

Atychiphobia, Failure, Genre, and Vulnerability Inside and Outside the Writing Classroom

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In this article, Shane A. Wood attempts to enlighten failure as a positive means for production and progress. Wood argues that failure can offer us—the teacher and the student—a lot. This article challenges us to consider how failure aligns with other theories (e.g., genre theory), and to re-consider how failure, through vulnerability, can be relational inside and outside the writing classroom.

Introduction: Understanding Failure

The following pages are filled with failure: failure to say things in the clearest way, failure to theorize well enough, failure to understand fully. Failure is a part of how we learn, as the old adage goes. But how often, as teachers and students, do we attempt to understand failure as a practice or phenomenon? I know none of us want to be associated with failure. We never want to produce failure, we never want to be viewed as a failure—and, we never want people to see our failures. I'd like to deconstruct these assumptions that lead, ultimately, to a lack of conversation about failure. I'd like to challenge our communities and institutions that help construct our fears of failure. For the most part, we have become numb to our failures and we have devalued them because we see them as weaknesses. I'm weary of my own failures and even more so about talking about them. Nerves and anxiety help establish my fear of failure. In the back of my mind, even as I write this introduction, I'm thinking to myself: *I hope this introduction doesn't fail. I hope whoever reads this acknowledges my work. I hope this introduction doesn't disappoint anyone, or make anyone question my intelligence or ability as a writer.*

Atychiphobia is the fear of failure. More than any other tangible or intangible, realistic or unrealistic fear, I fear *failure* itself. So, I decided to write on failure because failure is relatable. I believe we all struggle with some degree of failure, past or present or future. For some reason, failure seems to be the most relational aspect of humanity. Failure is something we have all experienced, we still experience, and will always experience. No matter how far away we try to run from it and no matter how many barriers and walls we put up, failure still exists. The premise of this article is pointing towards one claim: we *all* fail and we *all* can learn from failure. I'm writing this as an attempt to theorize failure within composition studies and writing classrooms. I believe that we've all experienced failure and we've all avoided failure or neglected to share our failure(s). Therefore, by understanding failure, I think we're expanding our opportunities to learn and grow. In this article, I'm asking us to consider and reconsider the nature of failure in our own lives as well as what it means to resituate failure in the composition classroom.

During my junior year of college, I had a detrimental experience where I felt like a failure after an English professor of mine commented on my ability as a student-writer and suggested that I wouldn't succeed if I wanted to continue to pursue higher education. This teacher's feedback stole nearly every bit of hope I had in my abilities as a learner. I had recently switched my major from Business to English Literature because of my inability to take standardized tests, and after this feedback, I felt like I didn't have a place in academia. I was devastated, and I felt doomed for failure. I remember reading those comments via email and shutting down—mentally, physically, and emotionally. I sat there in an on-campus computer lab and the walls began to collapse. My skin began to peel and fall like wallpaper, and I had nowhere to hide. The only thing I could see or think about were those comments. I was ashamed and embarrassed. Questions about my intellectual and academic abilities began to race through my head: *Is my writing that bad? Do I really have no potential? Where do I go from here?*

My fascination with failure started because of this experience as an undergraduate student. The beginning was feedback, or how a teacher responded to my writing, and how it made me feel. I believe the writing classroom is a perfect place to start engaging in discussions about failure because it's a space that embraces experience, creativity, analysis, critical thinking, and exploration. To me, *the writing classroom is vulnerable* and provides opportunity for vulnerability. And vulnerability is an opening for conversations on and about failure. The art of being a *good* teacher is the art of adaptation, and the art of being a *good* student is the art of non-cognitive skills, such as motivation and perseverance. Pedagogical theories are (and *will always* be) formed and constructed in an attempt to better the classroom by making it more effective

and more accessible. Theories and research inform teaching, and teaching informs theories and research. I'd like to introduce vulnerability as a lens in which the writing classroom can be transformed—teacher and student alike. But first, I want to consider how Mary Soliday's work in genre can be a possible frame for how we—the teacher and the student—perceive failure in the writing classroom and critique the nature of our writing assignments.

Everyday Failures in the Writing Classroom Through the Genre of Writing Assignments

Mary Soliday's *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines* explores the nature of writing assignments teachers construct and distribute to students across different disciplines, and she concludes that “genre is not a recipe for writing we can effectively list on the assignment sheet: instead, because it is a social practice, readers and writers make everyday genres interactively” (3). She offers a better understanding of how teachers create writing assignments to assess a “writer's intellectual grasp of material” and focuses on how writing assignments can be viewed as a genre that “shapes how writers talk *about* something *to* someone *for some reason*” (1–2). If teachers and students consider how writing assignments *are acting and being acted* upon, then I believe we have to acknowledge the possibility that failure may exist in those writing assignments—whether that be in the construction of the assignment, the reception of the assignment, the grading criteria for the assignment, or how the assignment is meeting or not meeting the goals of the course or program. Genre studies can help us uncover the innerworkings of writing assignments, and the potential constructions and responses to failure.

Genres are complex, multi-faceted, and robust. Genre scholar Amy Devitt writes, “[Genres] shape our experiences, and our experiences shape them” (219), and Deborah Dean adds, “Genres are social. They are used to act in specific situations, and they arise from social situations” (11). The writing classroom is a specific social situation where the teacher and the student interact with each other and genres, like writing assignments, on a consistent basis. The simple categorization of writing assignments is even too broad to fully comprehend the nature of those assignments. There are low-stakes writing assignments and high-stakes writing assignments, ungraded writing assignments and graded writing assignments. Both low-stakes and high-stakes writing assignments are acting and being acted upon differently by the teacher and student, and each assignment must be analyzed individually in order to understand its dynamic nature. Soliday connects to other genre theory scholars by explaining how writing assignments are placed within situations and motives. Can we look at genre theory and writing assignments to help us

understand failure? And can we share failure through the ways in which we construct and take up those assignments as teachers and students? Nothing is more social or anti-social than failure. In some cases, sharing failure generates more conversations, it encourages more people to willingly talk about their own failures. In other instances, sharing failure further isolates the individual, causing for future conversations to shut down. Regardless of how we respond or react to failure, it still exists.

In my writing classroom, we often analyze writing assignments by thinking about what works, what doesn't work, how does it work, and why it works in that specific genre of writing. Ultimately, this type of critical thinking and genre awareness searches for deeper understanding and looks for different meanings. We engage in critical thinking about specific genres and how we go about composing within those genres, and we often consider the flexibility of the genre and what it affords. For example, if the writing assignment is to produce an ethnography, then we consider the flexibility within that genre; ethnographies allow us to create a narrative, base our understanding and writing on field observations and interviews. An ethnography functions a lot differently than an academic research paper. Understanding the nature of the writing assignment and the genre of writing we're composing in allows us to consider failure.

The premise of the writing classroom is largely influenced by failing. If writing is a process, then failing is a large part of succeeding in that process; messing up and revising is a normal part of any writing assignment and process. As both teachers and students engage in the writing process, aren't we also engaging in failure? The impetus of the writing classroom is writing and writing and writing and revising and revising and revising and so on. The process of failing is ultimately the heartbeat of practicing and teaching writing. I believe that failure doesn't have to be associated or assigned a negative connotation. In fact, I'd urge teachers and students to start thinking about failure productively.

Productive and Positive Failure in the Writing Classroom

As a student, five years ago, a professor of mine wrote a letter to my class expressing his own failures. The letter was a heartfelt confession of how terribly the class session before went. The previous class session was focused on peer-to-peer feedback and it turned into an absolute debacle of suppressed voices. Nothing positive came from that experience in class. But, that failure became a learning process. The initial problem, the failure, was necessary in order for the letter to be written and for the second half of the semester to occur. The

letter possessed honesty because it was a reaction to failure. After he read the letter, the class thrived and the confession of failure became a turning point. The class took advantage of failure and turned failure into something positive, a *learning moment*. The beauty of failure and our experiences with failure is that it allows us to connect with each other. Theorizing failure can help both teacher and student through the enviable crises that failure in writing classrooms bring with it.

As a teacher, I try to talk about failure as much as possible in my writing classrooms. I don't talk about it in terms of failing the class, or other academic institutional associations with failure that often portray it as negative. In fact, the first two class sessions of every semester, I try to embrace failure as much as possible by talking about how failure is positioned and asserted in academia, and how I disagree with failure being perceived as a mark of incompetence. I try to reposition failure by giving it more value or by simply acknowledging its value by talking about failure as being a fundamental part of human nature and learning. What I'm doing in the first couple of class sessions carries great weight for the rest of the semester: it opens up a conversation about failure—something we all experience, something we all feel. I'm being vulnerable. I'm tapping into my personal experiences with failure as both a teacher and student, and I'm sharing it all. I believe vulnerability is a key step in sharing failure in the writing classroom.

Five Steps for Vulnerability and Transforming the Writing Classroom as Teacher and Student

Vulnerability is one lens we can use to embrace failure in the writing classroom. I feel like being vulnerable allows me to be more real, more honest. I'm no longer fearful of failure. That lack of fear is the impetus of vulnerability. The fear of failure doesn't control me or what I do in the classroom. Instead, failure is projected as a positive. And it's natural. What better way to talk about failure than to criticize writing assignments? The teacher and the student can practice vulnerability by openly analyzing what the writing assignment affords and constrains. For example, the writing assignment might be privileging certain identities over others. Teachers and students should be aware of the ideological positions that exist in writing assignments and in academia. We can begin critiquing those systems and structures inside and outside the writing classroom. If we're producing different genres—different texts—and if we're constantly talking about genre, then failure makes sense. What better way to talk about writing than to also talk about failure? Writing is failing; writing is revising; writing is understanding what works and doesn't work within a genre; and writing is vulnerable.

Admittedly, being vulnerable is something of a different nature for different identities. I know and understand that some teachers can embrace vulnerability more in the writing classroom than others due to other aspects of their identity: *being able to be vulnerable* in the classroom is a privilege. For example, as a student, I don't want to assume that my teacher will be open to hearing what I have to say through my vulnerability. Likewise, as a teacher, I don't want to assume that students will embrace my vulnerability inside the classroom. Confessing and sharing failure isn't easy because we can't control how someone is going to receive our failures, or how someone will respond to us sharing failures. There's no potion. Talking about failure is a personal endeavor, talking about failure is selfless. Talking about failure, I believe, is one representation of humility. The idea of cultivating vulnerability is one idea of how to center failure in the writing classroom.

The following list is what I've personally gathered from embracing vulnerability and what it means to focus on failure in the writing classroom. This list isn't a self-help manual or any sort of guidelines to follow as a teacher or student. Instead, this is only what I've learned from my own classroom experiences about vulnerability and failure (and how the two collide). For now, the most significant elements of my own experience with, in, and through being vulnerable as a teacher and student are honesty, listening/communication, consistency, and accountability.

Honesty

Honesty is the grass roots; it's the cornerstone of vulnerability. If you want to talk about failure, I believe you have to be honest with yourself—it's okay to fail. Believing that it's okay to fail is a big step moving forward. After you believe that, then confessing your failure is usually next. This is going to be hard. I'm not naturally inclined to admit where I've failed—past or present—but I'm becoming quicker in verbalizing how I've failed. There's another leap: you must move beyond a mere confession of failure. There has to be a turning point where you see failure as positive. If you truly want to embrace failure, then you can't look at it as solely negative. I ask myself, my friends, my colleagues, and my classroom these types of questions all the time: what did I learn from this specific failure? How is this failure going to help me moving forward? How am I encouraged by this failure? How can I share this failure with others? What's the best thing about this failure? If the failure came from not meeting one expectation within the assignment—if the genre calls for a specific convention and it gets overlooked—then it's a matter of seeing how that specific convention shapes and changes what the genre does and how it functions. As a teacher and student, I've discovered that productive classes spend a lot of time talking about assignments even after the final draft feedback is given. As a teacher, I make it a point to never

move on to the next assignment without a thorough discussion about the previous assignment. This may take one to two more class sessions, but it's worthwhile in creating vulnerability. As a student, I have to be okay with talking about my successes and failures of a given assignment after receiving final feedback. There's more to learn, there's more to understand. It doesn't stop with marginal comments and an end comment. It's extremely important to want to talk about failure. As a teacher, I even confess how I feel like a previous class session failed, how the assignment failed in some way, how the discussion failed, or how the criteria for assessment failed. There's always an open, honest dialogue where the classroom is focusing on failure productively.

Listening / Communication

If that dialogue is going to exist, then communication is necessary. I believe conversations on and about failure are guided by listening. I placed *honesty* before *listening/communication* purposefully and intentionally. Ultimately there needs to be some attitude-based framework that builds everything else. Honesty is inward and foundational. Without honesty, listening/communication doesn't exist, especially vulnerable communication. When it comes to failure inside and outside the writing classroom, listening is one of the most important concepts to grasp. Often, in my writing classroom, we break into pairs to further generate conversations on failure. We might do this during the middle of class, or after a group activity, or after receiving feedback, but regardless of the circumstance, we get time to talk about failure. Each student is given five minutes to share and confess how they're learning from failure and how failure is becoming a positive experience. One person talks, the other one listens. The listener can't say anything at all. Then, they switch positions. After those ten minutes, I have five minutes to share in failure. I'm given the opportunity to communicate and share where I failed, whether that be in the creation of the assignment or the production of my feedback. If I feel like I created my response in a "rubber stamp" manner, where my feedback could be transferred from one student paper to the next, then I speak candidly about where I failed them. I talk about how I wasn't intentional enough, or how I wasn't careful enough in my response. After I share, we have a larger discussion about failure. Students, then, have the opportunity to talk about the assignment as a whole and how the assignment or assessment potentially led to specific aspects of failure in their writing. I embrace students critiquing the assignment and assessment. If we're going to learn from failure, then I believe we have to analyze those texts that may help produce failure. If the assessment criteria, which is always created collaboratively as a class, fails in some way, then we need to address that. We need to have open communication about how we can improve assessment for our next assignment. I believe this is untraditional in academic culture, a culture that tends to push aside failure.

Consistency & Accountability

I'm a believer in consistency. If I'm not consistent, I want to be held accountable. Now that failure is a large part of what we do in my classes, I expect consistency in talking about failure. Consistency and accountability help produce a more vulnerable classroom—holding each other, both teacher and student, to a degree of accountability is important in creating a writing classroom that thrives on vulnerability. My nature and personality already relies heavily on consistency—my schedule and routines—and academia, for me personally, has cultivated that need for consistency even more. Consistency and accountability often branch from honesty and come from active listening and communication. Are we being honest with ourselves and each other? Sometimes, I think it's necessary to evaluate and assess conversations we have with each other. Are we being vulnerable? In class, we reflect on what we're thinking, how we're thinking, what we're saying, why we're saying it, and how we're feeling. We're accountable for our own intentions and purposes, and we're accountable for the person beside us.

Conclusion: Incorporating Failure and Failing in the Writing Classroom

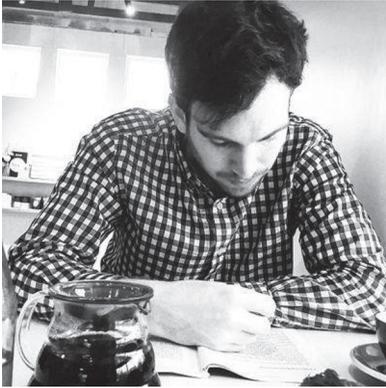
Failure is multifaceted. I think that writing about and discussing failure will allow us to see the broad, multifaceted nature of failure. Theorizing failure within composition studies and writing classrooms might be a long process, but I believe that a conversation on failure which attempts to identify the nature of failure by breaking down social conventions in order to define, or establish the identity of, the writing classroom will lead to an open dialogue that embraces, not evades failure. Failure and the feeling of failure seem to be a significant portion in the life of all of us. Failure is a part of the nature of what it means to be human. I argue for more failure. I want failure to be illuminated inside and outside the writing classroom. I encourage all of us to engage in an open discussion of failure, and I desire for writing classrooms to be at the forefront of that conversation. The more we focus and study failure, the more we will be able to understand why and how it happens. Our world isn't perfect; our communities aren't perfect; our institutions aren't perfect; our classrooms aren't perfect; our writing assignments aren't perfect; we aren't perfect. I challenge us to better understand failure so that we can learn from our imperfections. This article has merely scratched the surface on failure theory. I urge others to take up the task and do more work in failure theory.

I believe that failure is an endless learning opportunity; a constant force with countless possibilities. Theorizing failure has changed the way I look at myself, my life, my pedagogy, my writing assignments, my assessment, my

feedback, my classroom, my students, and so on. Instead of avoiding and running from failure, I accept and share it. Instead of dwelling in all my failures, I focus on where I've grown from those failures and where those failures have taken me. I acknowledge that I will continue to fail, and I acknowledge that failure is unavoidable by its nature. Instead of feeling shame and guilt from the negative aspects of failure, I will be enlightened by failure, and I will be encouraged that something great will come from it. Failure is a part of me, and I will choose to carefully examine all those failure(s) that exist. Maybe the best unanswered question so far is this one: how will you embrace failure?

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