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Fail Forward! Perspectives on Failure in the Writing Classroom

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FAIL FORWARD!

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In their brief segment of *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Collin Brooke and Allison Carr note that “the capacity for failure (and thus success) is one of the most valuable abilities a writer can possess” (63). And yet in our own classrooms—where pressures to teach to the test and produce as much measurable learning as quickly as possible often stand in direct opposition to known best practices—it is challenging to help students feel comfortable with failure. Elizabeth Wardle notes that “the steady movement toward standardized testing and tight control of educational activities by legislators is producing and reproducing answer-getting dispositions in educational systems and individuals.” As educators, we know how important student dispositions are to their learning, and Wardle’s research indicates that students who are consistently in systems that require them merely to find the one right answer rather than encourage them to solve problems through trial and error then develop answer-getting dispositions. Such dispositions discourage students from trying to work through difficulties or apply what they know from one situation to another. For students with answer-getting dispositions, the writing process screams of failure because revision means their work wasn’t “right” the first time.

In this inaugural Teacher-to-Teacher column, three classroom teachers discuss how they approach failure to normalize it and help students work toward problem solving rather than answer getting in their own classrooms. Missy Springsteen-Haupt explains how sharing her own authentic writing failures helps students see the natural emotional connection to their writing as normal and also to prove to them, as Shirley Rose notes, that “all writers always have more to learn about writing” (59). Framing student writing in

terms of growth mindsets, Stacy Stosich discusses a practical strategy for allowing for ugly drafts and redefining success and failure. Finally, Nora K. Rivera delineates a system of peer review and weekly sentence work designed to allow for experimentation without penalty; her methods not only pushed students to carefully evaluate their own and others' work, but also resulted in a reduced grading load and student success in district testing.

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PERSPECTIVES ON FAILURE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

From Missy Springsteen-Haupt:

The Call for Submissions was near-perfect, encouraging all teacher-writers to share their experiences of writing with students. I dove into the work in class, during our designated writing time. Throughout the process, I talked through my goal of being published. My eighth graders lived through the process with me.

The first revision suggestions gave me hope. It wasn't the outright rejection my mind had spent the previous weeks prematurely building defenses against. I shared the comments with my students as we revised together, commiserating in the pain of feedback that proves our writing isn't perfect even when we think it is. Wrestling with the feedback in front of my students showed them my personal attempts to overcome the failure of a draft not being good enough.

And then, finally, the news: My manuscript was rejected. The outcome I had originally planned for hit hard after months of revisions. The wound of rejection settled itself into my brain. My students rallied around me with sympathy and support, astonished that something I had worked so hard on could ultimately be rejected. They couldn't understand how my dedication didn't pay off because so much of their education has reinforced the idea that a goal plus hard work equals success.

We talk about failure being a path to learning all the time; "Growth Mindset" buzzwords plaster the walls of schools around the country, but motivational reminders to work past failure are meaningless in the moment of hurt. Nothing bruises our minds quite the way failure does. Defeat worms its way into our heads and takes up extended residence. *This paper wasn't good enough* easily spirals into *I'm not good enough*. Nowhere is this quite as personal as the act of writing.

Even the simplest writing assignment requires personal investment and bravery. Many student writers experience excessive error-

correction from well-meaning writing teachers, and the stakes for failure build over time. We encourage failure as a path to growth: crummy first drafts, multiple revisions to strengthen writing, and utilizing feedback to make adjustments. Final drafts eventually receive a grade, though, and the fear of that opportunity for high-stakes failure is difficult for students to ignore. Student writers have invested so much to improve, but what happens when a piece of writing is still not good enough? We shouldn't kid ourselves that the mark of failure is an "F." For many students, simply not earning an "A" translates into the feeling of failure. Revisions feel like failure for students who want writing to be "perfect" on the first try. Minutes of staring at a blank sheet of paper or a flashing cursor can make any writer feel like a failure before they even begin. Any writing experience that doesn't lead to personal satisfaction or audience approval can feel like failure. Writing provides us with ample opportunities to feel inadequate.

With the fear of failure looming in many students' minds, we as teachers need to work them past that fear by having them confront it when the stakes are low, before that final paper. Too often, our compassion and desire to see all students succeed translates into teachers attempting to rescue students from the pain of failure. We see them struggle with the empty page, and after a few minutes, we swoop in to provide support. This leads to failure on both sides. Students fail to realize their own agency and don't learn the resiliency necessary to work their way out of a challenging situation. Teachers fail to provide their students with a safe space to struggle, and often prevent ourselves from viewing their full capabilities. One class period of staring at an empty page has never harmed any of my student writers beyond repair, but I have seen plenty of writers grow dependent on teachers because they are afraid to face the task of writing without being told exactly what to do. Fearful writers will never grow into confident writers if we don't allow them the space in our classrooms to fail. If teachers don't model and practice the safety of life beyond failure, then failure becomes fatal in our students' minds.

Embracing small failures on a regular basis allows students to experience the benefit of working beyond defeat. Frequency matters. The more students write, the more they have opportunities to struggle

on smaller pieces instead of investing too much in one major piece of writing. Writer's notebooks are the place where failure always reigns. I stop my students from erasing anything, and urge them to look to their worst writing for opportunities to reflect and grow. Attempts to try (and fail) at new techniques or genres receive encouragement and in-process feedback to support revision.

We can successfully model how to overcome deficiencies by building self-reflection around potential failures during early drafts. A simple five-minute quick write on *What is your biggest obstacle to success at this point in the writing process?* can help our students think about how to get to the root of the problem. At the bottom of a rough draft, I have students write for a few minutes about what the hardest part of writing the piece has been so far. This normalizes the feeling of failure during the writing process. Many student writers are suffering alone with their fear, but if we build the space for frustration into the process itself, we show that confronting the fear of failure is as much a part of writing as drafting or revising. This head-on confrontation with perceived failure can help them work out these feelings before revision. Confronting fear was something lacking in my classroom until I experienced rejection for myself and felt the fear that came with it. The more I talked in class about my feelings of rejection and failure as a writer, the more comfortable my students felt admitting their own. Naming our fear helped to take away its power and gave us freedom to move forward.

As we model our own writing in class, teacher-writers can pay special attention to highlighting our initial failures. We invite students to notice where our word choice is lacking and syntactical choices are awkward. Verbalizing our frustrations and struggles can help create a writing environment where students feel comfortable facing their own roadblocks. We reinforce revision as the key to overcoming rough draft failures, playing with changes until we find ways to turn inadequacies into strengths. Instead of looking at revision as another thing to fail at, the way we model revision can be the key to fostering a growth mindset for our student writers. If we remember how strong the fear of failure is in our own writing lives, we can better empathize and model resiliency.

I licked my rejection wounds for longer than I would like to admit, and it reminded me that our students need time to heal from failure, too. If a piece isn't working, they should have freedom to set it aside and try something else. Rewrites should always be an option on graded work, after a one-on-one conference over the major issues in the final draft. Teacher comments should guide students forward instead of dwelling on mistakes. Through this, we show them that lack of success on one piece doesn't mean they are destined to fail at all writing.

Students eventually have to confront their fears on their own, and our most effective action is to share in the frustration of failure. By naming and making space in our classrooms for the fear of failure, we show that successful writers are not the people who are never scared to fail, they are the ones who continue to write even in the face of fear.

From Stacy Stosich:

Teaching is an exercise in failure. There is always something we could have done differently, done better, or done more of. Yet in my education classes in college I was told to “fake it ‘til you make it” and to present an image of authority. But as a reflective practitioner I believe what students need is a way to see failure as part of professional life. In my eleventh grade English classroom, the biggest issue of student “failure” I deal with is simply students who won't write, who won't even make an attempt to turn something in, and students who continuously turn in plagiarized writing instead of writing something themselves. Here is what I do to show students that it's okay to try even if sometimes they don't succeed.

I like to start the year talking to students about some success stories that emphasize the soft skills that contribute to academic success such as the stories of Dawn Loggins and Ben Carson. Loggins lived in a shack with no running water or electricity, and her parents abandoned her before her senior year, yet she was accepted to Harvard. Carson was the “dumb” kid with a single mother who only had a third grade education, but he became a world famous neurosurgeon. Most of academic success is not about how “smart” you are, but rather about being an advocate for yourself, asking for help, working hard,

capitalizing on your strengths, and being able to remediate your weaknesses. And of course, the most important soft skill of all is having a growth mindset. I have my students write a reflection on what areas and in what ways they have a growth or fixed mindset. It's important to model to students, so I explain to them my own areas of growth or fixed mindset. For example, in the area of athletics I mostly have a growth mindset—I know that as I practice and train, I get better. In the area of writing I also have a growth mindset; I am eager to receive feedback, largely because I'm confident enough in my own skills that I'm not worried about criticism or others seeing me as a failure. I know that the eye can't see itself and that all writers need feedback. However, in the area of math, I am not as confident due to a long history of negative experiences. So if a math problem comes up in a social conversation, I usually just laugh it off and say, "I'm an English teacher; don't ask me," hence effectively avoiding the challenge altogether—the very thing that I get so frustrated about when my students do it in my classroom. This year I told my students that I plan to have a growth mindset toward math, and I expect them to have a growth mindset toward English.

As I've learned over the years to share my own areas of weakness, I've seen the humanizing effect it has on the way students see me. This year after I pitched my "why reading matters" presentation, a student came up to me and told me that what I said really "hit" her and that she wanted to focus more on reading. We talked about her experiences as a non-native speaker of English, and I told her I was impressed with anyone learning a new language. Then she told me that she heard me speaking in Spanish to an ELL student who was new to the country, and she was impressed! I laughed and told her some of my insecurities about speaking Spanish, but she was very encouraging. Now whenever I attempt to use my broken Spanish to help students, I see her smiling at me. I've also noticed she's been more emboldened to raise her hand and share in class.

Another way I allow my students to try without fear of failure is making the first draft of an essay a separate assignment, for which they get full points as long as they turn in a complete draft. Even in schools doing proficiency or mastery grading, this works because

the common core actually has a standard on the writing process and simply writing a first draft makes you proficient in that aspect of the process. This is my way of showing students that they are rewarded if they will just try. I don't care if they make mistakes—the whole point of a first draft is to figure out how it could be better. I've told my students a mistake is a success as long as you learn from it, and the way they show that learning is by correcting those mistakes for a final draft.

Of course, there's a time to let a student fail, too. Even with a proficiency-based grading system that allows for re-writes and retakes, often enough students turn in too little too late, and can fail not just a writing assignment, but a quarter. This is a good time to have a one-on-one with a student about what went wrong and what goals to set for next quarter. Everything needs to be tied to the growth mindset and the opportunity to learn from an experience. This can be done through one-on-one conversations with students, through sharing with the class your “favorite mistakes” from a set of assignments you graded, as well as through assigning students to write reflections and goals after completing a piece of writing. There is never a time for sarcasm or shame about mistakes made in the classroom—only an opportunity to encourage growth.

As a professional educator, I've had to re-define my own ideas of success and failure. After turning in plagiarized work for every major writing assignment for the year, one student finally turned in his real writing for the fourth quarter narrative essay. Now, this essay wasn't exactly pretty. In fact, the writing was so poor that I couldn't even understand what happened in the story. But I spoke to him about some of my confusion points, and he actually turned in a revised final draft. The final draft was still quite poor, but I considered it a huge success because he embraced the effort and the risk of turning in his own writing and even continued with the process to take constructive feedback and embark on the journey that all professional writers go through when turning something from an idea to a finished product. He caught the vision that success doesn't mean getting an A you didn't deserve—success means learning something.

Winston Churchill said, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” As a teacher, I am the authority in my classroom, but my position of expertise and power didn’t come from one defining moment of success; rather it came from a collection of successes and failures that I’ve used to continuously improve my practice. Educators need to help students reframe their vision of success to include facing failure. Case in point, I almost didn’t submit this very article due to my own fear of failure, but I did, and my risk was rewarded when I was conditionally accepted pending revisions. And because of that risk, I’ve gained experience that is making me a better teacher and a more seasoned professional as I’ve been able to share with my students how I’m going through a revision process just like I expect them to. Students must see red marks on a first draft not as failure, but as part of the pathway to success. Let teachers and students, professionals and amateurs alike never forget the work, the effort, and the insecurities of the craft. Here’s to facing failure!

From Nora K. Rivera:

Failure has been misunderstood. Rather than understanding it as a training phase, an opportunity for revision, or a rehearsal towards achievement, failure has become a word that implies defeat. As an English teacher, I have been pondering over my own reactions to failure in my teaching practices, prompting me to speculate about the importance of deliberately devoting time to writing in class and creating an editing system that can be adjusted to the needs of students. Consider my case last year when preparing to teach English I for the first time to a group of talented eighth-grade girls who were being taught high school English. Thinking of ideas like “practice makes perfect,” “process over outcome,” “plan with the end in mind,” and “praise effort over grade,” I created a practical system to give students sufficient time to practice writing and editing skills without exhausting myself grading essays after school. My method primarily consisted of peer-review workshops and weekly sentence exercises with SAT vocabulary use.

As part of our school’s initiative to encourage students to take ownership of their learning, we implemented peer feedback practices

throughout the core subject classes, and teachers were able to modify this practice to their needs. Writing, I knew right away, was the place for peer feedback in my class. Knowing that writing requires thinking, editing our thinking, and making mistakes, I had numerous conversations with my academically competitive students about the value of failure and the benefits of giving and receiving meaningful feedback. To free class minutes to dedicate to writing, the girls read novels at home as this task is usually less daunting than writing and requires less guidance—although my students do often read and analyze short pieces of fiction and nonfiction in class. Then, I devised a rubric—adapted from the Expository Writing Rubric designed by the Texas Education Agency—specific enough to combine my expectations with the state test expectations but simple enough for my students to follow and provide peer feedback (Figure 1). Students participated in writing workshops nearly twice a month, starting with the composition of paragraphs and gradually moving into writing full essays (adjusting the rubric when working on paragraphs). Although always writing either an academic paragraph or a full essay, each workshop focused on a specific area (e.g., thesis, introduction, topic sentence, concrete detail), and each session culminated with written and oral peer feedback.

Grading was surprisingly effortless. Instead of fixating on the final draft, I concentrated on guiding the process. And because we had recently adopted and adapted the Jane Schaffer© color-coded system, which associates each element of an academic paragraph with a color, it was easy to walk around the room and redirect students on the spot. Paragraphs and essays produced during this time received an A for effort, and were scored by peers. Students practiced writing and made mistakes without the fear of receiving a failing grade. To receive the A, however, the work had to be completed, and the rubric with at least two comments—one for reinforcement and one for refinement—had to be attached to the writing piece. As a result, students proactively sought out the opinion of other students, and peer feedback quickly became part of the routine. A drawback of my method was that, due to time constraints, the girls were not able to revise and resubmit their work. Instead, they collected their writings and reviewed their

Feedback by: _____

Expository Writing Feedback

Organization & Progression (Thesis, Smooth Flow, and Transitions)	
The introduction and conclusion strongly establish the controlling idea (thesis), and every part of the paper supports that controlling idea. The progression of ideas is logical and well-control. Meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections enhance the flow of the essay.	4
The introduction and conclusion clearly establish the controlling idea (thesis), and most parts of the paper support that controlling idea. The essay is coherent, but not always unified due to minor lapses in focus. For the most part , transitions are meaningful, and sentence-to-sentence connections are sufficient to support the flow of the essay.	3
The thesis (controlling idea) is weak or somewhat unclear . Lack of an effective thesis or presence of irrelevant information interferes with the focus of the essay. The progression is not always controlled or logical. Repetition of wordiness causes minor disruptions in the flow of the essay. Transitions and sentence-to-sentence connections are too weak to support the flow of the essay.	2
The thesis statement is missing , even though most ideas are related to the prompt's topic. Lack of focus, unnecessary information, and abrupt shifts from idea to idea occur. The progression of ideas is weak . Repetition of wordiness causes serious disruptions in the flow of the essay. Transitions and sentence-to-sentence connections are random or illogical , making the paper unclear and difficult to follow .	1
Development of Ideas (Concrete Details and Elaboration)	
Concrete details clearly and consistently support the controlling idea of the paper. Essay is thoughtful and engaging . The writer uses unique examples or experiences to connect ideas in interesting ways.	4
Concrete details sufficiently to support the controlling idea, adding some substance to the essay. Essay reflects some thoughtfulness . The writer's response is original .	3
Concrete details are present , but they don't really support the controlling idea. Concrete details are too brief . Essay reflects little or no thoughtfulness . The writer's response is limited .	2
Concrete details are weak, inappropriate, vague, or insufficient . Response to the prompt is vague or confused . Essay is weakly linked to the prompt, demonstrating a lack of understanding of the task.	1
Use of Language (Diction, Syntax, Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling)	
Writer's word choice and language is clear, precise, and appropriate to the expository writing task. Sentences are purposeful, varied, and well-controlled , enhancing the effectiveness of the essay. Writer shows consistent command of grammar with only minor punctuation or spelling mistakes that don't distract from the fluency of the essay.	4
Writer's word choice and language is mostly clear and unambiguous, and the tone of the paper is appropriate . Sentences are mostly varied and well-controlled. Writer shows moderate command of grammar with occasional spelling and grammar mistakes that create few disruptions in the fluency of the essay.	3
Word choice is not precise , does not contribute to the clarity of the essay, and does little to establish a tone appropriate for the task. Sentences are awkward or somewhat controlled , weakening the effectiveness of the essay. Partial command of sentences, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Distracting errors create minor disruptions in the fluency or meaning of the writing.	2
Word choice is vague or limited and does not establish an appropriate tone. Sentences are simple, awkward, or uncontrolled, significantly limiting the effectiveness of the essay. Little or no command of sentences, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Serious errors create disruptions in the fluency of the essay.	1
Reinforce What do you see in this essay that you find to be impressive, innovative, or strong? (I like how you... / I was impressed with...)	Refine Are there parts of this essay that you thought were not clear? Was the concrete detail and commentary consistent? (I respectfully disagree with... / I think focusing on _____ would really help you improve...)

Figure 1: Rubric for Expository Writing with Feedback

feedback before starting a new piece to avoid previous mistakes. The system not only gave students practice time but also saved me from the exhaustion of grading essays twice a month. As part of the nine-week exams, I meticulously graded two full essays per semester. It was during these assessments that the improvement from one writing piece to the next became evident.

In addition to the peer-review workshops, students practiced sentence structure by completing at home a simple vocabulary log every week (Figure 2). The log consisted of defining five SAT words, identifying parts of speech, synonyms, antonyms, and drawing images of each term. The caveat to this seemingly easy exercise was that students had to write one sentence using any two of the five words, and this one sentence needed to start with a different structure rule every week. We concentrated on five different rules to vary sentences throughout the year: beginning a sentence with an adverb, with a gerund, an adverbial clause, an adjective, or an infinitive. Every Monday, I wrote on the board the five new SAT words to develop in the log and the rule to use to start the sentence. At times, the rule also required a sentence to be compound, complex, or compound-complex. This sentence practice provided students with more non-intimidating writing experience, and gave me a chance to peek into their writing progress on a weekly basis.

This log was simple, and grading it typically took no more than ten minutes of checking by the students' desks while they worked on independent assignments. And each time I saw a faulty pattern emerging, I addressed it directly with the student. While some students failed to compose the sentence every now and then, most enjoyed the challenge of creating an interesting sentence with two new "fancy" words. And to persuade the reluctant students to write it every week, I weighed the sentence grade more than any other part of the log. Interestingly, many girls took this assignment as an outlet to express their humorous side or political views, and very often I found myself drawing happy faces, exclamation marks, or just chatting about the content. As in the writing workshops, we did not have enough time to revise and resubmit. Nonetheless, students reviewed prior mistakes and tried to avoid them the following week. With time, the skills

Vocabulary Log	
Word:	Part of Speech:
Definition:	
Synonym:	Image/Symbol:
Antonym:	
Word:	Part of Speech:
Definition:	
Synonym:	Image/Symbol:
Antonym:	
<p>[Note: Students complete a form for each of five SAT words.]</p> <p>Write one sentence combining any two vocabulary words. Use the sentence variation rule by your teacher.</p> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin: 5px 0;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin: 5px 0;"/>	

Figure 2: Vocabulary Log with Sentence [partial]

learned by practicing these sentences transferred into their essays. Both the vocabulary log and the peer feedback assisted my students during the state exam not only to write an effective essay, but to answer the multiple-choice questions in its editing section. The students gained confidence in writing while making low-stakes mistakes and learned to recognize these mistakes as opportunities to grow into better writers.

In the end, the girls accomplished a task that at the beginning of the school year seemed impossible. These eighth graders received the highest scores in the English I End of Course exam—a high school test—in the district. Succeeding at an exam that equally weighs reading and writing required my classroom to do the same. My system was neither the best nor the most unique. It was a trial-and-error method

that, like writing, was—still is—in constant state of revision. It was technique that allowed my young students to acquire something they lacked because of their age: experience.

To put it simply, we cannot expect students to get it perfect the first time, or the second, or the third time. Allowing and encouraging tolerance towards making mistakes in writing is indispensable to produce experienced writers. Allocating purposeful time to practice editing skills with a well-planned system, tailored to the needs of our own students, has to be a priority in the English secondary classroom if we want our students to succeed in college. Last year I learned to give writing a fair chance and stopped expecting perfect sentences, perfect paragraphs, perfect essays by accepting that making mistakes, and sometimes failing, is essential to writing.