

## THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

Doing something badly has become almost mandatory these days. TED talks, graduation speeches, and advice from some of the world's most successful people regularly exhort us to fail. They offer no real consensus about why we should do that, but only present failure as, paradoxically, the path to greatness.

You could spend hours watching [TED talks about failure](#). And there is no shortage of essays: Failure creates humility which leads to empowerment, [writes](#) one professor. Another [essay suggests](#) that being bad at something gives rise to a "growth mind-set" and hence to improvement. Failure is good for success, a third writer [explains](#), holding up Thomas Edison as a model of the serial failer: "We're so focused on not failing that we don't aim for success, settling instead for a life of mediocrity."

Exhortations to suck at something rely on our fear of mediocrity — universally held to be a worse fate than failure. But why should mediocrity get such a bad rap?

We should learn to give mediocrity the love it deserves. The first step is to rebrand it. I prefer to call it "adequacy." To be adequate is to have achieved the basic preconditions for participating in an activity without ruining it for anyone else.

As academics, we need to convey the benefits of adequacy to our students, too. In particular, those of us who teach liberal-arts subjects need to be able to explain more convincingly the benefits of doing something adequately. Because day in and day out in the college classroom, we are asking our students to do things at which they may never excel.

I am, for example, an adequate choral singer, meaning that I can sing the right notes by the time the concert happens. Whereas the term "mediocrity" suggests a point on a scale midway between terribleness and excellence, "adequacy" is one side of a binary, the opposite of inadequacy. Mediocrity has a telos, always straining upward toward excellence, while adequacy is an achievement in its own right.

There is a gulf separating the mediocre and the excellent. I am a mediocre singer, Renée Fleming is excellent, and the gulf between us is uncrossable. But adequacy unites us. What Renee Fleming and I have in common is that we are both, at minimum, adequate singers.

I've learned from my experience in a choir that singing adequately brings me the same joys that singing excellently would provide. It gives me a thrilling sense of being inside the music. I

come to know a piece of music in an entirely different way after singing it — intimately, measure by measure. I go through a process of falling in love with everything I sing, even pieces that I didn't like much on first hearing. Once I have sung it, it is mine. I get pleasure thinking about it, finding new reasons to love it, long after the concert is over.

The same is true in our classrooms. Articulating what our students can get from mere adequacy in our disciplines is essential if we are to defend the value of a liberal-arts education.

In the liberal arts, everyone — excepting the few Leonardo da Vincis among us — does things at which they prove merely adequate. We will not get far by bludgeoning people with chipper assurances about the growth mind-set nor, on the other hand, by telling them it is OK not to care whether they are doing something even adequately.

My experience as a merely adequate singer has helped me imagine what a merely adequate history student can get from the classes I teach. Just as there is a huge difference for me between hearing music performed by someone else and knowing it from the inside as part of a choir, there is a huge difference between learning history from the History Channel and learning it as historians do, by working with evidence.

In my classes students experience the making of historical knowledge for themselves. They work through primary sources, gleaning what information they can from diaries, photographs, parliamentary debates, or even recipes. They soon realize that even their best efforts yield knowledge that is only provisional, not the entire picture — nothing with the polish and certainty they would get from a presenter on TV. But it is theirs, much like the music I sing is mine.

To honor adequacy is not to abolish standards. Adequacy is itself a standard. A chorus member who does not bother to learn the music, a student who does not or cannot do the reading, is not adequate, and really does wreck it for other people.

Many people work just to get to adequacy. Singing in tune did not come naturally to me, just as taking notes and understanding primary sources does not come naturally to some of my students. I was lucky to have a high-school chorus conductor who, despite my initial (and mortifying) difficulties with pitch, did not kick me out.

The evidence of her greatness as a teacher is not that I sing well, but that I sing *well enough*. Not taking my own adequacy as a singer for granted reminds me not to take the adequacy of my students as historians for granted, either. Instead of tolerating their inadequacy or mourning their lack of excellence, I prefer to celebrate their accomplishment when they fulfill the basic preconditions of taking part in the making of historical knowledge.

To honor adequacy is also not to preclude improvement. By now, I hope that I do more than sing the right notes. Insofar as adequacy is a license to continue doing what you are doing, it usually causes a person to do it better over time.

For me as a teacher, to honor adequacy is not to discount the individual excellence of particular students, but to appreciate the collective excellence that can occur even when some students are merely adequate. When I started teaching, I judged the success of a course by how many students wrote brilliant papers — which meant I was always disappointed.

Now I judge it by the quality of the conversation in the room: Did students listen and respond? Did the conversation build on itself? Was there enough disagreement to keep the discussion interesting yet enough common understanding of the subject and questions at hand to keep it focused? In short, did we make interesting intellectual music together?

In a good class, as in a good choral performance, the individual voices come together to form a whole more interesting than the parts. A bit of dissonance makes it all much more exciting. But the excitement can only happen if everyone in the room is adequate. Which is why I need my students to be adequate, and why I don't take adequacy for granted.

Let's drop the exhortations to fail or suck at something and instead cultivate the adequacy mind-set — the feeling of being proud and grateful to be good enough to continue doing something from which we get pleasure and knowledge. If I can get my students be adequate historians, then I am an adequate teacher. Adequate, and proud of it.

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