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## In Support of Failure

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I propose a concerted effort to begin devising a theory and pedagogy of failure. I review the discourse of failure in Western culture as well as in composition pedagogy, ultimately suggesting that failure is not simply a judgement or indication of rank but is a relational, affect-bearing concept with tremendous relevance to composition studies.

Let me tell you a story.

The summer before beginning my doctorate, my advisor asked me to read about a dozen books about our discipline, to blog about them, and to write a short paper describing what I thought was at stake for the field. I did the readings just fine and got lots of positive feedback on the blog. But once it came time for me to write the paper, I froze. I couldn't make sentences, couldn't connect ideas, couldn't think of anything interesting to say. Somehow, I eked out four or five pretty terrible pages full of generic observations. My advisor, someone with whom I have a comfortable, almost effortless relationship, then invited me to lunch to talk more about my ideas. This is where the story gets worse.

It's the first day of classes. I meet my professor after a seminar, and we head up the road to a Vietnamese noodle joint where she opens the conversation by telling me the paper I wrote is "not your best work." But, she supposes, maybe the question was too-big, too open-ended. (It wasn't.) So, she wants us to chat more about important ideas in the summer texts. She asks me a question that should be easy for me to answer—something like "Why do you think a book like so-and-so's is considered so important?"—and I just stammer as if I haven't read the books at all. This goes on for about half an hour; we're sitting at this tiny table in this tiny, hot restaurant, the steam from my noodles creating a sweaty fog between us, and my professor leans closer to me, eyebrows furrowed with growing disappointment as I try to lean further away with nowhere to go and finally—finally—she asks for the check, and we leave.

I felt sick to my stomach, hot, dizzy. My mouth tasted like pennies. I tried to puke but cried instead. It was awful. It was the most visceral experience of failure I'd ever felt. I became overwhelmed by doubt, dread, and shame, muttering to myself over and over, "I don't have a backup plan." Here I'd put all my eggs into this grad school basket only to discover that the basket was without bottom, that the eggs were making a terrible mess at my feet. And this was the first day of school, the first day of my Ph.D.

Worse still—I didn't know to whom I could talk about this, and I didn't bounce back the way I felt I should've. I got stuck and spent most of that first semester hating myself and my work. My writing suffered, my reading suffered, my class participation suffered. I lost my appetite (for food, for intellectual fulfillment) and lost ten pounds. And my confidence—usually inflated to an inappropriate level—bottomed out. I was in a bad way.

Unable to think about anything else, I wrote about failure obsessively, first in the form of narrative and reflection and half-finished scribbles, and later, in the margins of seminar notes, I began the process of understanding it intellectually. It was the only thing I found I could write about with any degree of fluency; I had to know what was going on. Evidence of this obsession showed up in my schoolwork, in seminar papers, in conversations, in syllabi and course proposals for undergraduate classes. I couldn't stop. I was suspended in a state of failure but with the wherewithal to look around and take notes. A year later, discussing an idea in another seminar for an essay about failure (this essay, in fact), my advisor said to me: I think you like to fail.

In the years since that initial meeting, I've thought a lot about what happened to me, seeking a clearer understanding of what it was that seized me, causing what should have been an easy, low-stakes writing assignment to become an irredeemable obsession. I read volumes of scholarship confronting difficulty (Bartholomae; Elbow, *Writing*; Goldberg; Hjortshoj; Lamott; Micciche and Jacobs; Rose, "Rigid Rules"), seeking comfort, commiseration, and more importantly, insight. What I determined is that what I experienced could be named as a number of other things: writer's block, intimidation, overreaction. But for me, the name of the thing was utter failure, and it sent me into an extended period of agonizing self-critique and reflection.

I offer this portrait of my failure because failure is difficult, maybe impossible, to define. When we talk about failure as a profession, we most often talk about assessment-based failure, which we've come to understand as an expected consequence of learning. It's much less often that these discussions consider the emotional aspects of failure, what I've tried to foreground above. I want to think about failure, then, as an affect-bearing concept. By situating failure within the realm of affect, I mean to pull failure away from its association with strict assessment, wherein failure operates as a mark or a judgment of quality according to predefined standards of achievement ("That *other* F-word," remarked Joel Wingard in a conference presentation). At the same time, and as a way of acknowledging the impracticality of that separation, I want to highlight the inherent affectivity of the judgment and insist that when considered in the context of affect/emotion, failure reveals itself to be a deeply complex phenomenon that bears upon one's private self-concept as well as one's sense of oneself as a social being (an assertion I'll unpack later in this essay). For this reason, failure is an important object of study for compositionists, we who study writing as an act of individual-yet-social expression of meaning.

My interest in failure stems from my belief that there is something more to failure than scholarship would have one know. This belief is grounded in my own experience of failure not as commonplace, predictable, or "another bump in the road to success," but instead as a *deeply felt*, transformative process that incorporates feelings of anxiety, desperation, confusion, and shame. This is to say that failure knows no bounds. Taking after the rhizome, failure fills the borders of our emotional capacities, or may disregard them altogether. It is a catalyst for emotion sequences, each with their own associations and sub-sequences rooted in our personal and social history—shame, anger, sadness, self-pity, and resolve, in my case—as well as a consolidation of and container for those emotions, a gathering site where individual elements blend, fraternize, and transform so that the edges of each are no longer discernable.

Despite failure's resistance to a stable definition, though, the story I've shared is one I think may be common among the academic set—perhaps not in the details, but in the experience of falling wildly short of expectations. Such is the emotional rollercoaster of intellectual work. So, I'm hoping that this story conjures up related memories for others, creating common ground from which to proceed. If we can't agree on a stable definition of failure, perhaps we can rely on some common felt characteristics of failure instead.

By way of situating my discussion, I begin with an abbreviated explanation of how failure has been figured in historical discourse on literacy and rhetoric in order to illustrate emotional and stigmatized weight the experience bears on writers. Additionally, I invoke the work of some of our field's primary architects to examine the way failure gets construed—or avoided—in relation to error and composing. In so doing, I mean to demonstrate how our approaches to composition pedagogy make space for but ultimately sidestep discussions about failure and its affects, as well as to highlight how we might re-see some of our most treasured scholarship as work that invites further consideration of failure. Next, I turn to theories of affect and emotion, chiefly work on shame, to embed our disciplinary perspective on failure in a wider context. Finally, I offer some thoughts, questions, and images—the rhizome among them—to begin the work of re-conceptualizing creative and intellectual failure, and here also offer some thoughts on how we might develop a pedagogy of failure.

In light of failure's riddling qualities, in this essay I strive to untangle it in order to push scholarship toward an understanding that acknowledges its complexity and, ultimately, to validate its worthiness as a meaningful part of composition. What follows is by no means meant to serve as the first and last word on failure; rather, I hope this work provokes others to explore what it means to fail, and how the experience of failure impacts our work as creative thinkers, teachers, scholars, and writers. Thus, the essay builds not toward a closing statement but toward an opening up, an invitation for further conversation.

## **“A Measure and Mark of Moral Failure”**

When I talk about failure as an affect-bearing concept, I'm talking about the myriad ways failure sticks to people and marks them *as failure*, metonymically remade in the image of their shortcomings. Consider another example: when a student fails a grade level, something we call getting “left behind” or “held back”—rhetorically powerful phrases in themselves—she gets emotionally, socially, academically, and physically separated from her peers. And this is something over which she has no control, which is to say it isn't as if she makes the choice to separate herself, but that she loses all agency when failure acts upon her, marks her as less-than, inadequate, immature, unfit. It acts within a student's social and emotional registers in ways we can't fully know. Simply put, failure isolates.

And so when we think about re-conceptualizing failure, we have to think not only about the personal realm but also about the sociocultural context in which failure is embedded and throughout which it circulates. In composition studies, for example, we equate failure most often with what are referred to as “struggling,” “basic,” “remedial,” or “underprepared” writers. Increasingly, these students are denied access to four-year institutions, relegated instead to two-year colleges—academies that are themselves stigmatized—or they get tracked into college preparatory programs, a decidedly more sinister way of sorting students which, while granting them contingent entrée to “mainstream” institutions of higher ed, still succeeds in keeping such students at arm's length. An example of this machination: at my university, this preparatory program was first named “University College.” Later, it was called “The Center for Access and Transition,” and finally—please take a moment to observe this progressive, rhetorical demotion—it was nothing at all. It has been eliminated from the institution, and here's why. In 2010, the Ohio Board of Regents issued “The Third Report on the Condition of Education in Ohio,” which “provided policymakers and the general public a snapshot of where Ohio stands in providing the higher education services needed to be competitive in today's world” (Ohio 3). The 60-page report, “underscor[ing] the need to deliver high quality education to more Ohioans within existing resources” (3), resulted in, among other things, the elimination of remedial math and English courses from offerings at the state's four-year institutions, creating (or making more apparent) the gap between what certifies a person's fulfillment of secondary expectations (diploma or equivalency) and what is required to advance to the next level of education. Students requiring additional (“developmental”) instruction in both math and English are required to

take and pass remedial courses at any of the state's two-year schools prior to enrollment in a baccalaureate institution. Here, as in the nineteenth century, you have a policy that invents and reifies a stratified system of achievement, awarding unbridled access to some students and sending the vast lot of the others around the corner and through the back door. As administrators, teachers, trustees, we may not use the word "failure" in this case, but this is exactly what we mean.

John Trimbur gives us some perspective on the social conditions that bred such stigmatization in the nineteenth century when literacy instruction emerged "as both a means to regulate popular literacy and a social marker to divide the literate from the illiterate, the worthy from the unworthy, 'us' from 'them'" (291). Trimbur goes on to remind us that, because of high rates of illiteracy among prison inmates, illiteracy came to be associated with crime, poverty, and immorality. Thus, literacy came to function not as "a practical tool for everyday affairs or an intellectual resource against injustice but as a *measure of the person*. . . . Illiteracy . . . was refigured . . . as a measure and mark of moral failure" (291; emphasis added). Illiteracy in this context takes on an affective sheen, marking subjects as "less-than," undeserving of equal access to the tools, resources, and luxuries enjoyed by the community's more privileged members. What hope could a person have for overcoming such a stigma, now that the cards are stacked against her? The consequences of illiteracy—now systemically reified—extend beyond the inability to decipher documents or to successfully defend oneself in a court of law; those "marked" by illiteracy, by *moral failure*, get ostracized, excommunicated, erased.

This connection between literacy and morality is a potent one, and it can be traced back even further, thanks to the work of Miriam Brody. In her feminist analysis of writing advice and instruction, *Manly Writing*, Brody teases out a history that associates "bad," "undesirable," or "ineffective" writing/oratory with the feminine, dating all the way back to Quintilian's *Institutio Oratorio*. "Good" writing, according to Quintilian, is virtuous, clean, strong, and manly. He believed that instruction in rhetoric should be accompanied by instruction in virtue, and moreover that only "good" men should practice rhetoric at all. Those men whose rhetoric was sloppy, showy, or deemed not "good" were accused of producing *effeminate* rhetoric, the province of the eunuch, an "unnatural" deceptive being robbed of its reproductive organs. The eunuch, which Brody describes as "the specter of the failure to write well," signified "unnaturalness, sterility, and corruption, [and] the absence of manly vigor" (13-16). For Quintilian, a speaker's inability to display adequate skills in oration and argument represented the possibility of the speaker's "fail[ure] to be manly, the possibility for an invasion of the male writer by the feminine" (Brody 32-33). As we see in the nineteenth century, a failure to develop adequate skills of rhetoric and oratory represented not simply a learning deficit or systematic injustice but represented an individual's failure of personhood. In fact, Quintilian describes the illiterate subject as an "unteachable" monstrosity (I.1.1). Literacy, then and now, is inextricably linked to identity—the identity of the individual as well as the identity of the community to which that individual belongs. The effeminacy imposed by Quintilian's metaphor, the symbolic castration, is akin to erasure.

Brody's analysis demonstrates that this same castration effect persists in some of the most celebrated texts of composition studies' modern history. Of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*, for example, Brody notes, "Errors in parallel construction and tense were not merely errors of language; they suggested failures of character, of the masculine virtues of resolution and courage, decisiveness and certainty" (178). The effeminacy and shamefulness associated with failure is not, then, merely historical or cultural; it pervades those handbooks that represent and forward dominant ways of thinking about good writing, handbooks which, for better or worse, we trust.

It's no surprise to note that the discourse surrounding failure and the experience of failure itself have long-lasting effects on writers, both novice and expert. This discourse induces anxiety, loss of confidence, fears that we are inadequate, unfit, perhaps "unteachable." Worse, it perpetuates a system of stratification that serves only to reinforce itself as it expands to the furthest reaches of lived

experience (see Halberstam). And though we experience and talk about failure in all realms of life, it is especially prominent in our classrooms, where failure is formalized with rubrics and learning outcomes and complicated metrics of assessment. Yes, “failure” (little f) becomes “Failure” (big f) in our classrooms, the most extensive system of socialization available in the modern world. We are all inculcated into this reductive, do-or-die paradigm. *We are entrenched.*

Despite failure’s extensive reach inside and outside of the school, the term itself is strikingly absent from disciplinary discourse. “Failure” makes no appearance in Rebecca Moore Howard’s extensive bibliographies, and a search on [comppile.org](http://www.comppile.org) [<http://www.comppile.org>] (in 2012) turns out 46 records, most of which connect the term only to assessment, reinforcing a static notion of failure-as-end-point. Because the democratic ethos of our field promotes first and foremost the ideal of literacy as a form of empowerment, it could be that resistance to this “f-word” is really resistance to something like the failure of literacy (and literacy instruction) to achieve its promise. And, our commitment to process makes it difficult to imagine wrapping failure into the fold given its association with final judgments, especially considering the stakes teachers face in an era when education is largely reduced to standardized testing and discussions of merit pay in public spheres.

However, the “stuff” of failure gets written about in abundance, even if the term itself is gingerly avoided. Many scholars have produced thorough work examining and theorizing problems in writing, but much of that scholarship remains rooted in methodically diagnosed (and thus methodically overcome) afflictions: unfamiliarity with appropriate discourse, over-reliance on rules, or ineffective instruction. This work comprises a sizeable body of some of our field’s most important work—incorporating the vast and complex relationships between students, teachers, curricula, culture, cognition, socioeconomics, resource distribution, societal expectations, and other factors—but in the end we’re talking for the most part about correcting local, textual problems. Scholarship on error, for example, while attending to the social inequities that are often the root of students’ problems (Shaughnessy, Rose), tends to focus on what can be observed, named, and corrected. And while scholarship on process strives to understand what happens when people write, it does so in order to recommend courses of action for writers and teachers, again reducing a very complex activity into a handful of “steps,” taking a writer from beginning to end. And why not? It is the purview of academic scholarship, particularly in our field, to offer “deliverables,” “take-aways,” or other practical solutions or salves to even the most ideological of problems. Now, to be clear, I don’t wish to give the impression that I believe we ought to disregard such scholarship or that I don’t see its value; on the contrary, the robust body of work from Rose, Shaughnessy, Elbow, Bartholomae, and others writing on error and process is ideal for demonstrating the integral prevalence of failure in our field as well as the great need to wrestle with failure’s emotional grip over writers. Which is to say, “failure,” however conceived, saturates the activity of composing, and so far we have addressed it on two fronts. First front: work on error treats errors with great depth, pointing to a host of factors contributing to one’s inability to conform to standards of college writing—this is what I’ll call the environmental approach to failure. Second front: work on process, then, draws from countless studies of experienced and inexperienced writers, striving to understand the cognitive processes that either help or impede a writer in achieving her goals—and this is what I’ll call the cognitive approach to failure. Both tell us a great deal about the complexity and difficulty of our subject. What I am proposing here is a third approach: the emotional approach.

## How Failure Feels

For the purposes of this exploration, I’m focusing on school-based failure, not only because it’s what’s most relevant to our field (as opposed to, say, athletic failure), but also because failure—more specifically, avoiding failure—is the object around which school is structured. In this context, failure is construed as an outcome of assessment, the result of not fulfilling an objective standard of

achievement. Bearing in mind this foundational use of the term—and building upon it—I'm interested in studying failure in an emotional context, primarily as related to feelings of shame.

I turn to shame because of its status as the quintessential “emotion of self-assessment” (Worsham 16). Eve Sedgwick writes that “many developmental psychologists . . . now consider shame the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop” (98); Elspeth Probyn observes that “shame reminds us with urgency what we are interested in” (*Blush* x); and Lynn Worsham calls shame an emotion that “form(s) the core of the hidden curriculum for the vast majority of people living and learning in a highly stratified capitalist society” (16).

As tools of assessment, then, failure and shame are congenial bedfellows. Like failure, shame has prominence beyond the school but has particular relevance to school environments, often in conjunction with failure. Megan Boler writes about the role of shame and other emotions in education in *Feeling Power*, a book that begins with the assertion that “emotions have been consistently educated, whether explicitly or implicitly, in every classroom throughout the centuries” (31). Our classrooms, particularly those in the primary grades, are sites of social education where students learn behavioral and emotional discipline via pastoral power, “a form of governing populations by teaching individuals how to police themselves” (Boler 13). Here, we teach children—characterized by Judith Halberstam as “always anarchic and rebellious” (27)—not to “act out.” Reinforcing (in many cases) and extending the lessons of the home, this is where they learn their manners such as saying “please” and “thank you,” raising their hand to speak, and communicating with others in a calm voice. They are taught “not to express their anger, not to question authority, and not to resist those who have power” (Boler 32). When students misbehave, they are sent to a time-out of some sort. They lose privileges, receive detention, or are “gently” punished in some other, typically public, fashion. Such punishments, Boler asserts, are designed to cause the child shame and humiliation, teaching the child to blame herself when she is punished and to change her behavior to avoid the raw sting of shame—a kind of negative reinforcement the student is made to believe she can control. What interests me about such methods of socialization is how well the subject is taught to identify and modulate her negative emotions (such as anger) but is taught to endure shame unaltered. Yet, with the kickoff of the shame response, a host of other emotions follow—anger, sadness, self-pity, guilt—now directed at the self instead of at the figure delivering the punishment. Before long, the need for formal punishment vanishes, as the subject can punish herself well enough, Foucault's panopticon perfected. Shame comes first.

Our classrooms, I hope is clear, teach us how to *feel*. More specifically, they teach us how to succeed and how to fail, and with shame deployed as a tool of self-surveillance, it's clear that our emotional education is intertwined with these more concrete lessons. What is most striking to me about how shame operates in such an ideological fashion is that by the time we are of school-going age, we've already been trained to identify shame and to understand its meaning, albeit in more primitive contexts. As evidenced in the study described below by Carol Gilligan (conducted in 1977 by Colin Trevarthan), shame makes itself known even in infancy. I turn to this study because in insisting that failure is a trigger for shame (and shame a trigger for failure), I want to emphasize how instinctual our shame response is and thus how deep and potentially traumatizing an experience of failure can become:

Designing a double-closed circuit television system, [the researchers] filmed mothers and babies playing in real time, with each seeing a life-sized video of the other on a television monitor (like people talking on-screen from different cities). After a short interval, the researchers broke the synchrony of the relationship by quickly rewinding the mother's tape and playing it out of sequence with the baby. Instantly, two-month olds responded to the loss of connection, showing puzzlement (nothing had signaled the loss of connection;

the mother hadn't turned away) and then distress. The visual image did not override their experience of losing relationship, finding themselves disconnected from their mother, suddenly out of touch. (Gilligan 30)

Of the reaction described here (and prevalent in infant studies other than the one cited), Michael Basch concludes that “the shame-humiliation reaction in infancy of hanging the head and averting the eyes does not mean the child is conscious of rejection, but indicates that effective contact with another has been broken. . . . Therefore, shame-humiliation throughout life can be thought of as an inability to effectively arouse the other person's positive reactions to one's communications. The exquisite painfulness of that reaction in later life harks back to the earliest period when such a condition is not simply uncomfortable but *threatens life itself*” (qtd. in Sedgwick 37-38, emphasis added). In other words, shame arises when the infant is unable to establish connection with another. At that stage of development, such failure of connection is indeed life-threatening; later in life, shame affects a symbolic isolation that recalls those feelings, perpetuating despair that both unmakes and remakes one's self and one's emotional profile. Sedgwick describes this occurrence as the disruption of identification in the mirror phase, “[b]ut in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dramatic tension to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating” (37).

So, too, does failure make this “double movement” (Sedgwick 37) toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality. Am I suggesting that failure is life-threatening? No. But it might certainly feel that way, if only for a moment. As an outcome of assessment, failure makes us profoundly aware of our place in social and academic strata. It makes the borders of our physical and emotional selves known to us, and it emphasizes the distance between ourselves and others. A tool of (self-) assessment, shame, I would argue, is what tells us we've failed. This is what Probyn means when she insists that shame “reminds us with urgency what we are interested in” (*Blush* x).

Certainly not all failures cause shame; we can all likely remember a time when we were deemed to have failed but haven't felt the familiar sting of failure and shame because the object of failure wasn't something that mattered to us: an insignificant quiz, perhaps, or a hastily written seminar paper about a topic we have no intention of pursuing beyond a course requirement. As Probyn puts it, “Banal things that are supposed to make us ashamed quite often don't. And those things that do make us ashamed often reveal deep worries and concerns” (*Blush* x). Therefore, I'm not especially interested in failure that doesn't involve feelings of shame. *Failure*, in my mind, is that mark of assessment that sticks, that makes our cheeks flush and our vision momentarily blur. All the rest—the F's, the O's, the pronouncements of inadequacy—these are immaterial, judgments and nothing more. I find it useful to turn to grammatical forms in order to more accurately name what it is I'm talking about. The infinitive form, to fail—this is one thing. This is an action directed outward. To be a failure, on the other hand—to take on the noun form, the “thingness” which names one's identity—this is something else entirely.

So, it makes a great deal of sense to talk about failure as something emotionally mediated via shame. Shame acknowledges the failure, and in so doing, names the failure *as failure*, causing us to feel isolation while making us painfully aware of our relationality. “As we blush,” Probyn writes, “we are made visible at the very moment we want to cover our faces and hide” (*Blush* xii). From the blush follows the cascade of gestures that signify shame's tightening grasp around our emotional center—bowed head, lowered eyes, even sometimes contorting of the extremities such as balling one's fists and toes or setting the jaw (Probyn, “Writing”). In an instant, failure is literally taken on, changing the shape of our bodies as it changes our emotional profile. In this moment, notions of cause-effect become moot; both failure and shame come to signify each other.

Thus, studying failure means studying the complex relationship between one's emotions, one's identity, and one's (academic) performance; and failure's connection with shame makes it particularly relevant to the study of writing, an activity intimately tied to one's sense of self because of that dual nature Sedgwick identifies. While it's easy to understand the isolating quality of shame, what's more interesting to me is its relational quality. As an evaluative emotion that draws attention to our relations with others, shame opens up or "enlarges" (Probyn, "Writing" 81) the subject, "compel[ing] an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves: Why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions that have either brought shame upon myself or cause someone else's shame?" (Probyn, *Blush* xii). With little modification, these questions are similar to those we encourage our students to start with when we teach revision. "Where did I go wrong? Can I fix it?"

Shame in this way is positive . . . [and] it can even be self-transforming. This is possible, however, only where shame is acknowledged. Denying or eradicating shame, whether by an individual or a community, seems futile to me. It is also a waste of an important resource in thinking about what it means to be human. (Probyn, *Blush* xiii)

As writing professionals, we have been similarly known to express such sentiments about writing, process, and revision: We can only become better writers when we acknowledge that writing is a process, that we all make mistakes; denying this reality is futile and reduces a fundamental human experience—expression—to a matter of skills, technicalities, or—worse—a matter of inborn genius. But, however closely aligned are the experiences of shame, failure, and writing, their kinship is rarely addressed in its full complexity, much less plumbed for possible frameworks or perspectives on how to understand the so-called "process" of writing/expression. Instead, recognition of failure (and the emotional weight of it) comes in the form of flattened concessions: "We all fail, routinely and often! Let's learn from our mistakes!" It's true that such positivity is strategic, and I'm sympathetic to the good intentions of the volumes of scholarship that take this stance. However, it is my contention that our field—and our students—would benefit greatly from acknowledging an experience that is a bit thornier.

## Failure in Its Own Image

In moving toward a reclamation of failure in the writing process, I am led to examine the writing process itself. While it's true that we've come a long way since those early days of the Harvard entrance exam, we continue to rely on a fairly conservative, product-oriented concept of creative and intellectual work. Even process pedagogy, embedded as it is in the American education system, is not so much a *process* as much as a slowed-down look at the *progress* toward a *product*, an accumulation of means toward an end. Yes, we build in recursivity; yes, we make space for different types of learners; but in the end, process pedagogy is still about a finished product. Though we may wander to and fro, the process is ultimately about accreditation, certification, and success, about helping our students become better writers (begging the question: can we re-think failure without re-thinking what it means to "succeed" or "get better" as writers?). When our students fail, we ask them to try again. We send them back to the same path they've trodden once, twice, thrice before, and we ask them to slow down, pay better attention, notice the right things. In this model, failure indicates that students have missed the signposts and wandered off into the wilderness, while success signifies that, given a particular prompt or rhetorical situation, students have deployed a combination of recommended strategies to arrive at a small range of "appropriate" destination. Put another way: success in writing—no matter what pedagogy you work with—is reached by achieving clear, recognizable goals in an efficient and inventive manner. *Failure*, on the other hand, isn't any one thing but simply the absence of success, the silent, shadowy underbelly that frightens us into tugging at our bootstraps to "try, try again."



At least, this is how failure is most popularly understood. Yet, my interest is not in rescuing failure, uplifting it, pulling from it happy, success-oriented resolutions or morals. Instead, I want to think about what could happen if we risk dwelling in the shameful muck and mire of our failure, if we give ourselves permission to experience failure on its own terms, not as something that exists only in opposition to something else but as something that is *present*. I don't want to propose methods for turning failures into success, to devise strategies for turning our frowns upside-down. I want to reconstruct failure in its own image. What if failure was its own process, but unlike "process-based" pedagogies, it led writers to nowhere in particular? What if a pedagogy of failure dropped writers into the wilderness from the start and asked them to make their own path?

What might such a pedagogy entail? As I imagine it, a pedagogy of failure arises from the foundation laid by scholarship on error and process with the effect of widening the angle of vision from a pointed focus to something more cycloramic in scope. As I think about piecing together a workable set of principles, I'm motivated by a handful of questions:

- I want to know what happens when failure isn't the silent antithesis of success or the final and unspeakable consequence of struggle or deviance against social and/or pedagogical norms;
- I want to know if it's possible to fail without being erased, cast out;
- I want to know what becomes possible when we stop thinking about education as a forward-moving, product-oriented march toward some mark of achievement, and instead we start thinking of it as something bent more toward chaos.

In pushing the idea of chaos, I mean to invoke Ann Berthoff's well-loved work on the topic, specifically her concept of *allatonceness* (61). With this neologism, Berthoff moves to name the totality of the process that she—and process pedagogues, generally—has (somewhat artificially) broken down into component parts. With the introduction of *allatonceness*, Berthoff concedes the point that a writing process is not as procedural as we might imply. There are lots of processes happening all of the time. Though we might break them down and study them as stand-alone moves or strategies, they exist only in relation to all other processes, and none takes precedence over the others. There is no order here. And that's okay.

Berthoff represents *allatonceness* as a strand of DNA, the familiar double helix. "The chief feature of this model is that at any one twist of the spiral, we meet certain activities over and over: wherever we cut a section, the same things are going on" (61-62). I admire the biological beauty of Berthoff's metaphor for composition, and I offer a complementary-yet-divergent image for failure: the rhizome, a shape at once cohesive and chaotic, growing in all directions without any particular order or agenda. Like the double helix, the rhizome is a container for *allatonceness*. But while the double helix relies on chemical logic in forming its complex structure, the rhizome goes one further by rejecting procedural linearity in favor of unchecked expansion. It stretches its gnarly limbs to fill the space available, forces itself into the nooks and crannies of whatever boundaries attempt to contain it. But make no mistake, it isn't as if the figure itself is without function, extending aimlessly in all directions. Its wandering *is* its function, its method of sustaining life. This leads me to another question: what if failure *is* the point? When failure causes *notice*—when it provokes fits of shame, anxiety, tears, loss of confidence, paralyzing fear and isolation—it exposes the bones and sinews, the unique and messy and sometimes improvised structure of the thing we're trying to create. There, we can see each thing anew, how it functions on its own and how it connects to the rest; we can figure out how to fix it; or, with this new knowledge, we can build something else altogether.

For me, the rhizome encapsulates the dizzying unpredictability of composing better than the numberless images offered by other process theorists, for example, Linda Flower and John Hayes's complex cognitive maps, or Kenneth Burke's pentad—images that strive to mark order with

preexisting structures. As a metaphor, the rhizome allows for the unique needs of each individual writing project; form, function, content: all materialize in relation to each other.

A pedagogy of failure, then, would have to account for relationality as well as isolation—how all of the parts work on their own as well as how all of the parts work together, how these expectations are formed as well as how they are stretched or upset by the demands of particular contexts. Additionally, it would have to incorporate unpredictability and improvisation. And, a pedagogy of failure would have to foreground the *felt* experience of creative and intellectual work, the affective quality that causes failure to *be noticed*.

Let me return, briefly, to the story that opens this essay. As I mentioned, that story takes place in 2009 as I was beginning my Ph.D. Up until then—and, I say this knowing full well the kind of naïve, irritating student it makes me sound like—I found writing to be effortless. Even when concepts became more difficult to grasp, writing came easily to me, and I finished my Master’s feeling my Ph.D would be more of the same. So, at about hour three of staring at a blank screen the day that paper was due, I was facing something I’d scarcely faced before, and it was unsettling. That I couldn’t talk my way out of it at my lunch meeting was earth-moving. I walked home that day trying to imagine what I might do if my Ph.D plan didn’t work out, but all of my ideas were riffs off of the same, desperate image: moving back in with my parents, working a menial office job, hating myself, wallowing in unhappiness wrought by unfulfilling work and grown-out roots. (In this fantasy of misery, I am too poor and apathetic to afford the upkeep my blonde hair demands.) In the weeks that followed, with stills from my worst imaginings looping through the cinema in the back of my head, I forced myself (or rather, was forced) to pay attention. To notice. To slow down, to let myself feel the pain of failure and to find a way to make that work for me, because all my old tricks for getting out of little writing binds—baking, speaking aloud, writing phantom emails—weren’t sufficing. I was put in a position where the only useful thing I could do was acknowledge that something had changed. “This is who I am now,” I thought. “I’m a failure. Time to make failure something I do.” Since then, I’ve made failure my business. Don’t get me wrong—I treasure the euphoria of falling into a writing rhythm, and I do everything I can to keep the kind of habits and rituals that are most likely to help me find that rhythm—but I’ve learned not to rely on those habits. When I’m struggling, that’s when I *really* pay attention. I think about every word, every sentence, every loose thread on my t-shirt and every stray hair tickling the back of my arms. I ask myself how I got to where I am, where I am trying to go, and if there is maybe somewhere else I should be instead. I ask myself how I am feeling and why I am feeling that way. I stare with great intention at the screen, furrow my brows, and try to think about my subject and my craft differently. I go where the failure takes me, and I try to make that work.

With this in mind, I offer some brief sketches of activities that may help promote a pedagogy of failure.

I. Failure Narrative. In this exercise, students are given the opportunity to write about or discuss their impressions of and experiences with failure. As I see it, this exercise works best with few guidelines, so students are free to define failure according to their own impressions, rather than asked to develop a clean “narrative” that conforms to a narrower set of acceptable characteristics. Though you may choose not to use the word “narrative” (to avoid possible allusion to the classic “literacy narrative,” which tends to take a particular form, in my experience), I do see the term as an opportunity to talk about the necessarily contrived nature of narrative itself. Therefore, a more robust version of this exercise might incorporate some reading on the contingency of narrative in creating and sustaining particular self-concepts or self-performances according to the narrator’s psychological and emotional needs. (Some possibilities here include one or two of the opening chapters of John Paul Eakins’s *How Our Lives Become Stories* and the introduction to Dana Anderson’s *Identity’s Strategy*.) Additionally,

depending on how “personal” students get with their work, this exercise opens up space to discuss how the emotional self is shaped by the structures of learning. Regardless of the scope, such an exercise can accommodate multiple genres and can also easily be adapted to fit multimodal agendas. The work students produce might then serve as core reading material for a course that explores issues of success and failure in greater depth.

II. Failure Case Study. Students are asked to design research projects centered around how a particular community, organization, individual, or culture perceives and works with failure. This would require both primary and secondary research drawing on ethnographic methods of data collection (such as conducting interviews, scheduling observations, and analyzing written and spoken discourse) as well as research and reporting from scholarly and popular venues for news and information. In this project, students can branch out from their own experiences with failure and learn about how failure operates in athletics, for example, or among entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley; or, they might find interest in a comparative analysis of the discourse of failure in Western capitalist nations vs. eastern/Asian cultures. There are many possibilities here. Though this exercise logically follows from the narrative exercise, it would also work well on its own.

III. Low-Stakes Writing Binge, or “Try Again, Fail Differently.” In this exercise, which could extend over a period of days or weeks, students write and rewrite short essays or “themes” on a topic of their (or the instructor’s) choosing. The idea is to get comfortable with “getting restless,” as Nancy Welch might say, by working intently and intensively on the same project, focusing in each draft not on how to say it *better* but on how to say it *differently*. Instructors can give as little or as much guidance as they like, either turning students loose to write out whims or offering particular modes of change, such as writing the essay from a different point of view or a different verb tense, asking them to do a word-count and then eliminate half of the words (all exercises I’ve done as a student and teacher, designed to get at issues of style and precision, among other things), rewrite it in a different mode or genre, type it and then write it by hand and then type it again, record it on video or audio-recorder, etc. This exercise is meant to help students see myriad possibilities for expression, as well as give them experience looking at their work in a granular way. This activity should be supported by reflective journaling and discussion of the changes, how/why the changes make their piece better or worse or different, and how students are processing those changes on an intellectual and emotional level.

IV. Unlearning. A riff on the above exercise, in this activity students embark on a project in which they begin by listing, talking, or writing about how they learned to do something at which they consider themselves an expert, and then strive to “unlearn” it by investigating other ways one might come to mastery. This exercise is designed to draw attention to the often arbitrary ways we come to know things, forwarding the notion of expertise or “rightness” as somewhat more flexible or complex than we might otherwise imagine.

V. Novice Narrative. In this exercise, students embark on a weeks-long adventure to learn or achieve something they’ve always wanted to do but have never attempted: juggling, riding a unicycle, playing a song on an instrument, translating a passage of writing from one language to another, making a short film, writing a play, or something else. (For those teachers trained and experienced with such work, this exercise might also be tweaked to engage students in service-learning of some kind.) Students should also keep a journal, blog, vlog, or other record of their progress, documenting not only their strategies for learning but also their feelings and thoughts about difficulty and failure.

VI. Assessing “Quality of Failure.” This idea actually comes from Edward Burger, whose “Teaching to Fail” came across my desk as I was making final revisions on this essay. More of an ethos than an exercise, “Quality of Failure” refers to a policy Burger has instituted stating that if students want to

receive an A for their final grade, they must demonstrate considerable failure, framed here as a willingness to take on and pursue ideas that might not seem entirely “safe” with the idea that risk-taking and failure foster imagination and lead to innovation. What’s more, Burger encourages students to share their failures with the rest of the class. During these times, the class “comes to life,” as “everyone wants to show off their mistakes as they now know they are offering valuable learning moments.” Here, the feltness of failure meets the brass tacks of assessment, as 5% of the students’ final grade is based on “Quality of Failure.”

Underlying all of these activities is a focus on making failure—and failure’s feltness—more visible and present in the writing classroom. This is accomplished not only by unpacking and understanding the logic of error or casting light on one’s own learning and writing processes (though of course there is room for such work in these exercises), but also by keeping tabs on one’s emotional proximity to one’s work and to the manner in which one’s work or one’s ways of knowing and doing work undergo change. The emphasis here is on flexibility, improvisation, discomfort, restlessness, and on causing notice. *Failure* causes notice.

As I mentioned before, my interest in failure stems not only from intellectual curiosity but from my own experience of failure as a deeply felt, transformative process that feels singular every time. I write about failure not to learn how to avoid it or how to work through it as quickly and efficiently as possible, but rather to understand it in order to *do it better*, to stay there longer, to take it on as an epistemological choice. Failure makes me notice, and I care about failure because I am a teacher, a student, a human being, but also because *I am a failure*. And I use the word transformative because identifying as a failure has made me not only more accepting of and inquisitive about my own multiple failures (large and small), but it has also caused me to become a more curious learner, less risk-averse, and more cognizant of my emotional profile when engaged with different types of work. I’m not sure I’d say that I necessarily write *better* than I did before that still-tender afternoon that spring-boarded me into this topic, but I would say I write differently. My work comes from an enlarged place—not only from my mind, but from my body; it is mind and body together.

Failure reverberates. It expands. And it makes visible what we often take for granted. In causing *notice*, it helps us see that there are other ways of moving through the world, alternative ways of coming to know lived experience. In offering up these thoughts, I mean to make room for a complexity as yet un(der)acknowledged in composition studies scholarship. And, I hope to provoke others to join this conversation, to examine what it might mean to develop a fuller pedagogy of failure.

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