Chapter 49. Debunking the Flunking-Forward Myth: Towards Position-based Failure Narratives

Wally Suphap
Columbia University, Bard College

Here I offer a set of personal episodes of failure that, taken together, have led me to interrogate the value of "hard lessons" and better understand how to wield my own positionality as a writing teacher.

1. I Failed First-Grade English.

My first-grade teacher in Bangkok, Kru Daeng, assigned daily translation recitations. Each morning at the start of class, she'd write on the chalkboard five new English words, and their corresponding Thai translations: "Dog" is สุนัข. "Elephant" is ช้าง. "Red" is สีแดง. "Smile" is ยิ้ม. "Love" is รัก. At half past eleven, we had to stand in line in front of her desk and recite those translations from memory. If we got all five translations correct (she was a stickler for "proper" pronunciation), we were dismissed to go down to lunch. One by one, my classmates would complete the recitation and be given permission to leave class and head to the cafeteria.

Despite my best efforts, I was usually last to complete the recitation. English was by far my worst subject, and I made a point to be the final student in line so I could have more time to study the words on the board. *"Dog" is* สุนัข, I'd start. ช้าง *is Ele … le … umm-umm...font*? I'd stumble and start again. Sometimes it'd take me three or four attempts to get it right. I recalled pleading with Kru Daeng to give me a pass. *Can't I get credit for trying?* She never gave in. Most days by the time I joined my classmates at the cafeteria they were midway through their lunch; some already finished their meals and were kicking balls on the playground.

This was my first memory of academic failure. Every day I dreaded that late-morning hour of English lessons which I spent nervously anticipating my sweaty-messy self in front of the teacher, stumbling, fumbling, hungry to identify the correct answers. I don't remember my teacher being overly cruel, and to her credit, I assume she meant well. I could see, from her perspective, how the quizzes were employed as a carrot, for our own good, to motivate us to memorize the vocabulary and study harder. But from my six-year-old perspective, I couldn't help but feel starved by those quizzes; to me, they operated like sticks, pounding away at my confidence.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2026.2906.2.49

Decades later, I still haven't completely shaken off the shame of those repeated flops. They are the subjects of my worst nightmares, even now as a lawyer-turned-writer and college writing professor. I emigrated to the States when I was seven years old, and during my first grade at a public school in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley (I was forced to repeat a grade after my immigration), I could barely string together a sentence; instead, I resorted to using make-shift sign language to communicate with my teachers and classmates. In elementary school, after discovering how to make vocabulary flashcards, I managed to catch up to my peers. By middle school, I was drafting coherent essays.

One of those early essays was a reported profile of my mother for an assignment in eighth grade. I interviewed her and wrote about her divorce and becoming a single mother, her former undocumented immigrant status, her grit and entrepreneurship in opening up one of the first Thai restaurants in the San Fernando Valley. It was the first essay where I felt a sense of writerly control. I chose the topic. I chose the style. I chose a persona. It was a revelation. For the first time, I enjoyed the freedom, the thrill, of bringing myself into my writing.

When I reflect on my personal history of English education, I shift between dueling accounts. One version gives credit for the punishing protocols adopted by the likes of the stern Kru Daeng, and thanks them for teaching with might and instilling me with a fear of failure. This version sees failure as critical and necessary, an impetus for later successes. But another version sees those failures as harsh punishments, as cruel beyond helpful. While I acknowledge those series of failures pushed me to study harder, I cannot deny that my daily translation battles at an early age cultivated an uneasy relationship with the English language extending well beyond my childhood.

Truth be told, I wish to hold space for both versions, or rather, an amalgamated version. In this hybrid rendition, the instances of setbacks generate dual effects: motivating *and* harming, all at once. Yes, I've learned the lessons, but at what costs? Looking back, those lessons have left lasting wounds. I still have sweaty nightmares about those failed daily quizzes, and I clam up when I'm forced to recite something. We often talk about "hard lessons," but what about those that are *beyond* hard? So hard that they become internalized and embodied, scars forever affixed to the body. As one who carries those deep wounds alongside my successes as a writer, this double-sided version seems closest to an accurate archive of my trials with writing and language.

II. I Failed to Account for My Privilege.

Historically, pedagogical approaches to failure in writing have emphasized the importance of setbacks. Proponents of this notion of "generative failure" offer up snazzy mottos. *You have to fail to grow. You learn by failing. There's merit to failing. You can't achieve anything without failure. Failure is a necessary part of the path to success. Failure can be overcome. Fail better. Fail forward. Fail successfully.*

While I consider myself an optimist, I remain skeptical of these glass-half-full narratives. For one, they neglect the downsides associated with failure—the variations on the themes of hurt, shame, wounds—and overestimate the chances of future success. In fact, they often misleadingly paint success as an inevitability. *Work hard enough and eventually you'll get there.* Experienced writers know, though, that not all pieces we start will be successful or even completed. We writers miss the mark. We misfire.

More troubling, failure narratives often ignore the privileged positionality of the narrator. Take, for example, J.K. Rowling's famous commencement speech at Harvard University in 2008. Lauded as among the most brilliant and prescient, the speech espouses the "fringe benefits" of failure, elaborating on how she "failed on an epic scale" before she became the best-selling author of the *Harry Potter* series. By hitting "rock bottom"—she was divorced, single parenting, unemployed—Rowling says she was set free to rebuild herself. A phoenix rising up from the ashes of disappointments. To an audience of Ivy League crimson-clad graduates, Rowling preached from her perch: "Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way."

But who has the *privilege* of failing successfully? Implicit in Rowling's arc of generative failure is a two-step calculation: a personal reckoning followed by a bouncing back. Absent from this concept of failure is the acknowledgment that the latter step—the recovery—isn't guaranteed for everyone, nor is it all within a person's control. For example, all things being equal, the likelihood of a successful bounce-back is substantially higher for a Harvard graduate than most. Which is to say: Some people's "rock bottom" comes with a generous built-in cushion.

We see an example of this cushion in the fallout of Rowling's controversial comments on gender and trans rights—which itself is an act of failure to acknowledge privilege. Even though she's received backlash from some of her fans, and even actors in the Harry Potter films and other writers, she still maintains a special status in the literary world and the culture at large, a status that virtually shields her from ever regressing to a "rock-bottom" state. Certainly, her wealth and popularity might diminish, her reputation tarnished; yet, she remains a multimillionaire and one of the most successful writers. As of June 2025, Rowling has 14.3 million followers on X (formerly, Twitter), and in 2022, her book sales increased by 35% despite the calls to boycott her works due to her offensive comments.

In defending her position, Rowling has pointed to her own challenges with sexuality as a young woman and her own history of domestic abuse and sexual assault. In other words, she's staking her claim to the debate based on her unique positionality. Yet, it's a carefully-curated, cherry-picked positionality. In making these statements, as with her Harvard commencement speech, Rowling often deploys her personal narrative without due criticality or interrogation of the material conditions and systems that support her, not to mention her relative position vis-à-vis her audience and those whom she is attacking.

A few years ago, I was invited to be an alumni guest speaker for Columbia College's network for first-generation, low-income students. I spoke about my first career as a corporate lawyer and the transition to my second (and current) career as a writer-teacher. I cautioned against selling out, and encouraged a passion-filled career. During the question-and-answer session, an Asian-American student raised her hand and said she wanted to do non-profit work but was concerned about financial security and was now considering law school. She asked for advice on how she could obtain financial stability and support her immigrant parents, while still pursuing work that was meaningful to her and her community. Coming from a low-income family, she saw a corporate legal career as the safest pathway toward climbing up the social ladder.

In that moment, I realized I had neglected to account for my own privilege in my storytelling. I had already achieved a certain level of financial security and status as a corporate lawyer. I had a safety net, a soft cushion to land on if I fall. But to someone just starting out their career and coming from a marginalized background, was I not myopic in urging them to forgo the safety and comforts from a corporate job, the kind of job I had enjoyed and taken for granted?

Yes, I want to tell my students they can be a successful writer, as successful as the likes of J.K. Rowling, if that's what they want. I want to tell myself that, too. But aspirations do not always translate to reality. As a teacher and writer, I want to hold space for the plentitude of variations on the themes of hurt, shame, and wounds. I want to share stories that honestly acknowledge both my areas of disadvantage *and* privilege.

III. I Failed to Bring My True Self to Class.

When I first started teaching, I was reluctant to assign anything by writers who were Asian or queer or from immigrant backgrounds. I didn't want to be judged as demonstrating partiality toward writers of "my own kind."

A year ago, several colleagues in my department were assigning Cathy Park Hong's essay, "Bad English." It traced Hong's personal journey from her childhood shame of her once "broken English" to self-acceptance. I loved the essay, not least because it held space for the hurt and pain she experienced as a Korean-American while reclaiming the power in writing her own narrative. And still, I didn't assign it at first for fear of students accusing me of personal bias. I didn't want to be *that* non-native English speaker who assigns works by other non-native English speakers.

But in trying to break the mold, I trapped myself in another cookie-cutter mold. I often quote Oscar Wilde to my students: "Be yourself, everyone else is taken." I encourage them to apply Wilde's ethos to their writing: *Write in your voice, your style. Tell stories that matter to you, in ways that only YOU can tell it. Write about YOUR passions, interests, obsessions, haunts. Bring YOURSELF into your writing.*

Ironically, I was not taking my own advice. I brought instead to the classroom an entirely made-up—and radically unrealistic—"objective" teacher, a cardboard cut-out version that masked my identities and my minority status. It's not that I outright denied my identities, but I was purposely muting them, their free expressions at least, steering clear from raising any personal experiences in class that highlighted my race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

When I finally assigned Hong's essay (in my second year of teaching, upon the encouragement of a colleague), it was met with great enthusiasm and interest from my students, many of whom were non-native English speakers or else had struggles with writing growing up. During the in-class discussions of Hong's essay, I spoke about my own struggles with learning English in Bangkok, recounting my failures with the daily recitation exercises. In turn, many students shared their own stories of how, growing up, they were made to believe their English was "broken," "inferior," or "inauthentic." The essay resonated with my students, just as it resonated with me. Hong gave voice and narrative to the shame, and as a class, we individually and collectively recognized her shame as if it were our own. What's more, she gave us permission to reclaim our "broken" English as a badge of honor, as homage to our ancestors and cultural heritage.

Like most writing teachers, I ask students to complete multiple drafts of an essay, starting with freewriting and outlining to an exploratory draft and a formal draft, before submitting a final draft for a grade. Along the way, they engage in peer review, applying the agreed-upon community standards of tenderness and rigor. I also offer my comments, most frequently a variation on one of these themes: *Write more of this*! *Expand here! We are losing your voice!*
When a student tells me they are struggling to convert their exploratory draft to a formal draft, I tell them to keep going. What I am actually telling them, in an exclamatory yet tender voice, is this: *Keep being yourself! Stay true!* It's a mantra that I recite to myself, as a reminder to stay true to my own voice as a teacher.

IV. Can We Fail a Little Differently?[1]

One of the lessons I teach to my first-year undergraduates covers the topic of writerly authority. I begin by asking students to do a timed free-writing exercise based on a prompt: *What constitutes authority in a piece of writing?* After the free-write I ask students to volunteer to share out. Their responses often follow a familiar refrain. Authority, they say, is synonymous with confidence, forcefulness, expertise—offering compelling evidence to reach a firm conclusion. Authority, in their eyes, is associated with hardness, a certain toughness and might.

But what if authority is derived from *softer* components, I ask my students? What if the components that most express authority are actually the antonyms

1. Adapted from the last lines of Chen Chen's poem, "Circle 'C' If You Just Don't Know": "Can we go another way, another now? Can we / go, can we fail, a little differently?"

of the aspects they wrote down? Not (necessarily) confidence, forcefulness, or expertise, but rather, say, humility, gentleness, and a novice-mindset. What if it's not about so much forcefully pushing an argument but acknowledging the merits of counterarguments, recognizing the limitations of one's own perspective, accepting the possibility of being wrong? When I ask students to consider the assigned essays, and which ones exude the most authority, they often point to essays exhibiting these "softer" components of authority. They point to essays that lead not with fear or force but with tenderness and humanity.

This "softer" type of authority acknowledges, most of all, this: where one speaks and writes from, whether it's from a position of privilege or marginalization, or somewhere in-between. This is where I feel compelled to disclose my own position. Like all my prior pedagogical works, I write from a matrix of positions: a writing teacher AND a pupil; a benefactor of elite socio-educational institutions and systems AND a vocal critic of the same; an American AND an immigrant—among other identities.

When I think about the failure narratives I want to share with my students, I think about sharing stories from these hybrid positions—positions that affirm and interrogate my intersecting positionality, the privileges propelling my career path as a writer-teacher as well as the setbacks encountered in my English classes in Thailand and my initial years upon emigrating to the States. I think about translating my war stories to account for the nuances and caveats: narrated not from the all-knowing position of the ultimate victor but rather as one among countless bruised warriors still figuring things out—forging forward, banded together.