

Culture of Error

Overview:

A classroom that builds a "culture of error" is one in which we as teachers intentionally socialize our students to think differently about mistakes. From the moment students enter a classroom culture, teachers work to shape the students' perception of what it means to make a mistake, pushing them to think of "wrong" as a first step in the right direction to a final answer connected to deep understanding of the process by which we arrive at final answers through a complex learning process. Students are able to lower defensiveness, and have interest, fascination or relief in the ability to make and grow from mistakes. (Lemov, 2021).

Purpose:

For a variety of reasons, ranging from pride and anxiety to a desire not to disappoint the teacher, students frequently seek to avoid discovery by their teacher or peers that they do not understand something or have the wrong answer. In order for us as teachers to truly assess and bridge the gap between what was taught and what students actually learned we need to create a psychologically safe learning environment that fosters and lifts up mistakes as a critical part of the learning process.

Equally important as the teacher's role in response to mistakes is that of peers. A teacher alone cannot create a culture of error in which it is acceptable to fail. Classroom climate must be intentionally built around this concept from the beginning and revisited along the way.

Creating a true culture of error within a classroom fosters the inclusion of all voices, abilities, cultures, and identities, and teaches important life lessons in resilience and perseverance. This also puts the learning in the hands of students, to drive forward cognitive engagement and make the learning environment personable to those in the classroom community.

Application: When and where can I use it?

Creating a culture of error is relevant to grades K-12. It allows for the creation of a supportive learning environment and creates a mindset in students to practice patience and seek to more deeply understand. It would be most beneficial to weave in language related to a culture of error early in the year or in a course, through the creation of common norms within a community and while establishing expectations as the teacher. A community circle would be a useful structure to allow student voice relative to how they feel about making mistakes and what they need from others, such as peers, in those moments. Additionally, it is important to be ready to address instances where students act or speak in a way that is not supportive of an accepting culture of error.

Getting Started: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Begin early and often with intentional creation of common expectations around a culture of error, and the acceptance of mistakes as a part of learning for oneself and classroom community. Begin with teaching students to handle common situations, and practice proactively through modeling how you expect students to act when a peer struggles *before it happens*. Similarly, if needed, revisit this expectation as needed throughout the year. The goal is not just to eliminate negative behaviors, but to build a community where students actively support each other as they struggle through the process of learning.

Expect errors and strive to show that you are glad to know about an error in a student's work or thinking. Consider building in language such as "I suspect there will be disagreement here on the correct answer, so I'll be looking for multiple voices and ideas." Or, normalize errors around a topic by letting students know that "From what I know about this concept in my past classroom communities, it's a tough one! I think it will be important we hear from several students to really think about why they chose the answer they did, and to support each other through the challenge."

One strategy that is especially beneficial in creating a culture where error is accepted and expected is **withholding the answer**. For example, you might introduce a math problem and share aloud that you are looking for four or five different answers (then say those answers aloud). The key is not to give the correct answer, but rather work together to allow students time to share why they selected the answer they did. Giving the answer at the end fosters continued student engagement. It will avoid losing both the student who had it right to begin with (and checks out, thinking they don't need the discussion) and the student who made a mistake (and retreats into negative self-talk around "yet another mistake").

Work to **"manage the tell"** (Lemov, 2021). Avoid giving unintentional signals to reveal the answer before the deep learning happens. Related to this is how we as teachers respond to answers both correct and incorrect. Frequently, we may give a benign but potentially patronizing response such as "Interesting" in response to a student answer, which depending on the age, falls flat and is easily detected as a response to an incorrect answer. Our messaging can prompt students not to take another chance on an answer. Our most persistent giveaways are usually in response to wrong answers, but teachers may also have a giveaway for a right answer (facial cues, or inflection in a word such as "And can you tell us *why* you think Wilbur is afraid?").

Lastly, risk-taking is important in creating a successful culture of error. Praising students for taking a risk and facing down challenges fosters a safe learning environment. An example of a supportive statement to a group ahead of a challenging problem might be "This is a tough question. If you're struggling with it, that's a good sign. Now who will be bold and start us off?" (Lemov, 2021). Or, consider building in a practice of asking for "brave hands" to encourage risk taking, particularly when students may not be sure.

See this Instructional Move in action (link to video clips if available)

[Denarius Frazier: Remainder- Excerpt from Doug Lemov's Teach Like a Champion 3.0](#)

[Sadie McCleary: Culture of Error- TLAC Blog Post](#)

Read more about this Instructional Move (link to additional information)

Book: [Teach Like a Champion 3.0: 63 Techniques That Put Students On the Path to College](#) (Doug Lemov, 2021)

[Building a Culture of Error: A TLAC 3.0 Excerpt](#)

[The Mistake-Friendly Classroom | Edutopia](#)