CHAPTER 15.

THE CV OF FAILURE: MAKING REJECTION VISIBLE AND CULTIVATING GROWTH MINDSETS IN DOCTORAL WRITERS

Dana Lynn Driscoll

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

When I began teaching an advanced research writing class for doctoral students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I had difficulty conveying to my students the role of failure, revision, and persistence in professional academic publishing. As an experienced faculty member who publishes, failure and rejection are simply part of the process, and my experiences are hardly unique. Studies of writing for publication in the field routinely point to the need to address failure and engage in complex revisions (Wells & Söderland, 2017; Söderland & Wells, 2019; Tulley, 2018; Gallagher & Devoss, 2019). But to graduate students and new faculty under pressure to publish, rejection and revision present serious challenges that cross lines of self-care, identity, and self-esteem and may encourage imposter syndrome (Driscoll et al., 2020).

I see at least four factors that make "rejection as part of the process" difficult to convey to doctoral students. First, students don't see the process behind published pieces they are reading in their courses. They read the best versions of articles and books in the field, versions that have undergone rigorous revision and peer review. The messiness, failure, resubmission, reworking, and general struggle of the process that created the article or book are invisible to them. Even if they conceptually understand this, the invisible nature of the process makes it difficult for them to fully grasp.

Second, doctoral students are used to being the best at what they do, and, for many, being the best translates into straightforward and successful writing processes. Doctoral students aspire to grad school while still in their undergraduate careers, likely performing at the very top of their majors and maintaining high GPAs. This striving towards excellence continues as they work through

their graduate coursework. For many, writing isn't necessarily easy, but it is often immediately successful in the contexts they have done it in the past in that they work hard, get good grades, and move on to the next paper. Rarely in coursework do they have the opportunity to experience failure, persistence, and revision to the extent that they will when they pursue professional publishing. These observations have been borne out in my data exploring both expert and emerging scholars writing for publication in the field (Driscoll, forthcoming).

Third, successful publication and successful dissertation writing is extraordinarily high stakes and is critical to job market success and graduation. This puts graduate students in a tenuous position with any publications, difficult feedback, or rejections they may face and contributes to overall graduate student fragility during these very difficult times (Smith et al., 2019).

Finally, success as students may lead to unproductive relationships with struggle and failure, relationships shaped not only by their own educational experiences but by the larger institutional frameworks in which they study. Psychologist Carol Dweck (2008) identifies two underlying theories of learning that shape how people approach struggle and failure. Fixed mindset learners may attribute failure and success to their own intelligence; thus, a failure of any kind is a deep challenge to their self-esteem and identity and causes the learner to shut down or avoid the situation rather than persevere. Growth mindset learners see failure and struggle as part of the natural process of learning and embrace failures as a chance to grow and succeed. To be successful as professional academic writers, students need to embrace a growth mindset with their writing. Dweck has argued that we can model and teach toward growth mindsets (see also Miller, this volume)—and I have found that the "CV of Failure" presented here is an excellent way to do just that.

Given all of the above, I began looking for ways to demonstrate to my students that getting rejected and having to do many rounds of revision was simply a "normal" part of the practice of professional academic publishing. Talking to them about it or sharing examples from my own experience didn't seem to be enough. A year or two after my course, I would often find myself dealing with a crisis in my office as a graduate student had a meltdown over an article rejection or a dissertation committee member's comments. I had to somehow help "normalize" this idea of failure and struggle in a way that sunk in, and that demonstrated that failure wasn't a reflection of their intelligence or ability—it was just part of the process.

I came across an article in the Guardian (2016) discussing how Princeton Professor Johannes Haushofer published his "CV of Failure" on Twitter. His CV of Failure included degree programs he didn't get into, grants that weren't funded, and rejections from academic journals. Soon, other faculty in other disciplines began publishing their own CVs of Failure. I thought the idea was

brilliant and incredibly courageous, and I worked to transform my CV into a CV of Failure to share with my students.

In my CV of Failure, I include failed dissertation topics, failed degree programs, and article and grant rejections. I tell the "story" behind the publications and offer a timeline behind each of the entries on my CV. To see how it works, here are a few sample entries from my CV of Failure.

Education

Ph.D. in English – Primary area: Rhetoric and Composition, Purdue University, May 2009

Secondary Concentrations: Writing Program Administration, Empirical Research Methodology

Third Dissertation: *Pedagogy of Transfer: Impacts of Student and Instructor Attitudes.* Linda Bergmann (Chair), Irwin Weiser, Shirley Rose, and Anne Beaufort.

Second Dissertation Topic: Studying RAD research in Composition. I found a study too similar after attending CCCC the year I was selecting my dissertation topic, and so I switched topics. Even though I didn't pursue this as a dissertation, two years later after graduation, I did engage in an extremely successful collaboration with Sherry Wynn Perdue looking at RAD research in writing centers.

First Dissertation Topic: Explorations of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis with regards to Environmentalism and Linguistic Choices (dropped after I could not find a director, leading me to be mastered out of my first Ph.D. program in Linguistics and join the field of Rhetoric and Composition instead).

Publications

*****Driscoll, D. L.** & Yacoub, O. (2022). Threshold genres: A 10-year exploration of a medical writer's development and social apprenticeship through the patient SOAP note. *Written Communication,* Vol. 39(3) 370–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/07410883221090436

This was probably the hardest article revision I have ever undertaken. We originally submitted a much larger study with more data, but reviewers told us to narrow it. We focused on the case study, abandoning 1 year of data analysis and rewriting 50 percent of the article. We got additional feed-

back from reviewers (revision 2) and then the editor (revision 3). It was accepted, and later, won the 2022 Association for Writing Across the Curriculum and The WAC Clearinghouse Best WAC Article or Chapter Focused on Research Award. Revision pays off!

Driscoll, D. L., Leigh, R. S. & Zamin, N. (2020) "Self Care as Ethical Professionalization: A Case of Doctoral Education in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication* (CCC), Vol 71(3) 453-480.

Rejected from one journal (without review for issues of audience and genre), revised and submitted to *CCC*. Accepted with revision at *CCC*.

Driscoll, D. L., Gorzelsky, G., Wells, J., Hayes, C., & Salchak, S. (2017) Down the rabbit hole: Challenges and methodological recommendations in researching writing-related student dispositions. *Composition Forum 35*.

Failed portion of our larger multi-institutional and grant funded study. We tried to code data unsuccessfully for three years. I was ready to walk away from this part of the project. Then my co-author Gwen (Gorzelsky) suggested we needed to study the failure, so we did a systematic analysis of what happened over a three-month period. It was fascinating and illuminated reasons for the failure. As first author, I had 50 percent of the original article already written and had to do a full rewrite. Accepted with revisions.

Driscoll, D. L. (2014). Clashing values: A longitudinal study of student beliefs of general education, vocationalism, and transfer of learning. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* Vol. 2.1. pp. 21-37. https://doi.org/10.2979/teachlearninqu.2.1.21

Rejected from two journals prior to submission to *TLI*. This rejection process took 2 years while I was on the tenure clock. *TLI* gave me a Revise and Resubmit, then Accepted with Revisions. The process took 4 years and had 6 major revisions before publication.

As you can see from my own CV of Failure entries above, the CV of Failure is a powerful and transformative teaching tool that shows graduate students the realities of the work and writing that faculty do. It helps normalize failure and shows them that successful faculty frequently struggle and fail—and that's ok.

The CV of Failure is a two-part lesson, useful for any advanced writing course for graduate students. Towards the end of the course, I share my CV of Failure and introduce them to mindset theory. To do this, I start the class by bringing in my regular CV and asking the students to read over it. I ask them what they see when they read my CV, and they usually respond with comments surrounding my success as a scholar. I ask them how often they think I fail or get rejected, and they tell me it is obvious that I rarely get rejected. Then I hand them my CV of Failure. I have them read over it and, again, ask them to comment. They are often shocked by how often I get rejected and how many revisions I need to make.

The second part of this class shifts to mindset theory. For mindset-shifting work, I have doctoral students read a piece I wrote with a co-author on growth mindsets, writing transfer, and graduate writers (Powell & Driscoll, 2020). The data in this piece suggests that mindsets toward feedback shape both short and long-term writing outcomes in two graduate writers. After we discuss the article, I ask them to get in groups and create a list of positive qualities that can help shift to growth mindsets. These often include things like accepting that failure and struggle are part of the process, practicing persistence, working to not link academic success to self-esteem, recognizing that tough comments can improve writing, developing resiliency, and practicing self-care.

In a following class, I bring examples of in-progress articles that are undergoing revision. These examples include rejection letters, feedback, and my revision notes. I talk to them about what I'm struggling to do or where I am stuck and how I hope to get out of the difficulty. The important thing here is not just showing them the pieces that reflect in-progress academic discourse but also modeling non-emotional and growth-oriented engagement with revision. I talk about these rejections and failures matter-of-factly, sharing how they help me grow in new ways, improve my work, and are an opportunity to see my work from a new angle. I talk about my emotions and how I deal with frustration, feedback I am unhappy about, and anxiety. I show them, through drafts with track changes, how much of my original work is often revised before it finds publication. We talk about strategies for shifting mindsets, such as walking away from their work for a time if they are angry or upset and also putting themselves in the position of the reader or having another person read through the comments. As a homework exercise, I encourage them to engage with my own comments on their drafts in a similar manner.

The end goal with these activities is creating academically resilient members of our discipline that have growth mindsets and that can thrive in the face of failure and struggle. Through the CV of Failure, modeling a growth mindset, and sharing examples of real-life rejections and revision processes, doctoral students can see how struggle and failure are normalized processes and are simply part of

academic life. While mindsets can't be shifted overnight, repeated engagement with these ideas, especially as they move into dissertation writing and writing for publication, can foster growth. By reframing failure, rejection, and struggle as opportunities for growth, they can engage in more productive and successful writing processes long term.

REFERENCES

Driscoll, D. L. (forthcoming). *Becoming an expert writer: Threshold concepts in writing for publication*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado.

Driscoll, D. L., Leigh, R. S., & Zamin, N. (2020). Self-care as ethical professionalization: A case of doctoral education in composition studies. *College Composition and Communication 71*(3), 453-480.

Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.

Gallagher, J. R., & DeVoss, D. N. (Eds.). (2019). *Explanation points: Publishing in rhetoric and composition*. Utah State University Press.

Guardian staff (2016, April 28). CV of failures: Princeton professor publishes resumé of his career lows. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/apr/30/cv-of-failures-princeton-professor-publishes-resume-of-his-career-lows

Powell, R., & Driscoll, D. L. (2020). How mindsets shape response and learning transfer: A case of two graduate writers. *Journal of Response to Writing, 6*(2), 42-68. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=journalrw

Smith, S., Hunter, D., & Sobolewska, E. (2019). Getting in, getting on: Fragility in student and graduate identity. *Higher Education Research & Development, 38*(5), 1046-1060. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1612857

Söderlund, L., & Wells, J. (2019). A study of the practices and responsibilities of scholarly peer review in rhetoric and composition. *College Composition and Communication*, *71*(1), 117- 144.

Tulley, C. E. (2018). *How writing faculty write: Strategies for process, product, and productivity*. Utah State University Press.

Wells, J. M., & Söderlund, L. (2018). Preparing graduate students for academic publishing: Results from a study of published rhetoric and composition scholars. *Pedagogy*, *18*(1), 131-156.