if they need to for sitting or height of their statues but they must physically adjust all they want their statue to do. Strive students to "create / show us, don't tell us. Let the sculpture speak for itself."
- After a few of these practice rounds, instruct students to find their own spot to sit somewhere in the room. Ask them to pull out a sheet of paper and something to write with.
- *Failureland!* is, probably not surprisingly, a show about failure. Perceptions and definitions of success and failure vary wildly from person to person, based on factors like past experiences, privilege, family and societal expectations. Generally though, failures can be categorized into at least one of the following failure types:
 - **Real Failures:** Ones which we learn from.
 - *I ran a red light and got a ticket or I ran a red light, got t-boned, survived and learned a lesson.*
 - **Imagined Failures:** Ones we're afraid of.
 - *Why even bother taking my driver's test? I'm just gonna mess it up and fail.*
 - **Ignored/Unnoticed Failures:** Ones that we don't recognize as failures. Worse, we often view them as successes.
 - *I cut someone off in traffic. Clipped a pedestrian without seeing it.*
 - **Sought Out Failures/Failure Seeking:** Ones where we take big risks with the possibility of failure, not because failure is the goal per say, but because either way we will learn from the experience and push our own creative, artistic, scientific, etc, boundaries in the direction of expansion
 - *Putting self in new situations, a big fish that was in a small pond places itself into a larger pond with new, bigger fish. Playing and working with new and more senior people.*
 - **Failures Turned Successes:** Experiences that are initially thought to be failures, but yield incredible results by accident. Examples: Coca Cola, chocolate chip cookies, fudge, and penicillin.
 - *I fail to get into my dream college but instead I get into the *right* college for me, the one that gets me on the right path for the life I'm meant to live.*
- Discuss with the students some of the following questions as they relate to failure in their lives and that they have witnessed:
 - Think of the last time you failed at something. How did you respond to it?
 - Think of the last time you saw someone else fail. Someone in your life, someone in the news. How did you respond to *their* failure?
- Give students sufficient time on their own to note, draw and think through a moment of failure in their life. All the details surrounding that moment of failure and what it entailed. As they work, keep the following questions visible for them as inspiration for their work:
 - *What did the failure look like? Was it visible to the rest of the world? Was it more internal and only you knew about it?*
 - *How did it feel?*
 - *Where did it take place?*
 - *When did it happen?*
 - *How / what were the circumstances that led up to it happening?*
 - *What type of failure, of the ones we listed earlier would you identify this one as?*
- Once the artistic responses have been completed, move students to groups of 3-4. Invite students to share their failings within their groups.
- After a few minutes of sharing, students in each group should decide which of the members of the group they would like to create a group sculpture of. The person whose story is chosen will be the sculptor. The sculpture itself should be a physical representation of the moment of failure.

- Give the student groups 10 minutes to sculpt their failure sculptures. These will now, obviously, be larger pieces than the single person statues made earlier. Encourage them to find ways to physically show relationships and power struggles. Each student should be in the sculpture.
- Once ready, have each group hold their sculpture positions while the rest of the class explores their piece by walking around them and through them, getting a 360 degree view of the instance of failure that was created. Rinse and repeat this process with each group so that each sculpture is observed, appreciated and explored.
- Now, come back together as a class and discuss things you noticed, trends, etc in the sculptures displayed without knowing the more specific context of the failure itself.
- Ask the students if anyone is willing to share what their failure moment was with the rest of the class. Select a student. Before the student storyteller shares with the class, tell them that there is a particular way that the failure should be shared. Select a group of students (we recommend eight) from the class and have them join the sharing student in a part of the room where there is a decent amount of open floor space to work.
- Request that the volunteers lay on the ground or slump themselves over a nearby desk like a ragdoll.
- Instruct the storyteller that these volunteers are now their clay. "Please share your failure with the class through sculpting these eight into an image that shows the moment of failure itself. Every piece of clay must be in this frozen image in some way. As the storytelling sculptor, you are responsible for shaping the clay volunteers. You will sculpt around them with your hands as is deemed appropriate [either by directly touching or from a distance, re: teacher's instruction.] The main rule is that the storytelling sculptor cannot verbally speak to their clay with instructions or the rest of the class. You just have to create."
 - While the sculptor is molding, the other students should work on a different assignment or talk with each other. The sculptor will do poorer work if they feel all of their peers are watching them.
- Once the storytelling sculptor is ready to present, seated students rise to explore the statue "museum style" by getting on their feet and walking around the full piece, 360 degrees.
- Once the students have explored the piece and returned to their seats, encourage them to respond and comment on this art. What might the failure be? Who is the oppressed and who is the oppressor in the image?
- The story sculptor is then invited to explain the failure as it happened to them with the class, sharing only what they feel comfortable sharing with everyone (make sure that they know from the beginning that, if they choose to volunteer to be a sculptor, they will be expected to verbally share their story.) Given what they share, consider: What type of failure is this? What would be a productive or beneficial response to this instance of failure for the creator and those that were involved in the failure? (Where do we go from here in a positive direction?) What would it take for the next steps following this failure to be productively positive?
- Now, turn things over to the student audience. On the teacher's go, a single volunteer student will come up and resculpt the image. The failure must still exist - it's an essential part of the sculptor's identity and experience! - but the failure must be responded to in a positive or beneficial way in the long term. There must be a realistic level of empowerment within the image. Maybe it's the realization that this failure actually enabled later success. Maybe it's a recognition that life and the world continued after this. What does the positive response to this experience look like? Whatever it is, it must be a version that removes any negative judgment from the initiator or the community around them and replaces it with the possibility of progression.
- But here's the trick - we must all agree that the image has removed oppression and negative judgment. Once the new sculptor has completed the image, they will sit down, and if anyone in the group feels that it's still not right, that there's still oppression or negative judgment, they can get up and resculpt. And then, if it's still not right to someone in the room, we will continue to resculpt until the full class is in agreement on the image. It can also be resculpted if anyone feels the answer the statue provides is "too easy". We are consistently amazed by how frequently the "solution" presented in this round is everyone in a circle holding hands, regardless of the situation. Resist genericity!
 - A warning! It can be tempting to remove the perceived failure. Don't! This is about acceptance and celebration, not about erasure.
- Once the classroom has reached agreement on the updated sculpture, invite the student audience to soak in the sculpture one more time. Invite the clay students to shake out their muscles and then thank them for their time.

Discussion:

- How can we benefit from failure? How might excessive failure be a bad thing?
- Is it possible to be too cavalier or careless with failure to the point that it becomes dangerous or irresponsible? (For instance, it is ok to fail when you build a bridge when it's a model of a bridge but not when it's a real thing.)
- Can all people afford to fail? How is being able to fail and move forward a privilege? Do all people have the luxury to fail? Are certain people in the world allowed or enabled to fail more or more graciously?