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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Soft Places to Land

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## Soft Places to Land

by Daisy L. Breneman

I've tried to write this Toolbox SO MANY times.

I worked on it last fall at the [CFI Scholarship Residency](#); I've worked on it in various cozy spots on campus; I'm working on it now at my dining room table, watching snow fall. In other words, good gravy, I have failed at writing this Toolbox! Luckily, I have colleagues and friends (including on the CFI Teaching Team) who have been understanding, offering encouragement and feedback, and laughing with me over my inability to spit this thing out already.

In those vulnerable, hard, cringey moments when we mess up, or fail, or just can't face a certain task, it can feel like we're falling. Intellectually, it's easy to embrace [the power of mistakes in learning](#). Mistakes aren't just inevitable—they are essential. But, emotionally, the feeling is something else. Those moments when we tried something that didn't work or we said something we wish we could just take back (WHY is there no delete key for the words we speak?). Or, like right now, when we try to write something that just refuses to work. The [loop](#) of mistake, reflect on mistake, feel awful about mistake, linger on mistake more... can feel perpetual.

We CAN harness the power of mistakes in our classrooms and beyond, but only if we acknowledge the [messy emotional realities](#) and [power imbalances embedded in our notions of failure](#). We also must work to create cultures of care that offer support and encouragement, as well as ways to recoup, rebuild, or move forward after failure. We can create spaces for our colleagues, students, advisees, and other community members that [normalize mistakes and failure](#), and recognize the human reality of messing up.

And, really, one of the lessons of the last few years, for me and a lot of people, has indeed been [learning how to fall](#). Learning to be okay with things collapsing all around. Learning to navigate a world that feels unrecognizable (and sometimes [a self](#) that feels that way, too). Since we are ALL going to fall, in various ways, how can we help each other have a safe place to land?

In our classrooms, that can mean creating [low-stakes assignments](#), such as [discussion boards](#), [reading notes or quizzes](#), [social annotation](#), or [one-minute papers](#), that offer students space to fail. But, if you've tried this, you've probably also witnessed students agonizing over something that's a fraction of a percent of their final grade. It's important to also be [transparent](#) and talk about what

low-stakes assignments mean and *why* we create them—that is, be explicit about the activities as opportunities to experiment, learn, test out ideas, and, yes, fail.

To address the complicated relationship between grades and failure, we can use a variety of practices to [center equity in grading](#), including [self-assessment](#), contract grading, or [specifications grading](#). One thing I've done more and more over the last few years is build in more “cushions” for students, such as [extra credit](#) or dropping a certain number of grades so that students know they can miss, do poorly, or choose not to do a few smaller assignments. Recently, I've also started implementing a “gimme.” Students can choose from a mathematically-equivalent set of options; for example, they can use the gimme for extra time on a project (without penalty), extra points on a major project or assignment, or points on the final grade. I explain my reasoning for providing it and also build in some [accountability features](#), such as a reason for the request, to try to [balance flexibility and structure](#).

An emphasis on [process over product](#), a key component of [caring and inclusive spaces](#), can also help normalize failure. We can, as writing scholar Paul Feigenbaum suggests, use [“Failure Clubs”](#) to create classroom cultures that invite “generative failure.” This could mean designing courses that center student autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and community connection by allowing students to work toward self-created goals, while celebrating both progress toward goals, and the learning accomplished through failure. We can offer [revise and resubmit options](#), to emphasize the ongoing nature of process.

[Assigning Anne Lamott's classic essay](#) “Shitty First Drafts” can help students understand that the writing process is challenging for everyone, and that we all produce terrible drafts (don't I know it!) and that's okay. [Scaffolding](#) can be an important part of centering process—not just helping students get to the next “stage,” but also helping them understand the inherent value of process work (such as outlines proposals, and drafts).

And we can keep this in mind for ourselves, too. While we all appreciate the finished product of, say, committee work, or a publication, we can value and be more attuned to the process itself, and to the needs of those working with us. We can build communities of care, and offer each other encouragement as we work towards—or, change—our goals, and also support each other when we take [much-needed breaks](#) and opportunities for self-care. We can even celebrate career failures and work together to learn from them [by putting them out in the open](#). In co-creating [community agreements](#) (in classrooms, committees, or other spaces), we can center care, [vulnerability](#), encouragement, affirmations of the value of mistakes, flexibility, and other features that, as my students this semester phrased it, “center the human.”

For those concerned about [academic rigor](#) or maintaining standards, building in flexibility and using universal design actually [maximizes learning](#). If we remove arbitrary barriers, and fear, we can focus

on learning and making sure everyone has the opportunity to be successful ([whatever that might mean](#) for them).

Yes, there are contexts with less margin for error (nursing, anyone?). But, even in those, we can find ways to build up confidence. As one of my students reminded me the other day, even master aerialists work with a net (this student is, in fact, an aerialist). Sometimes knowing that we have a soft place to land is precisely what allows us to fly.

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