

PART 1.

HISTORICIZING AND THEORIZING FAILURE

Part One offers chapters that help contextualize the rest of the collection with histories and theories of failure. Contributors provide breadth and depth to the question of failure, including continuing to take us back thousands of years in the rhetorical tradition with a genealogy of failure, detailing a rhetorical approach to the idea of intellectual risk-taking as a conceptual counterpoint to failure, and theorizing failure in relation to feedback to student writing.

In **Chapter 1**, “A Genealogy of Failure,” Paul Cook takes a broad historical view of the concept of failure from the *arete* of the ancient Greeks to the earliest Medieval universities with their agonistic oral disputations to the present era of hyper-anxiety surrounding college admissions—complete with celebrity cheating scandals. This chapter, lauded by Allison Carr (this volume) as “the most comprehensive review of failure’s systemic meaning that has been written,” maps this history through the Nietzschean-Foucauldian method of genealogy in order to illuminate its workings alongside the development of capitalism and the gradual development of the university as a significant social institution. Cook provides a compelling historical account of how failure became an internalized, individualized concept enmeshed in the logic of neoliberal capital and argues how this understanding of failure has limited our collective capacity to imagine other forms of success, especially as it pertains to the relationship between education and material achievement. The author concludes by suggesting concrete ways that we, as academics and writing teachers, can reframe success and failure in the 21st century in an effort to improve our relations with each other and the world. For example, how might these terms, so slippery in their familiarity, be refocused to encompass one’s commitment to social justice, equity, and advocacy?

Chapter 2, “Counterpoint: Why Not Intellectual Risk?” authors Alexis Teagarden, Justin Mando, and Carolyn Commer draw on their previous work in developing a rhetorical approach to intellectual risk-taking to explore the conceptual and practical trade-offs related to approaching writing as a “risk” that relates to—or precedes—failure. In their previous study, the authors examined the problems posed by vague and often undefined uses of the term “intellectual risk.” But their current inquiry asks how might its capaciousness as a term be of value as a flexible pedagogical concept that accounts for a variety of writing practices? This chapter suggests how framing writing as a process of deliberating

over the *choices* involved in intellectual risks may offset or complement students' and writers' attitudes about putting *something* "on the line" that can fail.

Shane A. Wood, in **Chapter 3**, "Theorizing Failure through Teacher Response," engages compelling questions involving failure in and through teacher response. Does all feedback on student writing produce better, more accomplished writing? When does feedback fail to do the job a teacher expects it to do, and how do we account for the failure of teacher feedback? To explore these questions, this chapter introduces *feedback failure theory* and offers an examination of how feedback can fail through its *production* and *perception*, two sites where failure occurs in and through response. Wood describes a pedagogical practice that allows both students and teachers to focus on how teacher feedback, like student writing, somehow misses the mark, or fails, at least some of the time. The author ultimately frames failure as an opportunity to create more purposeful pedagogies through response.