Discourse Community Fail! Negotiating Choices in Success/Failure and Graduate-Level Writing Development

Michelle LaFrance
George Mason University

Steven J. Corbett
Texas A&M University, Kingsville

Abstract: If there is a better way to become an effective academic writer, many of us don't ever find it. In our experience, we become better writers by failing, sometimes abysmally, at the writing tasks set before us. But few scholars have made the importance of learning from failure their primary focus. Our goal in this autoethnographic essay will be to bring implicit assumptions about the productivity of failure to the surface of the discussion about learning to write as a graduate student.

Keywords: Productive Failure, Transfer, Queering Failure, Risks

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all.

- Richard Wright, American Hunger, 1977

I try my best to be just like I am,
But everybody wants you to be just like them.

- Bob Dylan, "Maggie's Farm," 1965

If there is a better way to become an effective academic writer, many of us don't ever find it. In our experience, we become better writers by failing, sometimes abysmally, at the writing tasks set before us. Even so, few among us like to talk about failure, let alone admit to the ways we have failed. For graduate students—especially in light of the pressures to professionalize, publish, and negotiate a demanding job market—the desire for professional acceptance often precludes any admission of struggle, difficulty, or self-doubt (Corbett & Decker, 2012). In today's educational climate, students—particularly graduate students—are conditioned to avoid failure at all costs (Wardle, 2012), and the stakes for educators who allow failure in their classrooms are high. Yet, novice writers may miss out on

deeper learning opportunities in their own writing development if they neglect to reflect upon complex task completion, *particularly when it is unsuccessful*. As Edward Burger (2012), mathematician and learning theorist, notes,

> Individuals need to embrace the realization that taking risks and failing are often the essential moves necessary to bring clarity, understanding, and innovation. By making a mistake, we are led to the pivotal question: "Why was that wrong?" By answering this question, we are intentionally placing ourselves in a position to develop a new insight and to eventually succeed. (para. 3)

Current discussions of transfer research (Ambrose et al., 2010; *Critical Transitions*, 2013; Donahue, 2012; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Wardle, 2012) have often similarly implied that *failure* is a quintessential part of "robust" learning. Christine Casanave and Xiaoming Li (2008) also argue that most graduate students accrue skills slowly and without a clear sense of progress. Moreover, our current theories of writing seem to call for a discussion of the learning potentials in failure. Post-process theories (Kent, 1999; Smit, 2004) have pushed against generalized or overdetermined notions of writing; these discussions foreground the indeterminate and ephemeral nature of producing complex writing within disciplinary communities. For graduate students, tasked with using writing as a vehicle to enter a professional field, the indeterminacy—and high stakes—of writing tasks like the dissertation (Pantelides, 2015) can often contribute to further confusion and anxiety around writing.

But few scholars have made the importance of learning from failure their primary focus. Our goal in this autoethnographic essay will be to bring implicit assumptions about failure to the surface of the discussion about learning to write as a graduate student (also see Fredrick, Stravalli, May, Brookman-Smith, this collection). Autoethnography, a form of critical ethnography, poses personal experience as a rich site for analysis, as it reveals the everyday impact of social forces upon the individual. Researchers who use autoethnography typically pose their own finely-grained personal accounts as sites that reveal the commonalities of experience across quite different situations, locations, and contexts. Drawing on discussions of transfer and productive failure (particularly discussions of metacognition, discourse communities, and the importance of attitude and motivation); theories of writing and writing-development; queer theory; and our own experiences as graduate student writers, writing program administrators, and instructors working with graduate student writers, this essay will discuss diverse theories and lived experiences in order to highlight why coming to terms with failure is important for writers. *Failure, we contend, offers rich opportunities for understanding the writing process and writing development for graduate student writers—it is part and parcel of processes of socialization into professional communities and learning to contribute to the*

knowledge-making activities of the discourse communities where we seek to belong. We will end by calling for more intentional awareness of the concept of failure, particularly at the graduate level.

Too Little to Succeed? Even Strong Writers Struggle in "Discourse Communities"

As college writing instructors, we have often used the concept of the "discourse community" to explain the rigors of academic writing to students new to—and frequently struggling to master—writing for college coursework. For academics, language use and community belonging exist in a reciprocal sort of tension, or as Patricia Bizzel (1992) explains, "[f]orms of language use [are] shaped by their own social circumstances" (p. 108). This definition of discourse community shows us that what we might call "expertise" in writing—or refer to more monolithically as "good writing"—is actually situationally dependent. In short, we use the term discourse community with students new to college to reassure them that learning to write effectively in a college context will take time and focused effort. The same is true for graduate students, particularly those who have been away from school for a bit of time before returning or who have switched disciplines and interests.

But we fail to understand the complexity of these working organisms if we do not also recognize their dynamic and ever-changing nature. In their study of how undergraduates work toward becoming more proficient writers within the disciplines, *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life* (2006), Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki explain further that discourse communities, academic disciplines, and even academic genres "evolve and change in response to a complex range of variables, including the motives underlying their production, the contexts in which they are produced, and the institutional and ideological agendas that help to shape both motive and context" (p. 18-19). Writers who know that the expectations for effective communication in one situation may differ substantially from those in another are set up to be more attentive learners in the writing situations they step into. Following this ideal, writers who keep their eyes open for signposts that indicate new or unfamiliar norms of language usage will be more aware, and as such, more effective, when entering an unfamiliar writing situation.

Unfortunately, this is easier said by writing instructors than it is learned by writers, even at the graduate level. And so, even as we find this discourse crucial to our work with writers at all levels, we also recognize that the majority of writers we speak with will learn—as we did—through trial, error, *and persistence in the face of failure*. A number of educational theorists and voices in the popular press have begun to call this quite typical experience "productive failure" (see Kapur &

Bielaczyc, 2012). We see a concern for avoidance of failure in the increased attentions writing researchers are giving to theories of learning transfer, particularly active in relation to the pedagogical design and value of first-year writing. But these issues and realizations are not relegated to the first-year writing classroom by any means, and are just as pressing, we contend, for our pedagogical approaches to work with graduate student writers.

Of course, for graduate students, the stakes feel much, much higher. In the introduction to their collection *Learning the Literacy Practice of Graduate School* (2008), Casanave and Li eschew the term "discourse community" for the broader term "community of practice," in part to recognize the breadth and diversity of abilities necessary for success in graduate school and as a newly professional academic. While both terms—discourse community and community of practice—call up the ways that writing is situated within and informed by an array of professional expectations, Casanave and Li use "communities of practice" to illustrate the ways that learning academic writing is a process bound up with any number of shifting and frequently undefined expectations particular to each graduate program. "[L]earning to become a member of a graduate school academic community requires that students become familiar with new cultural, literacy, and sociopolitical practices while under the pressure of time, financial hardship, and possibly unclear authority relationships with faculty members," they write (p. 3). Financial hardship coupled with the sometimes unclear mentor-mentee relationship with faculty, alone, is enough to cause great stress. But the vagaries and indeterminate nature of the larger learning process for graduate students often contribute to further confusion, anxiety, and self-doubt around writing.

"Students enter programs knowing that the dissertation looms on the horizon, though 'it' is rather ambiguous," Kate Pantelides (2015) notes as but one example of the lack of explicit training for the writing graduate programs require (p. 1). Often grad students have to face the high-stakes writing event that is dissertating as a trial and error gauntlet. If the problem of graduate student writing-performance confusion and anxiety is such a ubiquitous problem, then what steps can or might be taken to work toward possible solutions? "What graduate school did not do was teach me to read or write through the explicit means that I had anticipated," John Hedgcock lays out plainly in his essay "Lessons I Must Have Missed: Implicit Literacy Practices in Graduate Education" (2008, p. 43). The stories shared with us over our years of being and working with graduate students, as well as a number of the essays in the Casanave and Li volume (and the essays in this collection), also attest to this point: graduate classes as a rule require writing, yet few graduate-level courses explicitly set out to explain what may constitute "good" writing within the context of a course or field.

This has led some educators to argue that graduate programs need to be thinking more programmatically about their students as writers—offering explicit

instruction in the genres and professional heuristics central to their disciplinary practices. In her article "The Need for Curricular Writing Models for Graduate Students," (2001) Carol Mullen argues that too often graduate programs and instructors incorrectly presume that becoming a published writer will be a "natural" outcome of graduate work. The difficulty with this assumption is that "[g]raduate study is not typically shaped to socialize graduate students into the world of academic publishing; to many graduate students research and especially publication appear to be activities reserved for scholars" (p. 119). Learning to write for publication, according to Mullen,

> is a research project in itself, and some students may need guidance and support. Many students are unaware of the level of detail they need to familiarize themselves with in regard to such aspects of the publishing world as electronic clearinghouses, appropriate journals and other outlets, submission requirements, and the review process. They can also benefit from instructor's stories that offer advice about developing writing habits, preparing works, and getting published. Students may need support for making final revisions beyond formal course timelines. (p. 121)

As Adams et al. also make clear in Chapter 11 of this collection, these social interactions—modeling, advice, feedback, mentorship—are the social keys to student success in disciplinary communities. Without explicit instruction in writing for their courses and for professional publication, Mullen and Adams et al. argue, graduate students may accrue skills too slowly and without a clear sense of progress. The inattention to written norms of practice may be setting graduate students up to experience forms of failure that are not, in the end, as productive as anyone would like.

"Much of my knowledge emerged incipiently, without conscious awareness on my part," Hedgcock confides (p. 32). As such, Hedgcock argues that some of his struggle might have been mitigated or averted if he and other graduate students were more intentionally introduced to the expectations and processes of writing for their fields as part of their graduate training. The gains here may be larger than simply producing better writers in the short term. Hedgcock describes a typical emotional reaction to the difficulties he faced as a writer: "I have never viewed academic writing as anything but difficult, if not torturous; my attitude hasn't changed appreciably since my student days. Even after nearly 15 years of full-time employment in the academic ranks, I seldom find writing to be a natural or organic process" (p. 32). Whether more attention to writing in graduate school could avert the negative relationship some writers develop with their craft or offset the darker emotions that come to be associated with writing is left to be seen. Hedgcock, Casanave, Li, Mullen, and others, however, believe strongly that explicit attention to norms of written practice can only be beneficial. Struggling with writing on top

of trying to figure out all the other elements of success as a graduate student and an academic can feel pretty miserable.

Perhaps because of these widespread graduate school experiences, failure and the field of writing studies have always realized a mutually sustaining relationship. Writing process pioneer Donald Murray (1968/1982) argued that the most important experience of all for a writer is the experience of failure, as the process of writing is laden with failure: "the writer tries to say something, and fails, and through failure tries to say it better, and fails, but perhaps, eventually, he says it well enough" (p. 119). This led Murray to claim that the writing course should be an experimental one,

> a course in practicing, a course in trying, a course in choice, a course in craft. Failure should not be accepted passively, but failure should never be defeat. The student should learn to exploit his failures as he rediscovers his subject, re-searches his information, redesigns his form, rewrites and edits every sentence. (p. 119-120)

We might just as easily argue, then, that the graduate course curriculum in writing studies must therefore also be a curriculum with the notion of failure at its core, but one wherein students learn to metacognitively come to terms with the concept of failure, to manage their own experiences with failure, and to exploit the notion for its full worth. The work of queer theorists can aid us in these complex calls to personal exploitation as personal growth, offering foundational insights into our own experiences of writing development.

To "queer" something can mean to take an alternate path, to disturb the order of things, to "fail" in or "dis" traditional orientations (Ahmed, 2006). Judith Halberstam, in her book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), offers what might be called a theoretical blueprint for how graduate students often learn to balance exactly the tensions they experience between needing to conform to conventions and expectations in order to succeed and the desire to resist and take risks. Taking risks is an important piece of the growth of a writer; planning for more purposeful failures can then be a part of our intentional and strategic growth as learners and writers. For Halberstam, failure offers its own rewards: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmasking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (p. 2-3). Halberstam believes that one can realize a state of being "in but not of" (p. 11) the university, that even though we are—indeed by choice—part of the socially engineered world of the modern university, we might still realize our own local, esoteric knowledges, and that these unbridled knowings might just do their part to push the boundaries of the serious, stuffy academy where any sort of resistance by force may seem futile.

What might it mean to negotiate the often fuzzy interstices of choice in failure, adversity, and success in relation to conformity, resistance, or boundary-pushing? Building on Morten and Harney's "Seven Theses" of the "subversive intellectual," and informed by Michel Foucault and others, Halberstam posits three ways graduate students and teachers might consider "queering" their learning and teaching and, by extension, challenging the dominant paradigm of Conformist U. One, resist mastery: Halberstam believes that the counternarratives of "stupidity" in relation to mastery might open the doors to more salutary *conversation* that questions the boundaries of knowledge through "multilogue." She gives the example of ethnographic research that approaches a study with a very fixed set of assumptions, assumptions that can close-off the process of learning that overflows the original framework the researcher enters (p. 11, 88). Two, privilege the naïve or nonsensical: in championing stupidity and ignorance, we might just be also acknowledging the limits of our own mastery or expertise. Halberstam invokes Paulo Freire's famous "banking concept of education" and other pedagogical scenarios to argue for resistance to or outright rejection of the dominant attempts at intellectual colonization by the all-knowing discourse community "masters" (pp. 12-13, 120). And three, suspect memorialization: while implicitly acknowledging the value of memory in building discourse communities, Halberstam counterintuitively argues for the equally or (because it is so infrequently employed) even more important role of forgetting and erasure. She uses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as an example of a text that works against the grain of tidy histories of slavery (p. 15, 83). Holding memory in suspect can release the power of alternate ways of knowing and experiencing that can help graduate students make choices in what memories to hold on to even as they consider what knowledge will necessarily supplant or compliment previous understandings. In short, Halberstam urges academics to make choices in how they "fail" to be "normal."

In the following sections, we offer some of our own intimations—some more assimilative and others more resistant—of learning to negotiate the vagaries of the discourse community of Writing Studies/Composition and Rhetoric through our ongoing writing successes and failures.

Finding My Way as an Academic Writer: Michelle's Story

"Failure is a bruise, not a tattoo"

–Jon Sinclair

All of my life I have struggled with proofreading.
*There I said it. Out loud. (*An English professor—especially a writing teacher and writing program administrator—should have "perfect" grammar and spelling, right?)
I am a lousy typist.

I am sometimes stumped by the spellings of fairly common words.

I have to look up some of the academic terms others take for granted.

Sometimes, I look them up more than once.

Sometimes, I look them up more times than I can keep count.

I get lost in my thoughts and lose my way in just about every lengthy writing project I have ever taken on. I sometimes . . . with patience and persistence . . . find my way out of those thorny, dark places.

Yes. I said this. Out loud. To you.

But I am not alone.

At a backyard barbecue, I mentioned to a colleague—a junior professor like myself—that I was working on an article about the difficulties many graduate students face as they work toward becoming professional academic writers. Her eyes immediately darkened, and I knew she had a story to tell—a story not that different from the many I've heard from graduate students and new professionals working toward becoming published academic writers. A story not so different from my own. "It was so hard," my colleague confided in a low voice. Another colleague overheard us and jumped in at this point, eager to share her own similar experience. "Asking for help sometimes felt like an admission that I couldn't cut it," the second colleague admitted. "It was really frustrating," the first agreed, looking grim. "I just had to figure it out on my own." These professionals feared failure as much as I did.

Anyone who has worked with graduate students around issues of academic writing has undoubtedly heard the same sorts of laments with some regularity. As a graduate peer tutor in a university writing center, I often encountered graduate students who found themselves befuddled by the norms of writing they were asked to adhere to for their graduate coursework: the young woman in the social sciences crushed that her professor did not appreciate the poem that she had written to conclude her first grad-level seminar paper. The middle-aged businessman returning to school for his theology doctorate, who struggled to make claims (over simply summarizing), focus, and organize his scholarly papers. The dissertator in ethnomusicology who produced evocative descriptions of the community events she had attended, but who drew a blank when trying to connect those events to the theories of belonging and social organization that were active in her field. The numerous international students who could think with complexity and purpose in their native languages, but who struggled to cope with the steep learning curve of writing in accepted forms of polished Standard American English, let alone Academic English.

Like Hedgcock, Casanave, Li, and Mullen, I tend to agree with a need for more explicit attention to writing skills on all levels of study and across the disciplines for students, graduate and undergraduate alike. As Henderson and Cook demonstrate in Chapter 2 of this collection, "student self-expectations, and even self-doubt" often lend enormously to our impressions of ourselves as writers. Explicit training in the work of graduate writing has the potential to broaden this sense of self and

to clarify writing situations for graduate students. The students that I've referenced above frequently *felt* like failures until they had begun to master the rhetorical and communicative situations they found themselves in. Some were openly discouraged from continuing in their graduate programs by their mentors. Others were deeply wounded by professors' comments; they carried those wounds into the next writing task—but the comments made that task *harder, not easier*, to carry. Some dropped out—in my eyes, prematurely. It's only those who developed resilience—who kept writing despite the setbacks—that then moved from this place of uncomfortable confusion.

A frank discussion about failure is an important but missing piece of our approach to working with graduate students. We must present the possibilities and potentialities of failing to meet the expectations of others as part of the process of becoming a professional writer. While Writing Studies' current interest in learning theory and discourse communities, especially in terms of knowledge transfer, is commendable and can add to conversations involving failure, the field still has much to learn about how to coach students to a stronger understanding of these often difficult and sometimes emotionally charged experiences. Here, scholars in Writing Studies can take important cues from thinkers in other fields, particularly queer theorists who have long negotiated outsiderness and challenges to their academic and everyday belongings. In the struggle for recognition, a number of queer theorists have taken quite bold and sophisticated journeys into the notion of what it means to "fail" or "succeed." If we, as a field, were to openly address these moments of failure in graduate student education (and their close cousins: struggle, confusion, disillusionment, abjection, and rejection), we would come closer to the ideals already espoused by central discourses in our field, enacting a safer place for experimentation, intellectual growth, and identification for graduate student writers, bringing to life further opportunities to understand writing as a process and the ways writing development coincides with professional development. The first step in this process would be to pedagogically reconceptualize failure. It is currently read as a mark of outsiderness—we may re-see it as the very means by which we come to belong.

Like Halberstam, I believe that we need to change the grounds of our work—allowing writers at every level to resist and refuse the stiff models of belonging as perfection traditionally offered, clearly announcing that most of our own projects are unfinished, imperfect products of where we are at *now*.

As you may have guessed, however, my entrance into the discourse community of my graduate program was often marked with an enormous fear of failure: anxiety, dread of writing *at all*, and a pressing sense that others thought I wasn't really good enough to be in my program or to get a doctorate. (Some people call this "imposter syndrome" [e.g., Corbett & Decker, 2012]. Others say that graduate students in the humanities are particularly plagued by it.) I should note here that it took me a long time to get to grad school—on the way, I was a crisis counselor for run away

and homeless teenagers, worked in women's shelters and group homes for learning-disabled/developmentally delayed adults, and provided administrative support in a number of professional capacities (most notably assisting health-sciences researchers with publication in national medical and behavioral-health journals). So, I applied to graduate school a confident writer—I had published poetry; written for newsletters, regional newspapers, and on the job; and had once presented at an academic conference as an undergrad. My undergraduate professors praised the creativity and risk-taking in my writing. (They also consistently reminded me that typos and misspellings were distracting for readers, but were more encouraging than tyrannical about sentence-level correctness.) My employers occasionally noted that I struggled to edit my own work, but typically we worked in teams, so I usually had built-in readers for the final drafts of important written communications.

In my new graduate discourse community, the rules for writing had changed dramatically. (As Henderson and Cook note in Chapter 2 of this collection, the expectations for writing tend to change in the transition between undergrad and graduate programs). Suddenly none of my previous experiences seemed to matter at all. I was baffled, then, when my graduate instructors barely mentioned how to write . . . or what they wanted as readers and arbiters of my work. Their expectations were a screen of mystery. Most included one or two lines about the final assignment for their classes on the syllabus, describing it simply as a "seminar paper" or a "journal-length essay suitable for publication."

I was surprised when no classmates asked about these expectations. And, when I asked in class about these expectations, I could feel a level of impatience rise amongst my mentors and classmates. I asked questions anyway and my mentors answered—like zen-masters, speaking in koans:

> "You need as many sources as you need."
>
> "Sit with your questions."
>
> "Push on the text."
>
> "Interrogate the text."
>
> "You need to clearly articulate the stakes for your argument."
>
> "It's all about exegesis."
>
> "A graduate student should know about these expectations . . ."

My classmates smiled and nodded. I smiled and nodded, all the while thinking that I had *no idea* what they meant. They were speaking in riddles to me—an insider language that everyone else had and that I was ashamed to admit I didn't.

At home, on my own, I'd spend half an hour on a single sentence. Rewording, reworking. Spinning. Trying again. And again. I couldn't hear myself think. Texts felt like an impenetrable fog. What was worse, my work simply didn't cut

it. My professors' end comments called me out. I was not "modeling the sorts of conventions necessary for an academic conversation." Why had I begun so many paragraphs with quotations? Why hadn't I laid out my argument more clearly in the introduction? I needed to really focus, really grapple with the ideas. *Did I know that I wasn't producing graduate-level work?*

After a graduate mentor described my writing as "a string of blinking Christmas lights with no real substance"—which I translate now as meaning that I had not made clear the connections between what I believed were related ideas—I confided my frustration and fear to a small group of peers at a departmental social gathering. I was working harder than I had ever worked before to no clear advantage.

One of my friends visibly ducked her head and scrunched her shoulders around her ears, lowering her voice: "You should be careful talking about this. You never know who is listening."

As if, should we be discovered talking about the negative feedback I had received, *something we could not even name might happen to us*. As if admitting that I was failing despite my best efforts was itself taboo.

I fell silent.

I stayed silent.

For years, I have been terrified to tell others about how hard this work is for me . . . how frequently I find myself backed into corners, faced with a project that just isn't working . . . thinking that admitting this to others somehow signifies that I am poorly suited to this work. That I don't deserve to stand among my colleagues and peers.

But—as I have learned—the most fruitful projects develop over time.

Quality work takes time.

Sometimes it's the lengthier process that yields more thoughtful results.

It's okay to fail. Our goal should be to fail miserably and to fail often—as long as we keep learning from those failures and keep moving toward the goal we have set.

Failure is a bruise, not a tattoo.

A necessary part of the process.

Coaxing a vision into life takes time. Good work is not always convenient or entirely pretty or even half-way happy-making. I sometimes must coach myself into the patience and energy required to cope with my own processes. Those moments of realization—the recognition that what I'm doing *isn't working* and that I will have to start over or think more about what I see that others don't—are the bread and butter of my academic life.

I am always teaching myself to think the problem through.

And to think it through on my own terms. In my own way.

It is not always very fulfilling.

I'm thinking again about Halberstam's call to queer the academy—and LGBT activists in the 80's and 90's who shouted in the streets that *silence is death*. As professionals in Writing Studies—a special brand of professional writers, no less—we

must recognize the danger in allowing the moments of silence that inevitably arise when we engage in the social process of learning to take on such power over "novice" writers. Most of us enter graduate school aware that it will ask us to challenge ourselves and to remake our writing as much as it remakes our lives. And, there is something about the process of becoming an effective academic writer on the graduate and professional level that also often triggers deep anxieties, uncertainty, difficulty, and a sense of failure or inadequacy in otherwise confident and accomplished writers. Real personal gains for a writer can be recognized and capitalized upon in exactly those moments when a project feels most like it will fall apart—if only for the ways these moments teach us patience, perseverance, and dedication to the development of our best ideas.

If my enculturation into academic writing rarely ever felt as if it was actually *on purpose*—my accumulation of awareness and skill with the conventions of the scholarly essay was too gradual and too openly agonizing for that sort of descriptor—somehow, I did learn to be a more effective writer. I did this the same way most writers do, through reading and writing and revising and reading and writing and revising some more. Listening to readers, thinking forward as I wrote my first draft, trying to stay in moments of uncertainty so that I could slowly articulate a new idea, and coming to accept that failure—those moments that sapped my confidence, made me rethink, and got messy-messy-messy—were as important as any triumph.

It is important that we say these things to one another.

Out loud. In our writing. In our research.

As Halberstam notes above, we have to let go of the postures that stifle us as learners and as appointed mentors within an academic field. Failure must be recast as one of our most important sites of learning.

It signifies our belonging, not our defeat.

Processes of Authorial (Un)Becoming: Steven's Story

 "Failure" can be somewhat of a relative term, and it can mean different things for different people at different times. As Michelle discussed above, oftentimes what seem to be crushing defeats can—in time—prove themselves really only minor setbacks. Something I'm trying to get better at is negotiating how to make my work "fit" into various venues, while at the same time choosing when to fail to be too normal. When I originally wrote an essay for the collection *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring* (2005), I had purposefully composed it as a very hyper-stylized piece that addressed the issue of classroom-based tutoring on a rather broad and cross-disciplinary level. When I spoke with one of the editors, Candace Spigelman, however, she wanted a very specific focus that would fit precisely with what she felt she needed for her collection. She asked me to

research a bit on the directive/nondirective instructional continuum, an important and often talked about methodological concept in peer tutoring. We talked about texts that would help support this new focus. She also wanted me to eliminate most of the playful stylistics (the type you are experiencing right now!) to match the tones and styles of the other authors in the collection. Yet, I still got to have my "creative" moments. I was able to sneak in both a Bob Dylan and Walt Whitman quote to bring a smidge of color and personality to my essay and the collection. I usually carry this sort of "bend but don't break" authorial attitude into most writing situations. (Hint: After an essay has been vetted by an editor or commented upon by reviewers, you can frequently sneak in just a bit more color if you want. Shhh . . . don't tell the editors of this piece though.) I want to find those moments where even the nonsensical side comment can find its fitting place.

But, years later—when I failed my qualifying exams—I wondered what it would take to get those oh-so-serious Ph.D. exams up to academic snuff. At the time, it felt like the biggest failure of my life, like there was something really wrong with me. That I had been unmasked, finally found out . . . But what I really needed to understand was the loose baggy monster that is the genre of the exam essay. I needed to realize that it wasn't just ME (the actor), it was also YOU (the scene). It is well-understood in Writing Studies that students unfamiliar with a new writing situation or genre will fall back (regress) often on summary rather than argumentation and analysis. What my committee wanted were smart, sophisticated argumentative essays. Sure, they wanted lots of evidentiary support, but when I started to really study other people's exams, what I noticed was that they might only have 10 or 15—strategically well-chosen—sources for each essay, rather than, say, the 30 or 40 I had ridiculously tried to stuff in. The lesson here? When faced with an unfamiliar writing situation, I study models of the genre I am about to write in. I don't just peruse—I study. After meeting with my dissertation chair, I realized I should have also talked more with all my committee members about precisely what they would be looking for. How much summary did they want? How much argumentation did they want?, etc.

Then came the new rhetorical situations of the job search. First off, let me preface a more detailed discussion of the preparation that went into my job search materials with a brief idea of the sort of attitude I took and still take into these sorts of communicative rhetorical situations. Coming from the "nonmainstream" background I do, I carry a bit of a chip on my shoulder. I feel like I constantly must mask my working-class upbringing with all the intellectual showmanship I can muster. I recently told a couple of close colleagues at my previous institution that (before accepting their offer) I interviewed with several big schools and those schools didn't want to have anything to do with me. (I was being hyperbolic of course. Sort of.) I went on to say that "I want to show them that I can teach two courses per term, administer the writing program, *and* out-publish all of them!" Arrogant? Sure, maybe. But I was and still am learning . . . humility.

I learned a hard lesson during my exams, one that I won't soon forget. In preparation for the job search I did all the things right, textually, that I did wrong during the exams. I took all the sample materials I could get and studied them, especially the cover letter. The first draft of my cover letter was very vague about my experiences, publications, and accomplishments. Too much "aw shucks" and not enough "look at this!" perhaps. But after studying, especially my chair's cover letter from his uber-successful job search eight or so years before, I knew exactly what I needed to do. (The ancient rhetorical art of imitation in the service of invention must never be taken for granted.) I noticed that he didn't hold back in describing the details of his publications, presentations, administrative positions, and research activities in his cover letter—the significance of them, what they mean to our field, what they did for his teaching and learning, what they could mean for the institution he was trying so skillfully to persuade that they needed him. Once I felt I had a stronger draft of the letter, I asked all my committee members to read it and give me feedback. I took it through several successive drafts; I babied it and compulsively worked every paragraph, every sentence, every word, until I felt satisfied. And as the job search progressed, I tweaked it as I tried to better fit the needs of the particular audience I felt I was writing for. And there is that word "fit" again. Such an important concept in writing and academia in general.

Another strategy, suggested above while working my way through composing the job search materials, is letting as many readers in on the revising action as possible. Now that I've found myself in a position of authority, you'd think I might think it's ok (finally?!) to trust in my own editorial skills, right? Wrong. Now, more than ever, I rely on my colleagues to proofread any sensitive written correspondences I want to send out, including emails. (The "e-" means "electronic" not "emergency," I have to tell myself). I once sent an email to a prospective employer, referring to her as "Ms. _____." She emailed me back with a very curt reply along the lines of "I did not spend 8 years earning a Ph.D. to be referred to as 'Ms.'" Needless to say, I failed to get any consideration, let alone the job. When working with situations that often involve people's jobs, their lives, the wrong words put the wrong way can be devastating. The one minute it takes to compose a well-intentioned, but perhaps hurried, email to an adjunct instructor—telling them that you don't have a course to offer them next term—needs to be followed by about 15 minutes of wait time before being sent. I am learning much about tact and diplomacy from far more seasoned colleagues who have had to do this many times before, chairs, deans, other program leaders. Often what I end up discovering is that some of the sensitive writing situations I find myself in—while relatively simple-seeming on the surface—are actually quite complex, often unique enough that they require some collaborative and collective rumination with intelligent council. Sometimes these situations are even new for the veterans and really require some creative, multi-perspective problem-solving before we can even attempt a written response.

I am learning that many communications I used to take for granted—emails, memos, queries—can be just as important as any major essay, letter, or grant application. So I am trying to train myself to approach the composing process of these written communications the same way I would any important essay or letter. The more important the email, the longer I let it sit in my outgoing mailbox. My offices are the studios of an artist. I have many writing projects going on at once, all in different stages, and I come back to draft after draft over time, always thinking about my audience, always wondering about the consequences of my words-as-action, constantly seeking advice for what I may not be (fore)seeing clearly. I often wonder "what would so-and-so think?" And, when possible, I *ask* so-and-so what they think. I don't want to have to face the consequences of another failed communication—if I can do whatever I can in advance to forestall such (unintended or not) failure.

Further, I am finding other connections between the training I received in grad school and the professional writing I've performed on a daily basis. For example, at my former institution, in preparing my yearly renewal file (building toward my eventual promotion and tenure [P&T] review), I found myself performing many of the same sorts of rhetorical show-and-tells I did while on the job search. The cover letter I spoke of above is very similar to the rationales I had to provide for the four categories of renewal and eventual P&T: teaching and professional competence, creative activity, productive service to the department and university, and professional attendance and participation. As I prepared the rationales for these files, I found myself doing similar detailing of teaching and administrative philosophy, publication and presentation venues and respective merits, and service to my academic community and to other people and institutions outside my university.

In all of these situations above—the Ph.D. exams, the job search, and the multifarious on-the-job communications—I made deliberate choices to toe-the-line, to conform. I made conscientious choices in my attempts to *avoid failure* by studying and performing more "expert," "smart" communicative moves that would not shock the minds and memories of my various audiences. I tried my best to act in ways becoming of a budding teacher-scholar. Then I prepared myself to fail at making everyone who read my materials love me and need to hire me.

Yet while performing all of these attempts to conform, especially for my former institution, gnawing at my conscious was that very question of "fit," of "normal." As I mentioned above, even though my former institution is considered a teaching school with a 4/4 teaching load, I stubbornly (even proudly) refused to ease up on my research and creative activity. I knew very well that—in the scrutinizing eyes of my P&T reviewers, those masters of that particular discourse community—much of my creative activity was considered surplus and almost unnecessary. But this is where the force of my own image of a college professor queerly diverged from my colleagues' and institution's cemented notion of the role of a professor at a teaching college. In short, and in some sense, I purposefully chose to "fail" at being

a good teaching-college professor, opting instead to remember and hold true to the (counter)memory of the types of professors my graduate school mentors modeled for me: perhaps I proved "unteachable" in some ways for my new institution. Maybe, in the long run, all the lessons I learned from graduate school actually resulted in "negative transfer" to my new institution—albeit with what I believe to be my full understanding and consent in my own (un)becoming processes.

Conclusion: Exploring the Value of the Negative

> The message is familiar: Abundant success lies on the other end of failure. Could guiding our students through their own failures inspire the next groundbreaking physicist, talk-show star, or iPhone inventor? Possible . . . but not likely. Even if the results end up being a little less grandiose, I think they are just as important. Learning to fail could help our students become more resilient, self-aware, innovative, and compassionate. Not bad for a bunch of "failures."
>
> <div align="right">- Ann Sobel, 2014, "How Failure in the
Classroom Is More Instructive than Success"</div>

We will briefly conclude this essay with our thoughts on how our field(s) and graduate students themselves might consider the implications of failure in relation to (un)becoming the best teachers, learners, and researchers of writing we possibly can. We couch these thoughts within learning theory's notion of failed or negative transfer.

Any professional or performer—although they may not always like it—inherently understands the key role of learning to deal with failure in order to succeed. That's why athletes, dancers, actors, cooks, etc. spend countless hours watching, considering, and critiquing their own and their peers' performances, good and bad. In her notably cogent article "Transfer, Portability, Generalization" (2012), Christiane Donahue offers a succinct review of the literature on writing and transfer drawn from education, psychology, sociology, and composition studies. While much has been made about the power of metacognition in the successful transfer of learning from one situation to another (e.g., Donahue, 2012), we know relatively little, especially in composition studies, about what phenomenon might contribute to failed moments of knowledge transfer. Learning procedures without an understanding of the accompanying underlying concepts, a-contextualized learning, and the learner's pre-existing conceptions can all interfere with and prevent successful transfer. Relating back to the notion of "discourse community" we discussed above, Donahue claims this very notion in itself can lead to failed transfer because the idea of "the university as a discourse community into which students must enter, and then disciplines as more specialized versions of that community, seem now to be reductive and overly linear understandings of the negotiation students take on" (p. 157). Rather,

Donahue points to the work of activity theorists like David Russell and Patrick Dias in her claim that meta-awareness of the various functions of writing as ways of thinking and knowing in and through various activities must be painstakingly gained through time-intensive processes of enculturation and apprenticeship. Donahue goes on to discuss studies and texts that offer "boundary-crossing" scenarios as productive exercises in experimenting with what might work in one situation versus another (cf. Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994). And this notion of boundary-crossing brings us back to those queer theories of divergent, multivoiced, multiperspectival, and even resistant, realizations discussed above.

If Michelle were to offer any advice to graduate students, she would offer four points:

- The first is to keep all feedback in perspective. Ultimately, the work any writer produces in graduate school or professional situations is the work of that writer. One of Michelle's favorite tips for writers is from popular speculative fiction author Neil Gaiman, who says, "Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly how to fix it, they are almost always wrong" ("Ten Rules," 2010). This maxim holds true whether the respondent is one of our peers or our favorite (revered) graduate mentor.
- Michelle also recommends asking mentors about their work habits and struggles—processes, difficulties with writing, and revision strategies. As a graduate student, Michelle cannot remember a single instance where a faculty member discussed these real-life/real-work issues with her. She knows now, as a faculty member at a major institution, that most faculty have at least one useful story about learning how to solve a writing problem, rejection of their work, or institutional misunderstandings about the nature and value of their work. (Though, yes, only a few are actually forthcoming about their own painful experiences—and many believe that such sharing is a breach of professionalism. Writing is an affective as well as cognitive and social process, so it serves no one at all to pretend these things didn't happen or that a writer's negative emotional associations with a project aren't something that can become a "professional" problem at some point.) It can be enormously helpful to hear our mentors talk about these things, humanizing a process that often feels alienating, intimidating, and cold.
- The real goal for any learner (qua graduate student writer) is to embrace the process—and that means keeping failures in perspective. For most of us, (even incredibly painful) moments of failure are necessary and instructive opportunities for deeper reflection that allow us to move to the next level. Take the time to stop and study what went wrong, what went right, what can be or was done to recover.

- Surround yourself with a small group of close colleagues who you can confide in when the work becomes difficult, who will listen to you as you talk your ideas through, who can tell you about their own struggles, and who can remind you to embrace the difficulty, the work, and the process. We're all in this together, after all.

If Steven were to offer any advice to graduate students on negotiating choices in success/failure he might include:

- Decide how far you are willing to go in conforming or boundary pushing/breaking in any given professional performance. He frequently likes to follow the advice of an old Cheap Trick song: "surrender, surrender, but don't give yourself away."
- Like Picasso did with painting, learn the formal aspects of various professional genres—emails, cover letters, CVs, book chapters, articles in the pertinent academic journals, etc. But also find your moments to bring (or develop) those nonconformist attitudes and actions. These can set you apart and keep you true to who you really are and want to become.
- All writers begin to thrive when they are able to coordinate the previous two suggestions as closely as possible with what they believe are their own creative strengths. It is in this integration that a writer finds their unique voice and begins to see the specific contributions to the ongoing conversations that only they may make. Search out venues that will foster your unique qualities: if you are a natural speaker or performer, seek out presentation venues; if you love interacting with people, seek out qualitative field research venues; if you like journalistic writing, try composing articles for your school newspaper or online sources like The Chronicle of Higher Education or Inside Higher Ed. Or, more modestly, consider contributing to or starting a blog where you write to whoever will listen: the point being that you write, practice, write, experiment, write, sometimes fail, sometimes succeed . . . whenever possible on your own terms.

And, finally, we both recommend that all writers at all stages of development talk to others as candidly as possible about when and where they struggle, their failures, and what they can learn from these experiences. And above all, keep working, even if the gains do not feel so readily apparent. As Brian Ray (2015) notes in his article "The Lessons of Failure," we are always making choices, trade offs, and strategizing as researchers—it takes time to watch our own patterns, habits, and processes over time. It often takes many years until we begin to see what many would call "success." We know from our own experiences and our work coaching and mentoring others that we can help ourselves and our students come to terms with the crucial role of systematic experimentation and boundary-pushing. The most fundamental aspect of our development as professionals is this relationship:

learning to and from failure. When our pedagogies and mentoring strategies begin to account for the complex opportunities failure offers, we offer ourselves, and our students (and our colleagues), an invaluable gift.

Then, *plan* to fail early and fail often.

References

Adams, L., Adams, M., Baird, P. F., Beck, E., Blair, K. L., Conway, A., Nickoson, L., & Schaffer, M. (2020). Crossing divides: Engaging extracurricular writing practices in graduate education and professionalization. In M. Brooks-Gillies, E. G. Garcia, S. H. Kim, K. Manthey, & T. G. Smith (Eds.), *Graduate writing across the disciplines: Identifying, teaching, and supporting*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://wac.colostate.edu/books/atd/graduate

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., Norman, M. K., & Mayer, R. E. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. Jossey-Bass.

Bizzell, P. (1992). *Academic discourse and critical consciousness*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Burger, E. (August 21, 2012). Teaching to fail. *Inside Higher Ed*. http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/08/21/essay-importance-teaching-failure

Casanave, C. P., & Li, X. (2008). *Learning the literacy practices of graduate school: Insiders' reflections on academic enculturation*. University of Michigan Press/ELT.

Cheap Trick. (1978). Surrender. On *Heaven tonight* [MP3 file]. Epic.

Corbett, S. J., & Decker, T. (October 15, 2012). Impostors, performers, professionals. *Inside Higher Ed*. http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/10/15/essay-feeling-being-impostors-academe#ixzz2XdYD41r9

Critical transitions: Writing and the question of transfer. (2013). Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. https://blogs.elon.edu/criticaltransitions/

Donahue, C. (2012). Transfer, portability, generalization: (How) does composition expertise "carry"? In K. Ritter & P. K. Matsuda (Eds.), *Exploring composition studies: Sites, issues, and perspectives* (pp. 145-166). Utah State University Press.

Driscoll, D. L., & Wells, J. (Fall 2012). Beyond knowledge and skills: Writing transfer and the role of student dispositions. *Composition Forum, 26*. http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/beyond-knowledge-skills.php

Dylan, B. (1965). Maggie's farm. On *Bringing it all back home* [MP3 file]. Columbia Records.

Feldman, D. H., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Gardner, H. (1994). *Changing the world: A framework for the study of creativity*. Praeger.

Fredrick, T., Stravalli, K., May, S., & Brookman-Smith, J. (2020). The space between: MA students enculturate to graduate reading and writing. In M. Brooks-Gillies, E. G. Garcia, S. H. Kim, K. Manthey, & T. G. Smith (Eds.), *Graduate writing across the disciplines: Identifying, teaching, and supporting*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://wac.colostate.edu/books/atd/graduate

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Duke University Press.

Hedgcock, J. (2008). Lessons I must have missed: Implicit literacy practices in graduate education. In C. P. Casanave & X. Li (Eds.), *Learning the literacy practices of graduate school: Insiders' reflections on academic enculturation* (pp. 32-44). University of Michigan Press; ELT.

Henderson, B. R., & Cook, P. G. (2020). Voicing graduate student writing experiences: A study of cross-level courses at two master's-level, regional institutions. In M. Brooks-Gillies, E. G. Garcia, S. H. Kim, K. Manthey, & T. G. Smith (Eds.), *Graduate writing across the disciplines: Identifying, teaching, and supporting*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://wac.colostate.edu/books/atd/graduate

Kapur, M., & Bielaczyc, K. (2012). Designing for productive failure. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *21*(1), 45-83.

Kent, T. (1999). *Post-process theory: Beyond the writing-process paradigm*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Mullen, C. (2001). The need for curricular writing models for graduate students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 25*(1), 117-126.

Murray, D. M. (1982). The process of teaching. In D. M. Murray (Ed.), *Learning by teaching: Selected articles on writing and teaching* (pp. 115-120). Boynton/Cook. (Reprinted from *The Leaflet*, Nov. 1968)

Pantelides, K. (2015, August 25). Dissertation genre change as a result of electronic theses and dissertation programs [Special issue on graduate writing across the disciplines]. *Across the Disciplines, 12*(3). https://wac.colostate.edu/atd/special/graduate/

Ray, B. (2015, Jan 07). "The lessons of failure." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Lessons-of-Failure/150967

Smit, D. W. (2004). *The end of composition studies*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Sobel, A. (2014, May 5). How failure in the classroom is more instructive than success. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Failure-in-the-Classroom/146377

Spigelman, C., & Grobman, L. (Eds.). (2005). *On location: Theory and practice in classroom-based writing tutoring*. Utah State University Press.

Thaiss, C., & Zawacki, T. M. (2006). *Engaged writers and dynamic disciplines: Research on the academic writing life*. Boynton/Cook.

The Guardian. (2010). Ten rules for writing fiction. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one

Wardle, E. (Fall 2012). Creative repurposing for expansive learning: Considering "problem-exploring" and "answer-getting" dispositions in individuals and fields. *Composition Forum, 26*. http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/creative-repurposing.php

Wright, R. (1977). *American hunger*. Harper and Row.