CHAPTER 2.

COUNTERPOINT: WHY NOT INTELLECTUAL RISK?

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What is the point of failure? Lauded by some scholars as a necessary aspect of writing—and, more broadly, learning—other researchers treat failure as a problem to be reflected on in order to avoid repeating. [1] In classroom practice, meanings also diverge. Interviews with writing faculty led Thoune (2020) to argue instructors see the writing process as "dotted with failure" (p. 59) and "premised on the acknowledgment and anticipation of failure as part of how writing works" (p. 54). Phillips and Giordano (2020), by contrast, speak of students at open-access campuses who "come to college conceptualizing writing as a series of inherent failures or believing academic failure is inevitable" (p. 155). In both, failure is a series of events and an assumed outcome. Yet the meaning is diametrically opposed: Failure represents the optimism of a fully engaged learning process and the pessimism of an already foreclosed learning opportunity.

Scholars of failure further complicate the picture. Barrón and Gruber's (2020) joint reflection describes five "constructs of failure" they encountered over their academic career:

> The most negative ones emphasize the unsuccessful performance as students, teachers and researchers; the positive ones encourage us to see failure as always leading to new information as well as new actions and behaviors. We have been told that failure is inevitable in our attempts to succeed, and

> because we are classified as faculty of color and international faculty, we are encouraged to see failure as a possible site of resistance in our attempt to subvert normative behavior. (p. 83)

Failure in the academic realm thus points in many directions. It can (1) undermine one's professional self, (2) provide important information, (3) suggest new ways of working and being, (4) form part of the learning process, and also (5) create opportunities to challenge norms. While some of these constructs can peacefully coexist, others work at cross purposes. Such varying definitions create ambiguity about failure's meaning, value, and role. But disparate views of failing have long characterized the academic conversation. Perhaps this explains why *Naming What We Know* includes a section on failure but hedges the title: "Failure *can* be an important part of writing development" (Carr & Brooke, 2015, p. 62, emphasis added).

Recent scholarship on failure has recognized its many inherent issues; ambivalence, for example, underpins the preface (Hay, 2020), introduction (Carr & Micciche, 2020), and afterward (Inoue, 2020) of the edited collection *Failure Pedagogies*. Yet failure maintains its allure. Perhaps this is because most scholars and teachers of writing believe what *Writing on the Edge* ran as the title quote for an interview with William E. Coles: "Failure is the way we learn" (Boe & Schroeder, 2002, p. 7). Conversations about failure have thus repeatedly recognized it as an important means of learning and as the end result of not learning enough. Failure's paradox–coupled with its stakes: personal, social, and academic–explains some of the ambivalence in the scholarly literature. But it does not illuminate a path to meaningful classroom implementation. What are we meant to teach students about failure, and how? The same holds for scholars interested in failure-focused projects. Which kind of failure merits attention, and by what methods do we explore it?

Previous projects on failure literature have noted its ambiguities and divergences; Carr and Micciche's (2020) pluralized title *Failure Pedagogies*, for example, foregrounds multiplicity. But the causes and consequences of failure's ambiguous meaning have received limited attention. Specifically, we contend that calls in Writing Studies to teach and study failure elide a set of competing values and concomitant agendas. Together, these varying conceptions of failure create a rich inquiry into a complex concept, but the differences are not often acknowledged—to the detriment of instructors attempting to engage with failure pedagogies and researchers interested in advancing this line of scholarship. Better recognition of conflicting views might produce more pointed research and provide a better guide to teachers looking to incorporate aspects of failure pedagogy.

We base our argument on a review of 24 journal articles, chapters, and books published between 1996-2023 from scholars in the general field of Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies (RCWS) and focused on projects that position failure as an animating pedagogical purpose. Among them, we found we could separate out three strands of purpose: Scholars and teachers of writing take up failure in order to (1) inform practice by retrospection, (2) transform character by affective experience, or (3) form and reform plans by illuminating constraints and desires. Grouped this way, the shared traits of each strand align with the classical branches of oratory and their orientation toward time: the forensic (focused on the past), the epideictic (focused on the present), and the deliberative (focused on the future).

Forensic case studies of past failures or epideictic calls for re-imagining failure appear to dominate discussions; there has been less attention to the deliberative potential of failure. At first glance, this makes sense. How could failure, a thing that has to happen, be studied from a future-oriented perspective? However, we find clarity about the deliberative approach when we consider how the potential for failure may help students deliberate about future action. When we discuss the potential for failure, we are really talking about *risk*, and when we locate this risk in the classroom and relate it to learning goals, we arrive at *intellectual risk*.

In what follows, we present the conversation about the pedagogical role of failure through this division of the forensic, epideictic, and deliberative strands. Then, we offer a counterpoint: If we want students to truly learn from failure, we should turn our attention to intellectual risk-taking. Intellectual risk-taking, we argue, has the greatest potential to help student writers weigh multiple options, reconsider dominant ideals of "success," and engage with others in deliberation that will help them learn.

THE FORENSIC STRAND OF FAILURE STUDIES (LEARN FROM IT)

Forensic studies examine past instances of failure, asking what happened and who or what is at fault. Such work aims to analyze past instances of failure in order to understand what went wrong; Segal's (1996) "Pedagogies of Decentering and a Discourse of Failure" exemplifies this strand. Segal's examination of failure narratives, for instance, in part identifies four types of accusations: failure caused by the students, the teacher, the institution, or the pedagogical theory. Inoue's (2014) "Theorizing Failure in Writing Assessment" offers a more recent example. By examining writing assessment scholarship, he argues that standard constructions of failure themselves fail to support student learning. Work in the forensic strand also

looks at more specific instances of failure. Alvarez (2001) mirrors Segal's study at a more local level by asking her high school students to develop narratives explaining why they or their classmates had previously failed a course; the results prompt her to overhaul her curriculum. Lehn (2020) and D'Agostino (this volume) both turn inward, considering moments of failure in teaching and dissertating, respectively. Regardless of the scope, for forensic scholarship, past failures allow us to reflect on what went wrong and draw lessons from it.

However, underlying these forensic studies are two debatable assumptions worth considering: (1) failure is inherently a problem to overcome, and (2) reflecting on past failures can help us develop skills to succeed next time or at least better address failure's consequences.

The first assumption treats failure as something gone wrong. As the examples above suggest, the failures taken up by the forensic strand are undeniable issues. Lehn (2020), for instance, defines failure as "moments when some sort of harm may have occurred or was mismanaged in a classroom" (p. 142). Pantelides (2020) argues:

> Plagiarism accusations can lead to identity trauma in which students are forced to reckon with a vision of themselves that they don't recognize, that of failure, and this revisioning of their identity and the attendant fear has long-term impact on their relationships. (p. 40)

Inoue (2014) further generalizes the harm caused by continuing failed practices; they create "psychological consequences for all students in the system that negatively affect their learning" (p. 336). For the forensic camp, failure is a problem to be reckoned with, not a state to desire.

The second assumption is that attention to past failures can help us find a path to success. Indeed, as Segal (1996) argues, reflection on failure is important because it helps us develop "productive strategies of amelioration" (p. 189). Thus, this strand focuses on failures in order to generate effective responses. Some work identifies failures in Writing Studies theory in order to promote what they see as better practices (e.g., Alford, 2020; Inoue, 2014). Others attend to failures at the institutional level. Pantelides (2020) interviews students charged with academic integrity violations to argue our current institutional approach to plagiarism is a failure and needs redress. Cox (2011) interviews a more general sample of community college students, concluding that faculty must address the "student fear factor" that often arises from and perpetuates failure. In this volume, D'Agostino recommends improvements to departmental dissertation processes in light of his own initial failure. Wood, building on Segal's work, questions common approaches to providing feedback in order to find

better ways to "talk about failure with students." Failures at the individual level also inspire forensic projects. Lehn (2020) and Alvarez (2001) interrogate their own classroom failures to improve their praxis. Bartkevicius (2023) makes direct the forensic connection between the practices of teaching and writing: "Teaching, like writing, involves rough drafts (little failures) and revisions" (p. 117).

For writing instructors, the forensic approach, especially treating drafts as "little failures," is likely the most familiar. Carr (2013) offers an accurate description of this strand's approach, even as she disagrees with it: "In this model, failure indicates that students have missed the signposts and wandered off into the wilderness" (n.p.). Thoune's (2020) faculty interview data similarly demonstrates a broader commitment among writing faculty to the view of failures as teachable moments: "Instructors need students to fail so that they can provide the kind of feedback that leads to learning" (p. 59). Translating this failure perspective into classroom practice means helping students identify and analyze past instances of failure and then use that information to improve their work. Teachers need to show students how to "fail forward," argue Rickly and Cook (2017), drawing on John C. Maxwell's theory to "use [failure] as a lesson and a stepping stone" (p. 127). Bartkevicius (2023), in reflecting on Richard Lloyd-Jones's pedagogy, recalls that in his class, "Failure was welcome, as long as we explored, in writing, what had gone wrong and what we could learn from where the writing had taken us" (p. 115). Returning to undergrads, Inoue (2019) shared teaching materials built on similar reasoning: "We have to embrace our failures, because they show us the places we can improve, learn, get better" (p. 330). Alford (2020) describes a specific classroom instantiation; she focuses her writing conference conversations around students' use of clichés. Clichés, for Alford, point to important but underdeveloped elements of the argument; they are places in writing that can spark important revision even though, in her example, a student ultimately cut the clichés from the final draft. Here again, "little failures" provide important information about what went wrong or what does not work, allowing writers to remedy problems.

For the forensic camp, failure is understood as a marker or a means to an end but not an end in itself. Thus, the uniting purpose of this strand is amelioration: to improve theory and practice by studying what does not work. Embedded in this view, we note, is often another assumption: that "success" (however defined) is the goal. This assumption is directly challenged by the epideictic strand.

THE EPIDEICTIC STRAND OF FAILURE STUDIES (LIVE IN IT)

In contrast to the forensic view of failure as a rendered past judgment, the literature we classify as "epideictic" draws from the classical trope of praise and blame

to reframe failure as an affective experience—one that is valuable as an end in itself. For example, Carr (2013) describes failure as "a deeply felt, transformative process" (n.p.). Her work illustrates an early focus in this strand, how failure can 'afflict the comfortable' by shaking complacent students out of channeled success and showing them a wider landscape of possibilities. She recounts her first real experience with failure: "Until then—" she acknowledges, "and, I say this knowing full well the kind of naïve, irritating student it makes me sound like—I found writing to be effortless" (n.p.). Her personal experience illustrates the larger pedagogical purpose underwriting much work in this epideictic strand, a concern that students can succeed without friction and thus never have cause to develop skepticism of the systems that guide their education.

To counter or redefine dominant ideals of "success," a shared emphasis in this strand is how students should *feel* in the moment of experiencing failure. Gross and Alexander (2016) argue "failure and negative emotions are an ineradicable and sometimes crucial component of our educational lives" (p. 288) and point to queer theorists who show that "unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and even failure might serve as entry points to critique the power structures and normalizing discourses that direct our lives and efforts along certain lines" (p. 288). Myers (2011) likewise celebrates the classical figure of Metanoia for symbolizing "an important form of reflection in which the emotional impact of a missed opportunity motivates a transformation of thought" (p. 11) and, in her later work, gives voice to the premise: "Engaging the emotion that surfaces in the middle of failure can uncover the stories we are telling ourselves about how and why we and others failed, and we can begin to shape new questions and responses" (Myers, 2019, p. 57). In their *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*, West-Puckett, Caswell and Banks (2023) make a case for the "productive potential in the failure-shame entanglements of writing assessment" (p. 73). All of these advocates define failure as an affective experience with the desirable potential to prompt transformation.

This strand positions the primary focus of writing pedagogy as the cultivation of specific kinds of dispositions, in contrast to the forensic approach's interest in ameliorating problems or developing problem-solving skills. And the focus on disposition ties back to the thread's foundational texts: Halberstam's (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure* and pedagogical arguments made by education scholar Bain (2012). Bain, in turn, draws heavily from Dweck's work in psychology on fixed and malleable intelligence–all works that prioritize the development of specific ways of thinking and being. Thus, for the epideictic strand, failure is about more than seeing ways to improve drafts, syllabi, and research plans. The pedagogical imperative is to create critical awareness and a disposition for change; failure is a means of seeing the world and oneself differently.

Seeing differently, therefore, becomes a guiding metaphor for the epideictic strand. Carr (2013), again, ultimately argues that the experience of failure "helps us see that there are other ways of moving through the world, alternative ways of coming to know lived experience" (n.p.). Beare (2018) frames his rejections from graduate school as akin to "discovering that half of the map had been erased, I felt disoriented and confused" (p. 258) but ultimately that "the removal of one route of opportunity makes room for the consideration of multiple alternative options" (p. 259). West-Puckett et al. (2023) ask readers to recognize failure "not as the pop-psychology model of failing forward or the success-framed model of failing backward (down) but as lateral moves that create different (im)possibilities" (p. 24). The spatial metaphor dovetails with another shared premise, that the experience of failing serves us best when experienced in the eternal present, hence Carr's (2013) language of "dwelling in failure" (n.p.). West-Puckett et al. (2023) "wonder why we focus so much on the future, often at the expense of the present" (p. 92). Others in this strand testify to the power of inhabiting failure. Beare (2018) argues that his first failed applications to doctoral programs "afforded the space and time to think" (p. 259). Myers's (2019) "Unspeakable Failures," while tempering her earlier embrace of failing, still draws on Ahmed's work to argue we should "focus on stopping" rather than pushing through failure (p. 57). Wandering in the wilderness, even stopping there, is a valuable experience for the epideictic camp, not a mistake to correct as with the forensic strand.

Not every experience of failure proves enlightening, as the epideictic strand itself acknowledges. Bain (2012), whose theory of learning grounds much work in this strand, acknowledges how failure can dampen educational efforts rather than spark them. He recounts a hypothetical scenario about Karolyn, who enters college believing herself a smart, capable student, a view of self undermined by consistent failure in her intro math class: "In the inner recesses of her mind, in those dark places where feelings and thoughts mingle like dance couples, she began to explore a new self. Maybe that self wasn't as smart as she had thought," (Bain, 2012, p. 103). Karolyn, in this story, retreats from all academic challenges. Faced with failure, Karolyn shuts down. Bain's hypothetical example finds real counterparts in studies on how students respond to failing (Pantelides, 2020; Cox, 2011). And the epideictic thread shows increasing attention to the consequences of advocating failure (see, e.g., Myers, 2019; Carr & Micciche, 2020). Rather than rehabilitating students stuck in an impoverished view of success, failure can debilitate students, especially students already marginalized by U.S. educational systems. Failure might be a way to learn, but it does not guarantee learning; it might prompt transformation, but it does not promise a good one.

In short, the epideictic strand unifies around the promise of failing as a means of transformative learning (that is an end unto itself), though proponents differ on

the perils involved. The emphasis on dwelling in failure rather than moving past it delineates epideictic work from forensic and serves to illustrate the fundamentally different views of failing that circulate within failure studies scholarship.

THE DELIBERATIVE STRAND OF
FAILURE STUDIES (PLAN FOR IT)

We describe the third strand we find in the failure literature as "deliberative" because this scholarship focuses on the types of deliberative processes students must go through in order to navigate potential failure. Unlike forensic studies of failure that reflect on past examples or epideictic calls to embrace the transformative power of failure, deliberative studies look to the future and emphasize action—the role of "navigating" choices, weighing multiple options, and considering context, purpose, and audience.

The deliberative strand tends to take a strong stance against unreflective calls for failure. For example, Johnson and Sheehan (2020) begin by agreeing with much of the epideictic strand's larger mission, including that everyone should question the entwined social scripts for success and happiness. But they ultimately reject the universal applicability of embracing failure. They both draw inspiration from and critique Halberstam (2011): "If we demand students fail and feel bad while doing it, what damage are we fostering in our classrooms?" (p. 130). They acknowledge failure's potential for learning but also note the epideictic strand's limited attention to failure's costs, asking, "Who has the privilege to fail?" (p. 133). Within this collection, Tellez-Trujillo similarly argues, "It is imperative to remain considerate of student vulnerabilities," building from the premise that "no one emerges from adversity unscathed, if they emerge at all." Thus, Tellez-Trujillo also tempers epideictic advocacy, accepting Carr's (2013) view of failure as a transformative place but rejecting the goal of "dwelling" in it; for Tellez-Trujillo (this volume), failure is not a core identity but rather a space to strategically "enter and emerge from." For these authors, a classroom emphasis on failure requires attention to its ethical dimensions and material consequences. A uniform insistence on failing ignores them and thus proves an incomplete pedagogical guide.

Because of concerns about the universal applicability of the term "failure," the deliberative strand also tends to employ the argument strategy of dissociation in order to distinguish harmful from beneficial types of failure and responses to it. For example, Feigenbaum (2021) argues that we should promote "generative failure" instead of assessment-driven "stigmatized failure" (p. 14). Feigenbaum argues that students will embrace generative failure only after instructors overcome the fear that stigmatizes failure and that one way to do so is

"by interrogating failure's de facto rootedness in an ethos of competitive individualism and envisioning an alternative ethos grounded in communalism" (p. 15). In parallel, Tellez-Trujillo unsettles a cultural assumption that overcoming adversity is an independent effort by countering the typical view of individual resilience with the communal paradigm of feminist resilience.

Finally, we find that this strand of scholarship tends to emphasize students' situated process of decision-making. Enacting the deliberative approaches in the classroom does not treat failure as an ideal way of being but rather as a potential outcome of human actions, one that should factor into decision-making. For example, Feigenbaum (2021) argues "teachers must help students negotiate [failure] paradigm dissonance" because "students frequently experience failure as a source of fear and anxiety that impedes risk-taking and experimentation" (pp. 13-14). Trujillo-Tellez (this volume) advocates for writing assignments that help "students take an agented position" and encourage "planning for more purposeful failures," an approach she defines as both resilience and risk-taking. In parallel, Johnson and Sheehan (2020) describe their approach as "navigation . . . a material-discursive practice that acknowledges the labor of strategizing, weighing expectation against personal desire" (p. 137). With this emphasis on the activity of deliberate decision-making, Johnson and Sheehan's chapter concludes by asking readers to "recognize the risk and complexity of making those choices" (p. 138). By turning the conversation from experienced to anticipated failures, this strand shifts focus from the products of failure to the process of taking intellectual risks–and how teachers might ethically and effectively help students navigate the process.

POINT OF ORDER: FROM FAILURE TO RISK

The deliberative strand aligns with an approach we have developed in our previous scholarship on intellectual risk-taking. In a 2018 *Composition Studies* article, we proposed a pedagogical approach to intellectual risk-taking that was also framed as an issue of "navigating tensions" (Teagarden et al., 2018). We defined taking an intellectual risk as an option with stakes attached, ones felt by the student. Intellectual risk-taking, we argued, can only occur when a student faces a choice among at least two options related to learning, where at least one of the options has consequences, ones that the student—not the instructor, not the audience—recognizes as meaningful. Students must then weigh the potential positive outcomes against the negative ones, such as being perceived as less competent, receiving public criticism, or losing an aspect of one's social identity (Beghetto, 2009; Foster, 2015; Haswell et al., 2009). Necessarily, these deliberations over intellectual risk occur throughout the writing process.

In a follow-up article in *Rhetoric Review*, we further theorize intellectual risk-taking as a *rhetorical process*, i.e., situated, responsive to an exigence, and addressed to an audience (Commer et al., 2024). The consequences of a student's choice arise from audience response–be it that of the instructor, an imagined audience, specific classmates, or one's self. We argued:

> Intellectual risk-taking is an act of responding to a *kairos* (Dufourmantelle) or opportune moment in the writing process that "provokes a deliberative reaction" (Weil) and has an outcome—insofar as it may result in loss or failure—that holds meaningful "stakes" for the writer taking the risk (Johnstone, 1991, p. 5)

Our definition of intellectual risk suggests a pedagogy that foregrounds decision-making, which is active, done within a community, and responsive to communal, as well as individual, values. It emphasizes the uncertainty that planning for the future entails and how such plans should then always grapple with potential failure and consequences for self and others. Our approach ultimately values the deliberation undertaken over the plan developed or its outcome. Like Johnson and Sheehan (2020), we agree that while writing instructors can help students recognize options and their potential consequences, it is the individual student who ultimately determines what options count as risky as well as whether such risks are worth taking. We, therefore, see intellectual risk-taking as a rhetorical form of self-deliberation.

This approach to possible failure (which we view as an inherent element of "intellectual risk") focuses on fostering student agency, which has implications for a social justice mission for writing studies. For example, Johnson and Sheehan (2020) argue that researchers and teachers should be "oriented to social justice" and, in doing so, should value the intellectual labor and risks involved in navigating pathways between one's desires and one's constraints. This echoes an argument put forward by Canagarajah and Lee (2013) in the edited collection *Academic Risk-Taking*. Canagarajah and Lee also advance social justice goals; they argue for more inclusive norms in academic publishing. They claim the field can better accomplish such work if we "train novice scholars to negotiate with the multiple parties and texts involved in the publishing process" (Canagarajah & Lee, 2013, p. 94). For both Canagarajah and Lee and Johnson and Sheehan, writers' "desires" are curtailed by systematic norms and outside expectations. Both sets of authors maintain that the collision of desires and constraints requires writers to make choices, and both argue for valuing the decision-making process rather than just the products such decisions yield. And while both chapters engage with failure, they each ultimately shift focus from

failure to intellectual risk, proposing we teach students how to deliberate about risky choices, like those where failure is a possible outcome.

Turning from failure to risks calls us back to Coles' argument from our opening (Boe & Schroeder, 2002). In our eyes, Coles identifies the reason so many instructors feel compelled to foreground failure: "Failure is the way we learn." We argue, however, this claim does not reckon with the full, paradoxical truth Feigenbaum (2021) describes: Failure is the way we learn, but failure is also the mark of not having learned. Yet our introduction cuts Coles' statement short, and reading further finds him suggesting a way out of failure's problematic paradox. Immediately after claiming failure is the way we learn, Coles clarifies his stance:

> WOE: Is it accurate to say about a writing course that a certain amount of initial failure is not only inevitable but also desirable?
>
> COLES: I think it is, yes, in several ways, and for that reason ought to be considered as something other than failure. It ought to be named and planned for, built into a course and then capitalized on. (Boe & Shroeder, 2002, p. 12)

Coles' emphasis on "initial failures" departs from Johnson and Sheehan, as they maintain the value of failure as a sometimes worthy end. But Coles, like Johnson and Sheehan and like Canagarajah and Lee, argues for attending to the way failure can, even should, happen within an intellectual project. This approach calls for an instructional design that promotes the "in-process" not-always-successful work as future-oriented "navigation" (Johnson & Sheehan, 2020; Teagarden et al., 2018) or "negotiation" (Canagarajah & Lee, 2013). Either term prompts forward-looking considerations of risk rather than backward-facing experiences of failure, and each opens up a deliberative approach to the question of future potential failures. In general, we believe that most teachers who are proponents of failure pedagogies agree with Coles that failure is valuable because it is a powerful means to accomplish writing class goals. Even the strongest advocates value failure for what it engenders. For example, when Carr (2017) writes, "Failure is integral to learning and development" (p. 79), she makes learning and development, not failure itself, the goal. Failure is a means of learning, we grant, but so too is intellectual risk-taking.

We believe that the advantage of focusing on "intellectual risk-taking" in the classroom (instead of focusing on failure) is that it can offer a more positive learning goal for students. Outside the field of RCWS, educational psychologists Abercrombie et al. (2022) similarly argue that intellectual risk-taking is "broader than a response to failure, and includes a positively valenced, generative learning dimension," emphasizing intellectual risk-taking can foster "actions that are more

exploratory than reactive" (p. 7). More specifically, our review has shown how intellectual risk inherently overlaps with deliberative failure projects while emphasizing generative rather than stigmatized framings. But we also see opportunities for an intellectual risk focus to advance the forensic and epideictic missions, without requiring instructors to first overcome students' negative associations of failure or to build artificial experiences with failure into a curriculum. We thus argue intellectual risk is a more helpful concept than failure, offering greater classroom affordances while less ethically fraught and with fewer rhetorical burdens.

What Intellectual Risk Offers the Forensic Perspective

Foregrounding intellectual risk instead of failure offers potential for the overall mission of the forensic strand. We grant that a forensic approach to failure offers inventional capacity, as most scholars, teachers, and students can point to times where something did not work. But the backwards-facing focus is also a limitation. Such work can only be done on what is already complete, on a failure already rendered. Students can mine their past experiences for lessons but this approach gives no guidance on how to prospect for future options.

Students, moreover, often do not intuitively understand their decision-making as writers, which limits the utility of starting with a past failure. If students do not recognize points of agency, then they will struggle to see how their choices could have contributed to a failed attempt. This undercuts the efficacy of reflection as a process of information-seeking. Moreover, as the epideictic and deliberative strands argue, most students come predisposed to define failures in terms of other people's judgments or preexisting social scripts rather than develop their own sense of what worked, what did not, or even what constituted failure and success in the first place. Since the forensic strand tends to accept failures as externally defined, this approach could end up reifying students' beliefs rather than equipping them to generate their own definitions of success.

Intellectual risk, in contrast, emphasizes contingency, where some choices can be wise but ultimately unsuccessful. This can help students understand failure as not always the result of mistakes or errors but rather a part of making choices in the face of uncertainty. An intellectual risk framing can thus make failure more an exploration of the contingent factors of a situation that resulted in failure rather than a hunt for mistakes or a performance of self-chastisement.

In asking students to evaluate potential risks ahead of time, if and when they fail, students might also be better prepared to identify decision points and reflect more systematically. For just as forensic investigators at a crime scene must piece together evidence to establish a logical chain of causation, so must writing students plot the winding route to "failure" if they are to learn from it.

This involves detective work. They must uncover and sequence class notes, high-lighted readings, discarded outlines, feedback from instructors, conversations with classmates, circumstantial situations, rough drafts, and false leads. Then, they must decide where to place the blame. The process can be made easier if we prime students to track risky decisions well before they have potentially failed.

Rather than foregoing discussions of failure, foregrounding intellectual risk lays the foundation for purposeful considerations of unsuccessful attempts. A rhetorical approach to intellectual risk-taking provides students a bread-crumb trail to follow back to those forking paths–to repeat Holmes and Wittman's (2020) allusion–allowing students to reflect on specific choices among the available means of persuasion. And so, an intellectual risk approach maintains the value of reflecting on past failures while emphasizing path-finding. It back-grounds the rendered judgments of others while still foregrounding a core mission we see underpinning the forensic strand: promoting student, teacher, and researcher agency while acknowledging situational constraints. In short, the lens of intellectual risk-taking creates opportunities to look backward and forward, learning about what works from past failures (and successes) as well as imagining how choices might play out with work-in-progress.

What Intellectual Risk Offers the Epideictic Strand

Relocating from failure to risk might be a temporal shift for the forensic strand, but what intellectual risk-taking offers the epideictic perspective is more of a dispositional shift. We start by noting the high stakes involved in advocating for failure, as defined by members of the epideictic strand. Much of the epideictic literature describes the negative consequences, especially in terms of emotional states, that accompany failure. These accounts serve as a useful check, reminding readers that not everyone–perhaps hardly anyone–likes failing or being subject to failure. West-Puckett et al. (2023) acknowledge that their enactment of failure entails risk-taking: "Queer assessment killjoys stray from well-worn pathways that iteratively move toward success; they risk the attainment of material and social rewards in order to pursue different trajectories and horizons" (p. 85). Overall, this strand claims failure's potential overrules possible downsides; we, like the deliberative strand, see the destructive potential as a serious limitation to epideictic aims.

Feigenbaum's (2021) generative failure is one approach that suggests we can experience failure without being penalized so severely. But if we minimize the stakes of failure, can we still produce the crucial kind of experience? Can exercises that prompt generative failure take students into the affective dimensions that will lead to the most substantial insight? Carr (2013) does not believe so. She says, "I'm not especially interested in failure that doesn't involve feelings of shame" (n.p.).

She is drawn to the "double movement" of failure that, through pain, helps us transform our view of ourselves both as individual beings and beings in relation to others. West-Puckett et al. (2023) build on this view, positing: "Shame is a faithful traveling companion to those who search together for failure. Without it, however, we can't know the flip side of shame, which is pride" (85). They thus advocate failure's role in creating powerful affective states, both negative and positive.

But we argue failure is not the only entry point to emotionally powerful experiences. Like failure, risk is as much an affective state as it is an external measure, and it can prompt students to experience the emotional catalyst of being drawn both "toward painful individuation, [and] toward uncontrollable relationality" (Carr, 2013, n.p.). Identifying intellectual risks, after all, requires individual judgment, but one that is socially situated and where others' judgments contribute to the evaluation of risk and reward and potentially form some of the positive and negative outcomes. Recognizing risky options can lead students into negative emotional states, in part because of unwelcome comparisons to others. Consider how Lee's "perception of risk led her to isolate herself during the writing process" and that "Ena's perceptions of her article as risky . . . and her fears of appearing too demanding and entitled as a novice scholar, however, prevented her from confidently asserting herself to the gatekeepers" (Canagarajah & Lee, 2013, p. 93). Cox (2011) finds a similar pattern among undergraduate students:

> For Ashley, the underlying fear involved being exposed—in front of the teacher and her peers—as too stupid for college classes. "I don't want to be the stupid kid in class, where everyone else is raising their hand, and I'm the only one not. And I know it's not going to be like that, but it's one of my biggest fears." (p. 34)

The feeling of risk, just like the experience of failure, can engender powerful, negative-affect states; both failure and risk can inspire students to question themselves and their situations. But dwelling in failure does not necessarily lead to good outcomes. Lee writes "Even now, years after the experience, I find myself almost back at the paralysis stage" (Canagarajah & Lee, 2013, p. 85). And Cox summarizes Ashley's experience as "scaling down" her educational plans despite her excellent high school performance. Both students withdraw for fear of failure, which then causes a more consequential failure. Yet the resulting state is one of continued anxiety.

Thus, focusing on failure cannot guarantee positive transformation. But by shifting emphasis to intellectual risk-taking, those interested in the epideictic project move from "dwelling in failure" to "dwelling in possibility," the Emily Dickinson line that *Failure Pedagogies* contributors Holmes and Wittman (2020) advocate. Pushing students to imagine possibilities can serve to spark

the same critical reassessments that much of the epideictic strand sees happen with failure. But it also emphasizes student agency over their decisions–from what to write to how to be. Rather than embracing failure, teaching students how to navigate risk can call forth powerful affective states like uncertainty and discomfort while also fostering in students the deliberative skills and disposition of agency to make navigating such choices more possible.

RISK AND FAILURE: COUNTERPOINTS/COUNTERPARTS

Our three-strand model of failure offers readers a new way to understand the conversation about pedagogical interpretations of failure's purpose in the writing classroom. In making our case, we also present intellectual risk-taking as a counter to failure. Thus, we offer our review to identify the emerging differences in failure pedagogies, and we further argue that writing teachers should embrace the pedagogical potential of intellectual risk-taking on three grounds.

First, we argue that the concepts of failure and risk-taking are already often intertwined in scholarship, so understanding intellectual risk-taking is key for understanding failure. We have shown how deliberative approaches tend to move from failure to risk-taking, suggesting their interconnected nature. Forensic and epideictic arguments for failure also acknowledge the importance of risk-taking; for example, Inoue (2019) follows the forensic strand, and he exhorts his students "to take risks, in short to fail and learn from that failing" (p. 145). Bartkevicius (2023) titles her forensic chapter "On Failure: Notes Toward a Pedagogy of Risk." From the epideictic strand, West-Puckett et al. (2023) title their opening chapter "Risking Failure." And Carr (2013) recommends assignments based on the idea that "risk-taking and failure foster imagination" and says of her own experience that "identifying as a failure" has made her, among other benefits "less risk-averse" (n.p.). So, while we argue writing instructors would be better served by foregrounding the goal of intellectual risk-taking instead of failure, we view this as a way of pursuing similar goals and enacting the same values; risk and failure are better understood as counterparts than counterpoints.

Second, we argue that starting with intellectual risk-taking creates the capacity to meaningfully engage with failure—if and when it occurs—later in the course. Instructors interested in the learning potential of failure can thus develop classes where intellectual risk serves as students' initial encounter with this larger learning cycle. This design sidesteps the stigmatized baggage associated with failure so instructors can foster the engagement, trust, and deliberative skills necessary to take on the more fraught task of learning through failure.

Third, and finally, we argue, in agreement with Abercrombie et al. (2022), that intellectual risk-taking offers a positive learning framework that is "more

exploratory than reactive" (p. 7). In other words, rather than focus on how to help students process or deal with failure after it happens, intellectual risk-taking encourages students to recognize the benefits of seeking and trying out new things. In this way, intellectual risk-taking encourages an exploratory approach to inquiry and to writing.

In making this argument, we recognize that shifting the scholarly conversation from failure to intellectual risk-taking could appear to be just a switch of key terms; emphasizing intellectual risk-taking will not guarantee that students actually take intellectual risks or learn differently from failure. Additionally, we acknowledge those who might question: "How is intellectual risk-taking really any different from Feigenbaum's generative failure?" We take these rivals seriously. However, our point is not that one term is inherently better than another but that intellectual risk-taking—as the rhetorical practice we have defined—invites deliberation and a pedagogical approach to inquiry that many theories of failure do not.

Thus, we argue writing teachers interested in the learning potential of failure may be better served by explicitly teaching students a rhetorical approach to intellectual risk-taking that encourages deliberating over the outcomes and stakes of risky choices, making strategic decisions, and reflecting on their outcomes, failed or otherwise. By embracing the deliberative cycle initiated when a writer recognizes an intellectual risk, writing instructors may support the dispositions and practices that help students face risks as well as negotiate the relational, contextual, and institutional dimensions of failure and failing.

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