CHAPTER 9.

SELF-SPONSORED WRITING & ACADEMICIZED SPACE IN FYW (OR, A FAILURE IN THREE MOVES)

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1.

This story starts with a breakup.

After my first love dumped me, I moved from Florida to Chicago because I needed a change. My college friends lived in the Windy City, and its winter matched my mood. I moved in with an activist who organized a monthly body-positive dance party at a local bar. Through her, I became friends with a group of queer artists and writers. We tried to both write and dance away the cold as we later hosted poetry readings and made zines together.

My roommate and then I started a queer artists' collective. We called it Failed Attempt. We celebrated failure, celebrated the act of trying. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Judith (Jack) Halberstam says queers fail "exceptionally well" and posits that "under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (p. 3). Our collective set out to reimagine a way of being. We centered moments deemed failures by a society focused on success.

This story won't spend too much time in the theoretical. But I want to acknowledge concepts of failure as connected to material conditions. It can prove difficult for our students to reframe failure. Many associate it with traumatic experiences—the team they didn't make, the grade they didn't get. My experiences as a queer writer and teacher inform the ways I think about who gets to fail and in what capacity. Success, a type of survival. Only certain kinds of people can fail safely. A writing classroom provides a space to expand who gets to do so.

The collective I started with my roommate failed along with our friendship. I moved into a new apartment and applied for an editorial role at the fancy magazine I wrote for in the city. I didn't get this position. I then did

what so many before me have done in times of existential crisis: I applied to graduate school.

2.

This story discusses a failure in grad school.

During grad school, I taught first-year composition. I wanted to bring a platform many students used socially into the classroom. I asked them to write an Instagram essay. I figured if students liked to use Instagram, then it would help foster their writing in class as well.

Use hashtags, I told them. *Emojis, too*!

I thought my class of "digital natives" would get excited about the assignment. But I was wrong. They didn't get into it, and it seemed to be one of their least favorite assignments of the semester. Aside from some functional issues, I identified two main problems: (1) not everyone used or wanted to be on Instagram, and (2) those who used Instagram didn't want the requirement to use it for class.

Youngjoo Yi and Alan Hirvela (2010) assert that sites of self-sponsored writing can, at times, provide students with spaces to vent about schoolwork and find community with peers. Their research subject enacted a different persona online in her role as a student. She seemed shy in class, but the "exasperation boiling beneath her calm exterior needed a release in order for Elizabeth to maintain (i.e., regulate) a reasonable degree of equilibrium in her life" (Yi & Hirvela, 2010, p. 104). This self-sponsored writing allowed her to negotiate her life outside of class.

Students often produce meaningful writing outside the classroom. The incorporation of these sites into the curriculum acknowledges a range of literacies. But it can be tricky. Students play with language and identity through self-sponsored writing. We don't want to transform them from fun to her class assignment. If it's an assignment, then that means there's a grade attached to it. This shift can change how students view and use an important site for their writing lives.

I've had much better results discussing social media posts as text to "understand students' writing activities and digital literacy practices within digital environments" (Buck, 2012, p. 36). I've taught a Twitter thread as a literacy narrative. I've asked students to analyze rhetorical situations of social media posts. I've also given students sites of self-sponsored writing for their assignments, but I don't require it.

The twenty-four-hour writing log assignment makes connections from self-sponsored writing to our class. I often ask students to document a full day

of their writing across all platforms. These platforms range from composing an email to sending a message on Snapchat. Students usually turn in pages of data. We can then use this data to introduce discussions of writing practices. We also talk about rhetorical situations. I ask if they'd write a text message to their mom in the same way they'd write it to their best friend.

Kevin Roozen (2012) urges us to create first-year writing (FYW) curriculum design that incorporates the inclusion of self-sponsored writing without making them seem like precursors to the actual writing of the academy. He says it's important for us to frame why the "weaving together of multiple literate engagements is a key element of literate development throughout the lifespan" (p. 123-124). I've had the most success when I can weave together their literate engagement into our classroom by giving them the option—and not the requirement—to utilize their self-sponsored writing sites.

3.

This story moves back to the beginning to end with a conclusion.

After graduate school, I moved back home to Florida. I currently work as a FYW specialist at a private art college. This semester, I brought zines with me into class.

I first collaborated on "Failed Attempt" zines in Chicago a decade earlier. I had just wanted to make some cool stuff with my friends. Now, those failures have become useful experiences for my FYW students. I can talk about my self-sponsored writing of zines as a form of collaboration, experimentation, and multimodal writing. I can also talk about their tradition of queer activism and DIY publishing in marginalized communities.

In a unit on research, I discussed zines as a potential genre for their research. They circulate in communities and to a particular audience. I asked students to think about how effective arguments in zines would look different than in an academic research paper. The use of zines in curriculum can challenge the status quo. They create alternative discourse and models for "a variety of vehicles for meaning making" (Lonsdale, 2015, p. 12). The genre allows for discussion of meaning-making activities as embedded in specific contexts.

Because of this, assessment strategies prove a major concern. Requiring zines might reduce their potential for self-sponsored writing. The genre has roots in punk music and counter-culture movements. Their use in a classroom, to some, may even be antithetical to the genre's original purposes. Tobi Jacobi (2007) suggests zines shouldn't receive grades because of their roots in self-sponsored discourse and suggests a more appropriate assessment model would be for students to establish "shared goals and expectations rather than genre expectations" (p.

48). This process can take a long time, sometimes a full unit or a semester-long project. Instructors must consider these and other implications when using zines in their classrooms.

My students this semester liked zines as a genre, but not one of them made one for their research project. I'd given them the option of delivering their research in three different genres: (1) a traditional academic paper, (2) an op-ed, or (3) a creative project. I've written in all three genres. Their differences presented productive discussion of genre, writing conventions, and audience. I assumed the art school students would choose the creative option, but yet again, I was wrong. Most of them chose the traditional research paper or op-ed format (there's probably a further case study in there somewhere).

The students' other classes required them to complete visually creative projects. Some wanted a break. They also wanted to further develop confidence in their academic writing skills or try a new genre in the op-ed.

None of my students composed a zine, but I don't consider this a failure as I might have done earlier in my career. Students showed interest in the genre, but, for various reasons, didn't want to make one for our class. That doesn't mean they won't create one on their own later. Their future selves might make zines to process a move or build community or one day talk about the generative possibility of failure in a classroom of their own.

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