



Editorial

The 'F' Word

By Benjamin Bolden

In 2000 I attended an Arts Education Conference in York Region. Author and television host Evan Solomon was a guest panelist, discussing the value of the arts in education. He said something that stuck with me, and that I have pondered a great deal ever since. "I am grateful to the arts," he said, "for allowing me to fail."

In education, failure is a bad word. The word conjures up a very vivid memory for me: Michael, age 7, big and tall and stuck in my grade one class with all the six-year-olds because he had failed. Michael was ostracized and ridiculed accordingly. He sat in a desk by himself at the back of the room. He seldom put up his hand to answer a question in class, and rarely filled in his worksheets. Why would he, when his most significant school learning was that he didn't know how to learn? In education, this kind of failure (thank goodness) doesn't happen quite so much anymore.

There is little value, we have learned, in labeling a young person a failure. But is there, perhaps, some value in allowing young people to fail? Evan Solomon thought so. He explained that, as a teenager, his high school drama teacher had encouraged him and supported him in writing and producing a play. Sets were built, actors were rehearsed, tickets were sold, people filled the theatre...and the audience hated it. The play was a dismal flop, and Solomon painfully learned lessons he has never forgotten and appreciates still.

With music, it is possible to fail spectacularly. Some are galvanized by such a failure, and become resolute, determined, and motivated to do whatever is necessary to overcome that failure. For others (those, perhaps, with one less layer of skin), failure will shut down the music making entirely.

Playing with failure, as a music teaching strategy, is risky business.

Should we allow our students to fail? Can failure help them to become better musicians? Better people? How can we help them negotiate failure? How does one even *define* failure? And whose failure is it, anyway?

When I am helping students learn, I go to great lengths to 'set them up for success'. I design assignments that allow students to do well. I support them and provide them with all the tools necessary to succeed. I celebrate and publicize their achievements. I feel good, and they feel good. I believe that people learn best through positive experiences...or do I?

I remember once, as a student, receiving a most discouraging mark on an assignment. A failing mark, to be precise. I went to see my teacher, apologized, and asked if I could do the assignment over. "Of course!" she said. "And there's no need to be discouraged; learning's rarely about getting it right the first time."

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As a teacher I learned early the necessity of celebrating small victories. But what to do with the failures? At first I wallowed in them, agonizing over what I might have done differently. I learned quickly that was not healthy or sustainable. So instead I developed a survival strategy of putting the failures aside; I made a conscious effort *not* to dwell on them. Some failures, however, were not so easily dismissed.

Danny drove me up the wall. He was not rude, or obnoxious, or misbehaved. But he had a way of getting under my skin...Danny was 12. I taught him language arts, history, geography, and music. We spent a lot of time together. I couldn't understand why he never had a pencil, pen, or anything else to write with. I couldn't understand why he never had his homework done. I couldn't understand why he never listened. Danny exasperated me, and I made him pay for it. I asked him to give answers in front of the class that I knew he didn't have. I kept him in at recess. I bullied him.

Then one day the vice-principal asked me to come down to her office. Danny's mother had requested a meeting. The vice principal didn't know what it was about. Neither did I.

"Thank you for meeting with me," said Danny's mother. She seemed shy, and nervous. She was small and slight (like Danny) and wore a scarf over her hair. "I thought I should come in," she said. "I just thought I should explain..." She glanced up from her hands, clasped in her lap, and for the first time, looked me in the

eye. "Have you noticed anything unusual about Danny's behaviour over the past few weeks?"

"Not really," I replied. "I'm afraid he still seems to have a lot of trouble preparing for class and staying on-task. I don't think he's applying himself. His work is low in quality. Although I am sure Danny is very bright, he is performing well below his potential." Danny's mother looked down again, at the hands in her lap.

"I think it's my fault," she said. "Danny has been very worried about me lately. You see, his father passed away about a year ago. Then, six weeks ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. He's finding it very hard..."

"Oh," I said.

"I was very happy when I found out Danny's teacher would be a man," she said. Danny only has women in his life now, and he really misses that male contact..." She looked up at me again, hopefully. "Do you find he responds well to you?"

"Well...not really." I admitted uncomfortably.

"Oh," said Danny's mother. "That's too bad."

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I tell this story because it represents one of my most resounding teaching failures. Danny needed compassion and empathy. I was perfectly positioned to provide it, and instead I failed him miserably.

But I learned from this failure, most vividly. I learned more powerfully than I have from any teaching success. And so I see the value of failure, and I (nervously) realize that sometimes I need to let go and allow my students to fail.

I try to explain to my students that sometimes they will be in a position to learn from their failures...and sometimes they will need to simply put the failures aside for a more resilient day. As music educators we have a significant opportunity to shape and influence the perception of failure or success that our students experience. How do you wield that power?

As music educators we have much less power to shape and influence our own perceptions of the successes and failures we experience in our teaching. How do you negotiate that powerlessness? CME

Please respond through the ether to: bbolden@uvic.ca



CMEA 50th Anniversary 2009 Help Needed

Do you have any photos of significant events in the CMEA story or of people who played an important role in its development (particularly before 1985)? If yes, please send them to Betty Hanley (Box 849, Terrace Bay, ON, P0T 2W0 — they will be returned to you after scanning) or send them electronically as JPG files (bhanley@uvic.ca). Please identify the year, names, and event for each photo. For more information, contact Betty Hanley (807-825-9048).

AN INVITATION TO SHARE YOUR EXPERTISE

A) Teachers are invited to submit exemplary learning experiences (lesson plans) that achieve outcomes that lead to 1) greater musical understanding and 2) a better understanding of social issues.

This approach requires much more than singing a song about peaceful schools. It extends to addressing critical issues facing Canadian society today and requires imagination to push the boundaries of typical current practice. How do we foster ways of thinking that question the world around us? How can we inspire socially responsible action in and through music?

B) Teachers are also invited to contribute to a database of social issues resources. Please include all bibliographic information, appropriate grade level, type of material (CD, book, etc.), and a brief annotation.

Selected learning experiences and an annotated bibliography will be compiled on a CD to be distributed to music education conference attendees in 2009.

For more information, check out
http://www.cmea.ca/grants_proposals.htm.