Designed Failure

*An Approach to Design Thinking*

By Kristi Hodges, NBCT

Teachers encourage their students to embrace failure all the time as a learning tool. But what about Teacher failure? Why is it educators are afraid to try new methods or strategies if there is a risk of failure?

Only after I attended a workshop with several colleagues did I really understand how paralyzing the fear of failure can be for teachers. The purpose of the workshop was to immerse my colleagues and myself in Design Thinking in order learn how to apply the Design Thinking Strategies to our individual curricula. I envisioned the workshop to be similar to all the other Professional Developments I attended- I would be given step-by-step instructions on how to implement Design Thinking Strategies in my classroom. I would go back to my classroom armed with the information and instructions. Then, *voila!*` I would use design thinking in my classroom like a pro. Judging from the initial reaction of my colleagues I believe they too had the same vision. It became apparent quickly that we were all very wrong.

We were divided into teams and given a challenge. *How might we implement* *Design Thinking Strategies into our curriculum*? We called the instructors over to our tables multiple times, asking if we were doing it right or if we had the right answer. Within moments, it became obvious that they were not going to give us the answer because they did not know the answer. That is the point of Design Thinking- to discover the answers on your own.

Soon the silent screaming in my head started, “But we don’t even know what we are doing! How do we come up with the answer?” Frustration hit an all time high! I could feel the inward groan of disappointment at another wasted PD day. The clock ticked away minutes and then hours. It was almost lunch and we were no closer to the answer. As a matter of fact, we were not even focused on our individual curriculums anymore. We failed at our challenge.

Then something happened. We started sharing our vision of the ideal learning environment. How the students would not learn subjects in isolation but study the world using the concepts of all disciplines. We discussed the small steps we would need to take and the experiments we would need to try for our vision to become a reality. How we could “Fail small in order to succeed big?” We were discussing interdisciplinary classes and using various modifications of the Design Thinking strategies to make the learning meaningful for the students. Somehow through all the frustrations and failures we arrived at Our Unique Solution- we will experiment with the strategies in our own classrooms as well as work together to design interdisciplinary opportunities for students. We recognized that we may initially fail, but we will learn from each failure in order to make changes and adjustments because we still believe in the larger vision- Our Unique Solution.

Only after I reflected on the experience did I realize the power of learning from failure. But in order to teach the power of failure to our students, educators must first be willing to take risks themselves. More importantly, just as students need a safe place in the classroom, educators must also have a safe place to experiment with new methods and learn from their failures. Education is often a place where student and teacher alike are expected to always have the right answer. Design Thinking is built around the idea of failing quickly and often in order to succeed sooner. If teachers are willing to cast aside their fear of failing and embrace the opportunity to learn from trial and error, we may discover failure is one of the most powerful tools for all learners.

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