

# Fear, failure, and creativity: Thoughts on staying original in an A-F world

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I still remember the first time I failed – it as in Kindergarten. Many people don't believe that one can "fail" in Kindergarten. A child might be behind the other children or unready. I was neither of these; I was a failure.

On an October afternoon, we were instructed to draw a picture. I began with all the gusto of a supremely confident child. I was still an only child, with no siblings competing for parental time and affection, and I believed myself comprehensively extraordinary.

My world crashed around me when the picture was returned with these written comments: VERY MESSY, BAD JOB JOSH, F. I remember the formidable letter looming over me. That letter wasn't just stamped onto my picture, it was stamped onto me. Suffice it to say, that marked the end of my art endeavours, and for many years, my attempts at creativity.

Years passed and so too did I, out of kindergarten and (eventually) into my current undergrad years – yet I still remember the F. Recently, I watched a talk by Sir Ken Robinson (creativity and innovation writer) on: "Do schools kill creativity?"

Robinson suggests that children's ability to try without believing there to be only one current answer, both in content and expression, is what gives rise to their

tremendous creative ability. This creative drive is potentially stifled by conventional right/wrong thinking, as was my experience. Robinson's observation is to me a crucial reminder to enrich my educational experience by embracing creative potential. Perhaps this experience of finding creativity tightly bound by fear of failure in academia resonates with you. If so, I offer these thoughts for times when you find conventional academics coming before creative education:

*Know thyself.* Everybody fears failure at times, but if fear of failure is a serious, even paralyzing, issue for you, ask yourself why. Do I fear my parent's disapproval? Is this class going to make or break my career? There are numerous reasons why a person may fear academic failure. A great place to start overcoming fear is by understanding its source(s).

*Talk to your professor.* Most professors, like educators at any level, do not want their pupils to jump through arbitrary hoops; they first and foremost hope their students master and interact with the material. If you feel that you can demonstrate your understanding of the material in a way not marked out in the syllabus, ask your professor if an alternate project may be a possibility.

*Learn outside the academy.* Mark Twain once said, "I never let my schooling interfere with my education." Twain

understood education is not bound to one conventional method; rather education is an invitation to interact creatively with the world. Consider all learning options available. Look into independent research, studying abroad, attending guest lectures, trying a new sport or listening to new music. Options are abundant! Intentionally seek education, and seek to enjoy education.

*Listen to the living biographies around you.* Leaders in academic institutions had to be undergrads too! Dig into the wealth of

wisdom all around. You are likely to find that people do not become less afraid of failure – or more creative – by overwhelming continual success but rather by a journey of successes and failures.

Academic success is certainly significant for students. However, academics should never trump the importance of creativity and genuine learning. Work to educate your mind and embrace the idea that you are not bound to a letter assigned to your thoughts.