



Failure Is an Option

Messing up is what helps drive learning, says Lynn Wilkins, OCT.

BY STUART FOXMAN



Crash. Crack. Splat. One by one, Lynn Wilkins, OCT, tossed “spaceships” from the roof of Toronto’s Courcellette Public School. As the vessels hit the pavement, her Grade 7/8 students rushed to see if the eggs inside survived intact. Most didn’t.

The test was part of a mission to Mars project, with the eggs meant to represent astronauts. Wilkins had divided the class of 30 into teams of three to four to build a structure (no parachute) that would protect the eggs. Were the students disappointed when their eggs broke? Hardly, says Wilkins, who teaches science, language, math, geography, history and arts.

“There was a lot of laughter and a positive vibe from the kids,” she says. “If something didn’t work, they were quickly talking about how to improve.”

The project defines how Wilkins approaches teaching. It called for collaboration, incorporated multiple parts of the curriculum, and was triggered by the students’ own curiosity. Perhaps the most important lesson: embrace failure.

That “f” word is a dirty word to many teachers and students, suggests Wilkins. It shouldn’t be. She doesn’t want students to walk on eggshells, worried about making mistakes, never taking chances, or being afraid of giving wrong answers. “I want them to feel the classroom is a safe space to try and fail,” says Wilkins. “They should be confident that they can take on problems and overcome adversity.”

What gets in the way? “When you emphasize marks, tests and right answers, failure becomes scary. That’s outcome-based learning. But learning is a process, and failure is a part of it.”

When students focus more on the process (with its bumps) and less on outcomes, they tend to be more relaxed. “Learning becomes organic,” says Wilkins. “And student achievement goes up.”

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Lynn Wilkins, OCT, engages her Grade 7/8 students in project-based learning, encouraging them to ask questions and make mistakes.

Wilkins didn't set out to be a teacher. At the University of Toronto, she played varsity soccer and studied urban planning, philosophy and geography. One summer, she coached at the school's sports camp. She loved helping the campers, aged eight to 15, learn and develop individually and as a team. Wilkins began thinking about having that impact in a classroom. "It dawned on me that I could do this as a career."

This is her 15th year in it, all at Courcelette Public School. In 2019, she received a Certificate of Excellence from the Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence.

"Lynn hones in on the different strengths of her students, meets them where they are, and draws out the skills where they can really shine," says colleague Marie Clarke, OCT, who has worked with Wilkins for eight years. "With the curriculum, Lynn also sees the big picture. She's a guide and lets students be in the driver's seat of their own learning."

The Mars project came about because the students showed an

interest in space, renewable energy and sustainable living. Wilkins wants students to have a voice in what they're learning, the way they work together, and how they solve problems. "That makes it authentic," she says.

It makes education come alive too. Teaching from a textbook? "That's the death of learning," says Wilkins. "When you do that, you're not focused on the student."

The goals of the Mars project: build a bottle rocket and egg lander, design a remote-controlled rover with a hydraulic arm, and create a model of a habitat. There was an element of financial literacy too. The students had a budget for their builds, and used fake money to "buy" materials like cardboard, wood, glue and elastics from Wilkins.

To carry out the project, students formed "companies" and created names, logos, slogans, mission statements, business plans, a website and a Twitter account. As they made progress, they had to do blueprints and short videos of the

building process, and post information pages on their website.

So many aspects of the curriculum — really, everything Wilkins teaches — came together in this project. "A curriculum in isolated siloes isn't rich," she says. "Real life isn't separate subjects. I try to integrate everything. That's the most important thing a teacher can do," she says.

Students can become so engrossed in the broader challenge that they don't consciously think of the core subject. Which can be a good thing, says colleague Cathy Shaw, OCT. "They don't realize they're learning 'math' or 'language arts'; it just sneaks in. That's a very natural discovery learning."

The group nature of the project is also essential. "Lynn knows that people have to learn how to resolve conflict and arrive at a consensus," says colleague Deneen Robertson, OCT. "She's trying to build life skills about collaboration and problem-solving. Everyone in the class also has a role to play and a sense of belonging. It's inclusive."

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“What Lynn does well is have multiple entry points for students,” agrees Samantha Gillan, OCT, principal at Courcelette Public School. “Her projects have a level of open-endedness. You can fine-tune the goals, so every child can be successful based on where they’re starting from.”

All students can find a way in. Wilkins describes one who wasn’t always easy to engage. She knew he enjoyed Minecraft, an electronic game where people can build items in a 3D world. So she suggested he create his Mars habitat in Minecraft. He was thrilled. “One thing I do for all students is leave the door open for them to propose alternative ways to present things,” she says.

She gained an appreciation for varied learning styles toward the end of her bachelor of education studies at the University of Toronto — and not from her classes. Playing soccer, Wilkins suffered multiple concussions in quick succession. She had a brain bleed and developed epilepsy.

Prior to that, she did well with traditional learning. Wilkins could read something once and remember it. After, she couldn’t recall information as easily or sit still as long (it affects her still). That helped her empathize with different types of learners. She explores what makes them tick. “I call it being a detective,” she says.

She also likes to remove pressure from students. Because they knew they’d have a second chance to test their egg landers, her class felt free to prototype many models. In the followup roof drop, they doubled their success rate from 40 per cent to 80 per cent.

A former student named Scarlett, now in Grade 10, says Wilkins encouraged students to raise their hands, even if they were unsure of the answer. “She had a rule. Whatever anyone said, you couldn’t laugh or whisper

about it,” says Scarlett. “You don’t always get things right on the first try. But you don’t feel unsuccessful. It made our class feel supportive.”

Wilkins says success is a topic at every professional development. “That mucks the waters. What we should focus on is making the inevitable failures fun and essential to their learning,” she says.

She did just that after teachers noticed that many Courcelette students were showing anxiety during math, to the point of tears in some cases. Wilkins helped design a school-wide wellness initiative, which included mindfulness sessions and fun activities like a numbers-themed scavenger hunt. Her work helped inform a school improvement plan.

Over the year, Wilkins often talked to students across the school about their feelings toward math, and gave her own class lots of chances in the subject. Writing answers on a whiteboard instead of paper, for instance, reinforced the idea of do-overs. “I tried to take away their fear and the intimidation,” she says.

Wilkins practises what she preaches: “I’m comfortable telling the class I don’t know something. Maybe it’s a science experiment I haven’t done before. We’ll see how it goes. If you don’t take risks, that’s where you lose the plot.”

Welcoming mistakes as part of the process, playing with the curriculum, breaking eggs — in Wilkins’s class, things aren’t always clean. But there are no real failures, just ways that haven’t quite worked that lead to other paths.

“She allows for creativity to happen in the classroom,” says Gillan. “Lynn teaches in a messy way. And there’s a beauty in that.” **PS**

The Ontario Certified Teacher featured in this profile has been recognized with a teaching award and exemplifies the high standards of practice to which the College holds the teaching profession.

Make learning project based

Lynn Wilkins says project-based learning helps students find meaning and motivation. Students take ownership of a task, learn collaboration skills, engage in creative thinking and take pride in their knowledge.

Here are four things Wilkins keeps in mind when designing these opportunities.

- 1) Start with a driving question that arises from student interests and passions. “It becomes intrinsically important when it comes from them — a solution they want to find, something they’re curious about.”
- 2) Make it relevant. “Link the project to a question or cause rooted in the world, so they see that what they’re doing has connections and impacts outside the classroom.”
- 3) Don’t just emphasize outcomes. “Moving to a process focus, we can adapt learning as new questions come up, alter goals and add different ideas. The process drives where we go.”
- 4) Give students plenty of opportunities to work a problem. “The process isn’t linear but cyclical. Fix mistakes, take a risk and try something because you know you’ll have multiple chances. This is where we see deep learning and creativity.”