I, Allison D Carr, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:  
**Negative Space: Toward an Epistemology of Failure**

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Negative Space: Toward an Epistemology of Failure

A dissertation submitted to the
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Abstract

This project develops a way of rethinking failure in the writing classroom—how we define it as well as how we respond to it. In rhetoric and composition scholarship, “failure” as a term is hard to pin down. Though most obviously associated with assessment, the term is rarely if ever engaged as an experiential, emotional process integral to learning. Drawing from queer, feminist, and emotion theory, as well as an original research study grounded in feminist qualitative methodology, this dissertation brings failure to the forefront of writing scholarship, insisting that writing teachers and scholars must think more critically about its role in students’ writing lives if we are to continue promoting writing as a vital skill in the 21st century.

I begin by reviewing disciplinary literature, claiming that our primary ways of studying writing (observation, talk-aloud protocol) do not enable researchers to “see” failure, or those activities, behaviors, and bodily and affective markers that fall outside our understanding of what “counts” (and is therefore observable) as writing behavior.

The second and third chapters describe a research study, consisting of a large-scale, open-ended survey of undergraduates and follow-up interviews with a representative sample of participants. My analysis of the data is guided by Silvan Tomkins’ categories of affect, Krista Ratcliffe’s scholarship on rhetorical listening, Thomas Newkirk’s work on narrative and case study, and Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Davis’s work on Portraiture. The data show that participants associate failure most often with shame, an affective state that should be of great interest to writing researchers. Shame, according to the extensive work of Tomkins, Elspeth Probyn, Brené Brown, and others, represents at its core a disconnection from something or someone we perceive to be important; because of this, its onset also compels us to strive for reconnection, a process requiring a new and different approach than the one resulting in failure.
Therefore, I argue that shame and failure are linked to the rhetorical principle of invention, and help to account for the full emotional content of writing practice, something writing researchers have yet to explore adequately. The third chapter concludes with a call for the development of research methodologies that grant us greater access to the emotional and unseen elements of the writing process, and outlines the ethics that would guide such an endeavor.

In the final chapter, I discuss implications of the study, both pedagogical and theoretical, most prominently turning to Sara Ahmed’s work on wonder, Kathleen Stewart’s work on bloom spaces, and J. Halberstam’s work on failure to imagine ways of teaching, researching, and learning writing that resist neat, procedural methods in favor of messy, non-hierarchical explorations of thought. Embracing an “epistemology of failure” is a way of coming into knowledge in ways that cause discomfort, or attract notice. With such an approach comes the possibility of devising more inventive ways of moving and being in the world.
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Many moons ago, this project began as a frustrated response to the anxiety and fear that plagued my first semester of doctoral work. Over several years and after dozens of drafts, the project has finally developed into something whole, if not total and conclusive. I would not have made it even halfway were it not for the support and generosity of many people.

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Thank you to my husband, who first caught my eye with his fierce commitment to whole education; who has agree-debated with me for hundreds of hours on issues both pertinent to this project and beyond its scope, keeping me on my toes and re-igniting my drive when I would rather lie in languor; who cooked dinner when I didn’t want to; who took me out to celebrate progress milestones; who accompanied me to libraries and coffee shops on the weekends; and who never once complained about the hours, the piles of books around the house, or my waning energy, both physical and emotional. Thank you especially for giving me a reason to step away from the desk.

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“and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”
-Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

The artist, perhaps more than most people, inhabits failure, degrees of failure and accommodation and compromise: but the terms of his failure are generally secret. It seems reasonable to believe that failure may be a negotiable fact, while success is a temporary illusion of some intoxicating sort, a bubble soon to be pricked, a flower whose petals will quickly drop. If despair is—as I believe it to be—as absurd a state of the soul as euphoria, who can protest that it feels more substantial, more reliable, less out of scale with the human environment—? When it was observed to T. S. Eliot that most critics are failed writers, Eliot replied: "But so are most writers." Joyce Carol Oates, “Notes on Failure.”

Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order.... And the longer I stay in education, the clearer it becomes to me that some of our basic orientations toward the teaching and testing of literacy contribute to our inability to see. To truly educate in America, then, to reach the full sweep of our citizenry, we need to question received perception, shift continually from the standard lens. Mike Rose, Lives on the Boundary.

What does it mean to fail, to be a failure? What happens to the body, the mind, to our relationships with our peers, our teachers, and our subject when we fail? What is failure and why does it matter? I’ve wrestled with these questions for much of my scholarly life, a period of time characterized, for me, by failure—not because I’ve not been successful, but because my experiences of failure, few and far between, have a tendency to stick and resonate, while my successes, even the big ones, feel remarkable only for a moment. When I use the terms “success” and “failure” here (though I intend to complicate them later), I mean to invoke the conventional
meanings, wherein success indicates the achievement or surpassing of a goal and failure serves as its opposite. My “successes” as a scholar have included being admitted to and working through graduate school, fulfilling the expectations of my mentors, publishing my work, presenting at conferences, and achieving a host of other benchmarks commonly associated with success in this arena. My failures, too, have been of the predictable variety: not doing as well as I might have hoped on an exam or a paper, saying a dumb thing in class, crashing and burning in a presentation. But, while some of these failures slid off of my back, conforming to the traditional American narrative of progress—what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger; if at first you don’t succeed, try try again—a few of them have morphed into an altogether different experience tangled in emotional complexity. It is this particular flavor of failure that interests me most.

Examination of this emotional complexity is strikingly sparse in Composition Studies. Which is not to say that the emotions are altogether ignored in our scholarship (see McLeod, Shaughnessy, Brand, and almost the entire corpus of Elbow), but rather as I’ll detail in these pages, that they are often represented as a) secondary to the cognitive work of writing, and/or b) something that must be handled, fixed, hurdled, or dealt with in order to make their presence in the writing process a non-issue. One notable exception to this claim is Mike Rose’s writing (1989) on his own failures as a student and teacher, and the failures he observed (and often helped to alleviate) among the varied populations of students he taught—racially and economically underprivileged children, second- and third-language learners, veterans, ex-cons. In his decades of work in and around Los Angeles, Rose had intimate experience with the myriad ways the structures of public education fail students who do not fit a particular mold—and even those who do. Describing the curriculum of Developmental English, a remedial course at UCLA, Rose writes:
The curriculum teaches students that when it comes to written language use, they are children: they can only perform the most constrained and ordered of tasks, and they must do so under the regimented guidance of a teacher. It teaches them that the most important thing about writing—the very essence of writing—is grammatical correctness, not the communication of something meaningful, or the generative struggle with ideas...not even word play. It’s a curriculum that rarely raises students’ heads from the workbook page to consider the many uses of written language that surround them in their schools, jobs, neighborhoods. Finally, by its tedium, the curriculum teaches them that writing is a crushing bore. These students traverse course after remedial course, becoming increasingly turned off to writing, increasingly convinced they are hopelessly inadequate.

(211)

Rose tells a number of stories of interactions with students feeling shamed by extrinsic markers of failure—a C- on an exam, for example, or being offloaded to various cognitive and behavioral specialists when it is clear that a student simply needs individual attention—and these stories argue unequivocally for a shift in educational structures of a tectonic nature. In these pages, I examine the ways our own discipline may be supporting the narrow, success-oriented structures such as those described by Rose, and suggest perspectival and epistemological shifts that may help us do our work differently, more generously, and more sensitively. To get there, we have to know something about where we’ve been.

Since at least the mid-1990s, if not earlier, our culture has been saturated in increasingly unapologetic accounts of failure. Whether this takes the form of the cataclysmic economic and political meltdown we’ve been enduring, or something as benign as “reality television,”—the
appeal (and comfort) of which lies in the unpolished presentation of daily life—or directors’ commentary on DVDs, in which the jagged edges of the film’s productions are exposed, we’ve become a failure-oriented people. I read this fascination with failure culture as an acknowledgement of its prevalence in our own lives. There is something voyeuristic at work, as well, allowing us to take pleasure in the spectacle of another’s undoing. And, I wonder if immersing ourselves in this cacophony of failure helps to mute the pain of failure in our personal lives, or at least better prepare us for that eventuality.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. The fact of the matter is that failure has been with us in its myriad forms for as long as men and women have striven and fallen short. Present in virtually all genres of expression, from the novel and the epic poem to Southern spirituals and folk ballads, failure is woven into the fabric of cultures the world over. (Consider, for example, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, which follows the decline and death of a failed salesman; or Bonnie Raitt’s “I Can’t Make You Love Me,” about failed love; even John Newton’s “Amazing Grace,” considered the most recognized Christian hymn in the English-speaking world, describes redemption from prior failure.1) As a plotting device, failure propels men and women to achieve the unthinkable, so driven are they to avoid or redeem the shame of failure’s mark upon them; conversely, failure is the cause and effect of the (anti-) heroic collapse and the root of the villain’s villainy. As an archetype, the failure serves as the foil against which we are meant to measure ourselves. And yet, it has only been in our comparatively recent history that “failure” as a term has stood for an experience so ubiquitous that an attempt to define it inevitably excludes some facet or another of what it has come to mean. Once upon a time, “to fail” meant one thing: to go broke in business. It was not until the industry and mercantilism of the 19th century signaled the unstoppable rise of capitalism that failure evolved from a business
term to an identity-descriptor (Sandage). Indeed, the American work ethic, equal parts Protestant and commodity-fetishism, ingrained a particular drive in the man, an ideological commitment to growth and profit that caused his work to define his personhood. A man was his work. “Going bust”—failing—came to signify not just a person’s aptitude for business, but his failure of character as well.

How? Scott Sandage offers a detailed account of this etymological evolution in his book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005). In it, Sandage writes of so-called “big red books” that detailed individuals’ business histories, including information on how they acquired their capital (inheritance or earnings), the approximate value of their business at various intervals throughout the calendar year, and whether or not they were expected to experience continued success. Over time, the red books could be relied upon to tell an entire history of business large and small, a kind of pre-cursor to the modern day credit report, though relying much more on speculative observation and character judgment. But of course, one would need to remain tethered to the business world to have one’s history chronicled, implying relative success over time. Those who could not manage to recover from going bust (a frequent occurrence in the economic tumult in the decades preceding the Civil War) simply dropped out of the books, never to be tracked again. The power and scope of the red books is made evident in the story of William J. Manning, a blacksmith who, according to Sandage, the U.S. Census was only able to track once, but who was tracked by the Mercantile Agency for fifteen years:

Excepting a solitary notice of his “steady, industry[jious]” character, most entries reiterated one from March 1858, which read in full: “Not worth naming on paper.” Who would recall his name…or notice that he had ever lived if the credit agency had not spent ink and paper on “a continuous history” of “an idle loafer”? 
[...] On top of life’s disappointments, a permanent narrative of those disappointments now existed as a separate commodity, keeping track of broken men like damaged or unclaimed freight. Manning’s worthless name faded from an 1859 entry (“not in bus[iness] in his own name now), he disappeared, and the story ended. (148)

Thus, failure expanded from naming an incident in business to defining an identity. A man who could not succeed in business was nobody, a man not worth tracking or knowing, cast into negative space.

In choosing negative space as an organizing metaphor, I mean to emphasize the place-ness, space-ness, or presence of failure that lurks beyond the brightness of our disciplinary conversations. In visual art, the term refers to the space surrounding the subject of an image. Consider Edgar Rubin’s vase, that optical illusion presenting either the image of a vase in the foreground, or the image of two profiles facing each other in the negative space. It’s a matter of perspective, to be sure; for me, it serves as a challenge to see both at once, training the eye to hold both images in some kind of middle ground (fruitless, mostly). The term also calls to mind the photographic negative, where lightness and darkness are inverted, enabling a kind of inside-out perspective on the object of our interest. And with the phrase itself, I am thinking of the negative value judgment that failure imposes, and of the negative headspace into which it moves us, insisting that it shapes what we do and how we see.

In *English Composition as a Happening* (2002), Geoffrey Sirc re-reads the history of our field against *avant-garde* artists such as Duchamp and Pollack in order, first, to critique (in his mind) a rather straight-laced drive for disciplinarity and the promotion of uncreative ways of writing and, second, to “[find] an alternative to the current tradition” (13). He describes his work
as a “return to that point of disenchantment with established spaces and the desire for new forms” (12) and refers to it as “a negative-space history, one that reverses the conventional figure-ground relations to find the most fruitful avenues of inquiry to be those untouched or abandoned by the disciplinary mainstream” (12). Though my goals here are more modest, I do follow Sirc’s impulse—if not to invert the total image—at least to gaze into the negative space and ask what might be lurking there. I want to suggest that the negative space of our discipline has much to offer our research and pedagogy. An epistemology of failure, I’ll argue in the end, pushes us into that nothingness, actually a different something-ness, where our worldview shifts.

I begin by reviewing disciplinary literature, in particular the early, stage-setting research of Janet Emig, Sondra Perl, and Linda Flower and John Hayes, whose studies of young writers are among the best known and most influential in the development of our discipline. In reviewing their methods and findings, I note that their research draws our eye to the processes, behaviors, and ideas about composing that are either visible (in the case of observation) or readily identified as relevant to the total writing scene (in the case of talk-aloud protocol). My central question in this chapter concerns what behavior, ideas, activities, and other bodily and affective markers fall outside our understanding of what “counts” as writing behavior—and what that can teach us about composition. Then I describe two recent studies (which adopt in situ methods) designed specifically to cast light on those components of the writing process that our other ways of researching have overlooked (Pigg and Leon’s “Writing From Down Below;” Rule’s Composing Assemblages: Toward a Theory of Material Embodied Process), to argue for the development of research methodologies that grant the researcher access to the affective (and often opaque) aspects of the writing process, helping us paint a fuller picture of this complex activity.
The second and third chapters describe the research study, consisting of a large-scale, open-ended survey of undergraduates and follow up interviews with a representative sample of participants. My analysis of the data is guided by Silvan Tomkins’ categories of affect, Krista Ratcliffe’s scholarship on rhetorical listening, Thomas Newkirk’s work on narrative and case study, and Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Davis’s work on Portraiture. The data show that participants associate failure most often with shame, an affective state that should be of great interest to writing researchers. Shame, according to the extensive work of Tomkins, Elspeth Probyn, Brené Brown, and others, represents at its core a disconnection from something or someone we perceive to be important; because of this, its onset also compels us to strive for reconnection, a process requiring a new and different approach than the one resulting in failure. Therefore, I argue that shame and failure are linked to the rhetorical principle of invention, and help to account for the full emotional content of writing practice, something writing researchers have yet to explore adequately. The third chapter concludes with a call for the development of research methodologies that grant us greater access to the emotional and unseen elements of the writing process, and outlines the ethics that would guide such an endeavor.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss implications of the study, both pedagogical and theoretical, most prominently turning to Sara Ahmed’s work on wonder, Kathleen Stewart’s work on bloom spaces, and Judith Halberstam’s work on failure to imagine ways of teaching, researching, and learning writing that resist neat, procedural methods in favor of messy, non-hierarchical explorations of thought. It is my contention that practicing a pedagogy of failure (a kind of intentional mess-making) enables us to develop an “epistemology of failure,” a way of coming into knowledge in ways that cause discomfort, or attract notice. With such an approach comes the possibility of devising more inventive, wandering, and wondering ways of moving
and being in the world, a way to resist tired, one-dimensional notions of success in the classroom.

When I was a child, my mother would beckon me to emerge from whatever imaginative activity engaging my attention by calling for me in a sing-song manner, “Allison Wonderland,” elongating the first syllable of “wonderland,” also the high note of the lilting phrase: “allisonWONNNderland….” The melodic moniker became so deeply embedded in my ear, it should come as no surprise that Disney’s animated version of Carroll’s tale was a favorite of mine. That I had long blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a penchant for mischief further endeared me to Carroll’s Alice, but it was not until college, when I read the original text, that I became enamored of what turned out to be a disturbing and wacky story of disorientation, curiosity, and maybe a kind of stupid or naïve trust in wandering through unfamiliar territory. Wonderland is a kind of negative space for Alice, a no-place that is also some-place, unbound by and unconcerned with the logic and physics of the ordinary world from which Alice tumbled. What is striking, as I think about the text from the stable worldview of “objective” “reality,” is how easily Alice slips into this (illusion? delusion?) other world, off the map, a place at once connected to her (an imagining?) and separate from her (a habitation), a world that grows stranger and stranger as it unfolds, seemingly in line with her wanderings, her peripatetic wondering. In creating one world, Alice rejects the other. This is a kind of failing, or maybe more accurately, this is the world into which failure casts us. Here, we start anew. In this project, I try to channel Alice’s wonder, working to break from established logics of what we do and how we ought to be doing it, electing instead to see it strange. For this reason, each chapter features one of John Tenniel’s original illustrations for Alice to serve as orienting images, reminders to alter our perspectives.
Failure: an intention, a worldview, an embodied phenomenon of affect. In this project, I wonder what it means to conceptualize failure in these terms. This dissertation is guided by the questions listed above together with another: What does failure do? My motivation is manifold. As a scholar and an educator of a subject fraught with failure, I feel compelled to understand this experience and its effects on the project of learning to write. As someone who has failed and who continues to fail spectacularly, I have out of necessity come to see failure as a method of world-making, an intensive and intentional way of understanding and creating the world around me to accommodate and even welcome the often unexpected perspective failure offers. In this way, I am something of an evangelist for failure, and this project is part of my effort to spread the word.
Chapter 1 | Tracking Failure

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself 'Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!' (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but, when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was going to get out again.

-Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

What got me interested in writing was being unable to write.

If we engage in a bit of big-picture thinking, it’s not very difficult to understand why a concentrated study of failure would be relevant to educators, for failure is an integral part of schooling. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that failure, or avoiding failure, is the primary object around which school is structured. This is true for our own discipline, which became a formal part of university curriculum in 1869 with the administration of the Harvard entrance examination. Sharon Crowley details our origin story succinctly, writing: “The first step in the process was to define English as a language from which its native speakers were alienated. The
second step was to establish an entrance examination in English that was very difficult to pass. The third step, necessitated by the large number of failures on the exam, was to install a course of study that would remediate the lack demonstrated in the examination” (59-60). In other words, officials at Harvard (and later, elsewhere) implemented a system at the institutional level that required failure at an individual level to remain legitimate. Like the fabled self-sustainability of the perpetual motion machine, the entrance examination and concomitant first-year writing and rhetoric course at Harvard became something of a zero-sum game, bridging a gap opened by its very invention. Given this system’s success in guaranteeing a steady stream of students requiring the freshman course and thus, proving demand for the discipline, it is unsurprising that after 140+ years, failure is accepted as a consequence of learning, but is rarely examined in any context beyond that. My interest in this project is in disrupting the easy binary of success and failure, particularly in relation to the writing process. I suggest that failure can be more valuably understood as a rich site of examination and possibility when we consider it not as a simple mark of judgment signifying the failure to complete a project successfully, but as an affect-bearing concept or experience writers wrestle with throughout their writing lives.

To talk about failure as an affect-bearing concept is to signal the myriad ways failure sticks to a person and marks her as failure, metonymically remade in the image of her shortcomings. 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 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. Reconceptualizing failure entails not only the personal realm but also the sociocultural context in which failure is embedded and throughout which it circulates.

In composition, 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 either 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 education, 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.” Finally—please take a moment to observe this progressive, rhetorical demotion—finally 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, “underscore[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—systematically 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 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, Brody shows that “good” writing is that which is perceived as virtuous, clean, strong, and manly. Quintilian insisted 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” (Brody 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 saw in the nineteenth century, a failure to develop adequate skills of rhetoric and oratory represented not simply a learning deficit or systematic injustice but an individual’s failure of personhood. In fact, Quintilian describes the illiterate subject (the vast majority of citizens at that time) as an “unteacheable” 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’s 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, 2011). 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. “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.

Despite failure’s extensive reach inside and outside of 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 (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 underlies most of our discipline’s foundational literature, even if the term itself is gingerly avoided. In what follows, I turn to some of that literature in order to uncover gaps or opportunities where it might be useful to talk about failure more
directly. In doing so, I mean to suggest that regardless of the fault lines by which our major paradigms are divided, none of our varying pedagogical alliances or theories about writing are complete so long as we continue to turn a blind eye to the complexity of failure.

Below, I highlight what feel to me like important moments in the development of our discipline as they relate to failure. My gaze is directed specifically at work that, for any number of reasons, has staying power even as our lenses and alliances shift over time. In this spirit, the narrative that I’m constructing is meant to be considered as one of many possible narratives we might devise with questions of failure in mind.

**Process Pedagogy: The Birth of the Subject**

Above, I have provided snapshots demonstrating how failure has been inscribed in the institution; to put it plainly, institutions of learning require a success/failure framework in order to mean anything. Now, I want to show how a single discipline re-inscribes that framework as it develops its own foundational literature, even while openly eschewing the hard lines of that binary.

If we are trying to trace of construct a narrative that will help us understand where and why failure is relevant to the study and practice of composing, we might begin with the moment Louise Wetherbee Phelps identifies as a “founding” (41) moment for composition as a modern discipline, when we turned away from the product-centered current-traditional rhetoric and toward the business of expression, toward studying a common, humane practice of expressing one’s ideas, arguments, and reflections in written form. As the familiar story goes, process pedagogy represented a “paradigm shift” (Hairston), de-emphasizing correctness and form—a remnant of new criticism—and emphasizing instead the experience, perspective, and language of
our students. Whether or not we agree on the particulars of process pedagogy (Matsuda) in this moment, we see a recognition of writing as an activity not invented by or confined to the university, but an activity people practice with or without the sanction or resources of so-called authoritative institutions, a quality that would demand pedagogical, epistemological, and theoretical frames different from those of other university subjects (Harris, 1996). Rather than featuring lessons from standard, already-approved material, process pedagogy moved student experience to the fore; students were encouraged to write on topics of interest to them, and to develop and write in their own voices; their writing became the central texts of the class; and more emphasis was placed on peer and instructor feedback, as well as revision.4

This is an important moment for composition, ensuring as it does a seemingly endless and ever-changing environment in which to develop, test, and refine hypotheses and theories about what happens when writers (learn to) write. Additionally, and somewhat counter-intuitively, the move away from current-traditional pedagogies toward process (and beyond) created an environment in which scholarship became poised for longer life. That is to say, in staking a claim to process as a central commitment, composition transitioned from something of a “dead” subject (preaching the same sort of drudgery day in and day out) to an alive one, in which participation entails the always-ongoing process of remaking: revisiting old claims with the benefit of added perspective, launching reclamations, writing updates, etc. Content and approach are in constant relationship with students, who are themselves always in flux.

The rise of process pedagogy also saw the development of original research, contributing not only to building a knowledge base about the teaching and learning of writing but also helping to establish the field as a professional discipline. Initial studies strived to formalize the kind of informal research that brought writing teachers to process pedagogy in the first place, what
Stephen North (1987) calls “practitioner lore:” teacher-researchers building robust questions and careful methodologies out of a desire to know more about the activity they were observing in their classrooms. Two studies from this time are widely acknowledged as landmark work in the field, so much so that the student-subjects they feature are commonly referred to in subsequent literature even fifty years later: Janet Emig’s study of Lynn, and Sondra Perl’s study of Tony.

The first study of its kind on the scene, Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971) strived to make the composing processes of young people visible for the first time. Previously, research on how writers write was primarily drawn from analyses of iterative drafts of published work (archival research), from collections of writers talking about their writing (such as *The Paris Review* interviews), from theories about the creative process, or relied on the forms sanctioned by classical rhetoric (Emig). Though at the time of Emig’s research there was generally some agreement about the notion of writing as a process (Rohman), nobody had set out to empirically investigate and substantiate this claim. Driven by the then-recent (1965) assertion by editors of *Research in Written Composition* that the case study approach would be useful in “investigat[ing] the factors affecting the learning of composition and the procedures which will accelerate and maintain learning” (Emig 3), as well as the recommendation for “direct observation” in future research (24) from Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, Emig designed a research study featuring eight sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students of diverse ethnicities, socioeconomic classifications, and educational backgrounds. The students met with the investigator four times, completing a number of writing projects in her presence and engaging in speak-aloud protocol while doing so. The investigator also had access to their school records as well as several written artifacts from their repertoire of (mostly school) writing over time, giving her a reasonable data set from which to ask questions and proffer
hypotheses. Of these eight students, Lynn, a high-achieving young woman from “Pill Hill” (an area of south Chicago populated primarily by Jewish professionals—doctors, dentists, lawyers), gets top billing.

Though Lynn represents only one case in a very small sample size, her processes as observed by Emig largely mirror those exhibited by the other students in the study. For example, Lynn finds it difficult to write about emotional topics, often opting to write about somewhat ho-hum subjects because she finds this work “easier” (48). It is also the case that most of Lynn’s writing experience takes place in school, and her school-sponsored writing rarely presents opportunities for personal, or what Emig calls “reflexive” writing. Emig also observes that Lynn expends little energy in the prewriting, planning, and revising stages, focusing most of her efforts on the composing/composing aloud stage of her projects, mirroring the views of her teachers, “who do not provide school time for the earlier, and later portions” (73). Her impressions of revision are limited to the correction of spelling and punctuation, and “she tries, often with great skill, to translate directives of high abstractness into sets of behaviors she can enact” (73).

From her study of the eight students, Emig finds a number of commonalities. Most significant among them, she observes from the inventory of writing artifacts that “no student in the sample has experienced a curriculum…in which peer interactions play any formal part as, say, in reciprocal reading and evaluating of themes by pairs or in groups” (78), but that, to the contrary, “peers play a very significant role in self-sponsored writing of the twelfth-graders in this sample” (78). From the composing-aloud protocols, Emig determines that “composing does not occur as a left-to-right, solid, uninterrupted activity with an even pace. Rather, there are recursive, as well as anticipatory, features; and there are interstices, pauses involving hesitation phenomena of various lengths and sorts that give their composing aloud a certain—perhaps a
characteristic—tempo” (84). Most students seem to be aware of a two-level “reformulating” process, involving proofreading on the one hand and “moving things around” (86) on the other, though the students reveal that they do not engage in this latter kind of reformulation often.

While each student comes from a different school, all recall nearly identical writing instruction from grammar school: little-to-no imaginative writing, and a heavy emphasis on correctness. And, most strikingly from Emig’s perspective, “at no time does any of the students ask aloud any variants of the questions: ‘Is this subject important to me?’ ‘Do I care about writing about it?’” (89).

Recognizing the limitations of her sample size, Emig offers a small number of conclusions, one of which reads, so many years later, as a radical call to arms for writing teachers and scholars, adequately forecasting the shape the process movement would take.

A shift may consequently come in who evaluates whom, and to what end. In this inquiry we have seen that the most significant others in the private, and often the school-sponsored, writing of twelfth graders are peers, despite the overwhelming opportunity for domination teachers hold through their governance of all formal evaluation. American high schools and colleges must seriously and immediately consider that the teacher-centered presentation of composition, like the teacher-centered presentation of almost every other segment of a curriculum, is pedagogically, developmentally, and politically an anachronism. (100)

Thus ends the formal report of Emig’s research. What stands out to me in this study is that at no time does Emig question the reluctance of the students to broach “difficult” or “emotional” topics in their writing. Yet, the students’ reluctance signals a fear of engaging with topics that may cause struggle, and Emig’s dismissal demonstrates that she, too, is not interested
in why certain projects don’t get completed (or started), but is rather interested in the visible action of what can be done. Another way of putting this is to say that despite a clear opportunity to see what I would consider a more accurate view of the total writing process—watching a student work through a difficult project, with all its fits and starts—Emig’s own individual, academic, or pedagogical blinders cause her to focus only on what has already been defined as what we are meant to be interested in, which are the steps or procedures or strategies for successfully completing a piece of writing. Process, yes, but only to the extent that we examine the pieces leading toward success; the rest is irrelevant. This goes to show how even a study as radical as Emig’s was at the time is so deeply entrenched in institutional and disciplinary standards of significance.

The seventies saw the publication of more studies like Emig’s (Graves 1973, Mischel 1974, Pianko 1977, Stallard 1974), small-sample studies that featured observation of writers writing. But in 1979, Research in the Teaching of English published Sondra Perl’s study, “The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers,” a study that differed in many important ways from those published previously, and for this reason could be said to represent an approaching shift in the way we study and teach writing.

Like the process studies of the seventies, Perl’s study collected data from a relatively small (5) sample group. But Perl’s study differed from its predecessors in two important ways. First, it relied on a “meaningful and replicable method for rendering the composing process as a sequence of observable and scorable behaviors” (318). Secondly, it featured the processes of “unskilled” writers—not the average or skilled writers featured in previous research on writing—“whose writing problems baffle the teachers charged with their education” (318). (Before Perl’s study, Mina Shaughnessy’s Errors & Expectations was the only large-scale scholarly work that
could be said to study the processes of unskilled writers, but Shaughnessy’s focus dealt primarily with understanding process in order to understand the logic of error. Perl’s study, by contrast, was interested in the bigger picture of composition.)

Whereas Emig’s and others’ studies relied greatly on talk-aloud protocol and the investigator’s ability to note when, according to the protocol, the student was planning or prewriting or revising, Perl developed an extensive—some might say exhaustive⁵—system of notation to code the behaviors of her subjects in such a way as to ascertain the “frequency, relative importance, and place of each behavior within an individual’s composing process” (318). Perl argues that this methodology allows her to collect data that is standardized, categorical, concise, structural, and diachronic (320).⁶ Also representing a shift from the somewhat simplistic behavior recorded by Emig (who strived to track effort devoted to the already established three stages of composition, Rohman’s freewrite, write, and rewrite), Perl tracked the occurrence of some sixteen composing behaviors, many with their own sub-behaviors taking the total list to thirty. They include: planning (general, local, global), commenting, assessing, questioning, reading, editing, and silence (among others).⁷ Each behavior is coded and plotted on a minute-by-minute timeline to form a comprehensive review of the writer’s process. In the study, Perl shares and discusses the process of Tony, a 20-year-old ex-Marine from the Bronx, attending school and working part-time to support his child and ex-wife. A Puerto Rican, Tony spoke Spanish but considered English his first language.

Perl’s study of Tony reveals many interesting findings, but two in particular stand out. Similarly to Emig’s subjects, Tony expresses deep concern for correctness as he writes. He labors over each sentence, writing a few words, speaking aloud, backing up, moving forward until a sentence eventually lurches its way onto the paper, demonstrating that, like Emig’s
subjects, he has internalized the lessons of his writing teachers, even if he has not mastered the expected language. What this concern with correctness tells Perl, though, is important. “This repetition set up a particular kind of composing rhythm,” Perl writes, “one that was cumulative in nature and that set ideas in motion by its very repetitiveness” (324). When writing reflexively, Tony was able to write groups of sentences at once, suggesting “greater fluency” (325) in this mode, though Tony still exhibited the recursiveness apparent in his extensive writing. In fact, all of Perl’s subjects exhibited their own recursive rhythm. “That is, the behavioral subsequences of prewriting, writing, and editing appeared in sequential patterns that were recognizable across writing sessions and across students,” suggesting perhaps the study’s most notable and long-lasting finding, that students suspected to be hopelessly unsuited for writing demonstrate “a much greater internalization of process than has ever before been suspected. Since the written products of basic writers often look arbitrary, observers commonly assume that the students’ approach is also arbitrary” (328). The implications of this finding were, at the time, stunning, particularly for teachers. So-called “unskilled” writers were then often assumed to be “beginners,” with no working knowledge of how to write, leading teachers to believe they must start fresh in their instruction. Continuing apace,

teachers of unskilled writers may continue to place themselves in a defeating position: imposing another method of writing instruction upon the students' already internalized processes without first helping students to extricate themselves from the knots and tangles in those processes. (334)

Crucial in this statement is Perl’s insistence that teachers pay attention not only to what makes writing happen, but what inhibits it. Here, Perl acknowledges the importance of understanding the whole process, and flirts with the idea of silence and what I’m calling “negative space” that
will partially occupy her later work (“Understanding”). And though it’s unfortunate that this point becomes somewhat buried in the study’s more prominent ideas—that students have their own processes already, that teachers are obliged to help uncover these processes—it is nevertheless significant to research on failure for its new approach to writer observation. Perl notes that while case studies (such as Emig’s of Lynn, or her own description of Tony’s processes) are useful for casting light on the complexity of individual subjects, coding data in the manner suggested by her study allows researchers to study large groups of subjects, to compare them on an even plane, to more easily spot patterns and themes, to conduct longitudinal research in order to study how a subject’s writing changes over time, as well as to collect records of the false starts, struggles, and other “non-productive” aspects of the writing process that other systems might overlook. Most importantly, however, Perl’s methodology confirmed what narrative- and description-based studies had proffered for a decade: that understanding the “how” of writing is not only about forms but is also, and substantially, about the multiple and entangled processes a person goes through to create those forms.

What is striking to me about these studies is not what they taught us about writing or writing process, but rather what they taught us about our discipline: that students, indeed, are the center. Focusing on students allows us to ground writing and the study of writing in something, in bodies. They are what make it possible to study writing not as art but as practice.

Emig and Perl opened the floodgates for focused studies of writers. In 1981, Linda Flower and John Hayes published “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing” that had a tremendous if mixed effect on the continuing development of our discipline.

Flower and Hayes’ study begins with the assumption that the activity of writing is indeed a process. They disagree, however, with the then-dominant paradigm for composing, the stage
process model, which “describes the composing process as a linear series of stages, separated in
time, and characterized by the gradual development of the written product” (366-367), a model
that describes “the growth of the written product, not the inner process of the person producing
it” (367). Their study, therefore, strives to name and organize the thinking processes of writers
made evident by speak-aloud protocol. Unsurprisingly, the cognitive process model Flower and
Hayes devise is analogous with Rohman’s prewrite/write/rewrite model they’re striving to up-
end, but here named “Plan, Translate, Review.” While Flower and Hayes’ model strives to make
more explicit the complexity and chaos of composition, it is still organized into three “non-
hierarchal” stages or processes that we’ve agreed comprise the composing process broadly.
Flower and Hayes insist on this non-hierarchal structure, explaining that no process has
diachronic significance to the writing process as a whole. Or, writing is recursive.

Flower and Hayes’ study, with its emphasis on systematic problem-solving, struck a
chord with members of the field initially, offering perhaps a more developed or defined way of
working with data such as that collected by Perl (the minutia of composing), but it eventually fell
out of favor as the field moved toward more humanistic ways of teaching and studying writing.
Nevertheless the study remains intriguing to me for its grounding premise: Flower and Hayes
knew the writing process was chaotic and full of conflicting processes, and their study represents
an attempt to understand that chaos, to make order where so many struggling writers are unable
to find it. As with the researchers who came before them, Flower and Hayes seem to be circling
around the how and why of failure, but are unable to sniff it out. Instead, they end up devising a
model of writing that manages both to reinforce what we already know while turning a deaf ear
to what feels unknowable.
Like Perl, Emig and others, Flower and Hayes were trying to understand writing and to develop a schema that would help students and teachers alike visualize and, perhaps, learn to better control their writing process. While Flower and Hayes’ study did do the important work of insisting on a cognitive dimension to the process of learning to write, it also had the effect of injecting a certain amount of problem-solving and procedural logic into the then-still-developing process movement, an effect that still persists today, despite the sidelining of Flower and Hayes’ work in light of the “social turn.” Sondra Perl sums up this shift in process thinking in an interview from 1996:

My understanding of Linda [Flower’s] approach is that she took a methodology from work being conducted in problem solving and applied it to writing. For instance, if you’re solving a problem in mathematics, you can ask people to think out loud and you can follow how they arrive at their answer. Linda took this approach and said, “Let’s define writing as a rhetorical problem and watch how people solve it.” I had difficulty with the notion that you could take the protocols she had produced and assume that they described writing processes. […] What was unfortunate, I think, is that all process studies came under the label of cognition. It isn’t that writing is not a cognitive process, but this is not all it is. It is much richer and far more difficult to articulate because there are, in fact, unspoken pieces of it—the groping and grasping that we all go through. I always felt that the label or rubric of cognition, particularly the cognition that came out of information processing and problem solving, was too narrow to reflect the richness of composing. (Brandt 133)
It is the “unspoken” piece that I am most interested in; this is where I think we might begin to talk about failure, for these are the moments in which the writer is left “grasping,” at a loss for words, unsure of where to go but reaching for something anyway. Emig, Perl, Flower and Hayes, and others developed ways of studying the action part of writing, the moments when we can definitively say “something is happening,” be it planning, translating, goal-setting, reviewing, or any number of other activities. Less common are studies that offer a framework for seeing the “stuff”—affective, material, cognitive—of what we may call, for lack of better terms, the “negative space” of writing—action that is not recognized as belonging to the writing process (though it would be prudent to acknowledge that Perl’s work on felt sense provides a natural foundation for such qualitative studies). Distractions, diversions, moments when the forward motion or the purposeful back-and-forth of recursion seems to halt, appearing to leave the writer and her writing dormant. We do not know precisely what this looks like, but I imagine it as the stuff that falls by the wayside of data collection. These are the pieces that don’t fit neatly into a stage model, no matter how non-hierarchal and complex a model claims to be. If it has not been named, if it is not recognizable as something related to learning and growth, how do we know where it belongs, and how do we learn to recognize it?

As I mentioned, Perl’s 1979 study does make space for the fits and sputters often overlooked by other process-driven studies, but her inclusion of such data did not do much more than Shaughnessy’s similar claims that basic writers deploy particular, if convoluted, logics to their writing, and I’m not sure it had much impact overall on our disciplinary agenda (which is to say it is Shaughnessy we recall when we want to reference such behavior, not Perl). Also working in the context of process pedagogy, Robert Connors’ and Andrea Lunsford’s later study on error (1988) made waves in confirming long-held suspicions that error in “average” student
writing is neither rampant (despite the nationally-disseminated rumor that “Johnny Can’t Write”), nor consistently agreed-upon, noting, “Error-pattern study is essentially the examination of an ever-shifting pattern of skills judged by an ever-shifting pattern of prejudices” (Connors and Lunsford 399), and asserting that the kids are all right (see also Williams’ “Phenomenology of Error”). It is not until Bartholomae’s heavily anthologized “Inventing the University” that we see an acknowledgement of the productive value of difficulty.

[T]he student who wrote about constructing the clay model of the earth is better prepared for his education than the student who wrote about playing football in white shoes, even though the “White Shoes” paper was relatively error-free and the “Clay Model” paper was not. It will be hard to pry the writer of the “White Shoes” paper loose from the tidy, pat discourse that allows him to dispose of the question of creativity in such a quick and efficient manner. He will have to be convinced that it is better to write sentences he might not so easily control, and he will have to be convinced that it is better to write muddier and more confusing prose (in order that it might sound like ours), and this will be harder than convincing the “Clay Model” writer to continue what he has begun. (523-524)

Despite turning toward students—perhaps the most valuable and crucial gift of process pedagogy in all of its incarnations—process pedagogy caused researchers to turn away from students affectively, and instead to focus chiefly on their processes, their systems for achieving goals or solving problems, thereby reifying the success/failure framework upon which the university is built (with some notable exceptions—Elbow; Tobin; McCloud). Though Flower and Hayes were the first to explicitly approach the writing process as a “problem” to be solved, it seems fair to say that they were in actuality the first researchers to boldly affix the label to the ongoing project
of understanding how students write; Emig and Perl and other process researchers preceding the Flower and Hayes study similarly sought solutions to the persistent problem of how to teach and learn writing. By turning to the methodologies of problem-solving, Flower and Hayes imposed a structure on their study that guaranteed they would come up with clear and indisputable data illustrating how writing gets done, how the problem gets solved. Here, the reliance on “problem solving” language implies two possible solutions: solving the problem (success), and not solving the problem (failure). Though Flower and Hayes’ protocols represent perhaps the extreme end of data collection and organization, or perhaps because of this, their work nevertheless provides a clear image of how aggressively process pedagogy championed the “productive” elements of writing, and discarded the rest. Such a model asks us to forget that these bits of data or code, meant to represent a whole process, represent only what has use-value according to the structures of teaching and learning already in place. What we need to remember is that these data exist in particular contexts and represent the actions and inactions of particular writers in particular spaces. We need a different approach, one that rejects the notions that writing is a problem needing to be solved or a process needing to be defined. It is neither of these things, but rather a practice to be studied.

Despite our narrowly focused beginnings, all is not lost. More recently, a number of researchers have offered perspectives on the total writing process that allows us to think more broadly. Most notably, Stacy Pigg and Kendall Leon’s “Graduate Students Professionalizing in Digital Time/Space: A View from ‘Down Below’” (2011) helps us envision a way of studying writing differently by presenting a small but revealing study about the kinds of “unsanctioned,” peripheral, or otherwise professionally unrecognizable activities that make up the composing activities of advanced writers. In the study, Pigg and Leon rely on journaling, interviews, and
video-screen capture technology to track the writing sessions of two graduate students, and they uncover something that will not be surprising to most writers: that the space and activity of “official” composing practices are not easily demarcated from what might look like “slacking off” or falling prey to the endless “distractions” of a digital writing environment. Likewise, Pigg and Leon’s subjects’ professional lives blend almost imperceptibly at times with their personal lives and screen presences; their almost compulsive back-and-forth between professional documents and a huge variety of seemingly non-professional web spaces “down below” does appear to be in service of the composing process.

Pigg and Leon were able to gather such data by eschewing established methods for studying writing and instead devising ways of “looking” that would help them see the fuller picture, the total process before the activities are sorted into “meaningful” and non-meaningful categories. Instead of imposing artificial writing environments upon their subjects, as have so many studies before (including those mentioned previously), Pigg and Leon studied writers in their “natural habitats,” landing upon a method of observation that a) did not require their physical presence, and b) forced the researchers to observe and pay attention to the whole of what was taking place in the writers’ workspaces (the screen), not simply the stuff that looks like production. Here is one study that might serve as a model for studying that unknowable, “unspoken” and felt aspect of writing/not writing (cf. Perl). If we want to understand what we’ve been missing, we have to learn to look differently.

Hannah Rule, too, has conducted research into the negative space of writing process, examining the physical, material, and embodied components of individual writing processes in Composing Assemblages: Toward a Theory of Material Embodied Process (2013). Taking a page from Pigg and Leon, Rule studied writers remotely, asking them to participate in a three-
staged process\textsuperscript{10} of self-reporting that would give Rule access to the aspects of writing that, ironically, are not so easily seen. In her words, “Instead of taking the mind as the foci of writing process activity, I examine writing’s production centrally focused on the writer’s body and complexities of the writer’s physical environment. The writing process paradigm has left largely unacknowledged that writers are enmeshed in active, material environments, that writing is not only situated in social communities, history, time, and rhetorical situations or complex ecologies, but also within real, physical, material places” (3). Like Pigg and Leon, Rule gained access to these material places not by inventing circumstances in which to observe writers writing, but by inviting writers to conduct self-studies to which Rule gained access only after the fact. Such a study design allowed participants to be in total control of the observation environment. In the first stage, in which writers were asked to visually represent their writing processes and environments through drawings and photographs, the writers \textit{themselves} chose when and how to offer such renderings, giving Rule, in the end, what you might call first-person access to each writer’s sense of their environment and processes. The second stage reflects the more traditional observation setup, wherein the researcher observes the writer writing, but differs in three important ways: 1) the writer had total control over the when/where/for-how-long of the video recordings; 2) the recording took place without the researcher present; 3) the recordings were delivered to the researcher with an accompanying written reflection on the recorded session, again offering the researcher something of a first-person view of the scene. Rule’s study may be as close to “fly on the wall” as we’ve gotten, offering her a very different view of the writing scene than other researchers have been able to achieve.

I’ve highlighted both of these recent studies, conducted while researchers were advanced doctoral students (a detail I find important and telling), because I believe they illustrate the crux
of the problem that this project addresses: what we are dealing with when we talk about the place of failure in composition studies is partly epistemological—concerning the frames through which we create and disseminate knowledge—and partly methodological—how it is we come to know more about our subject. The research of Rule and Pigg and Leon notwithstanding, we have for the most part conducted research of the writing process with blinders on, and this is a result both of our institutional training, rooted in the success/failure framework, as well as our rather narrow understanding of how to study within that framework. As a result, our field’s disinterest in the distractions, diversions, face-plants, wrong turns, and burnt ends of the mess that is the writing “process”–the practice of writing—has left a wide gulf, an abyss of negative space. This is where we find failure. This is where we start.

In the next chapter, I describe the first phase of a two-phased research study designed to understand how students define and understand failure. Because the study shows overwhelmingly that students associate failure with shame, Chapter Two also reviews scholarship on shame and its role in education.
Chapter 2 | How Failure Feels

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; “and even if my head would go through,” thought poor Alice, “it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if I only knew how to begin.” For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.

-Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

One does not have to watch freshmen at work to know that writing is an emotional as well as a cognitive activity—we feel as well as think when we write.

-Susan McLeod, “Some Thoughts on Feelings.” (426)

As I mentioned in Chapter One, 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 am interested in studying failure in an emotional context. As educators, writers, and researchers, we know that “writing is an emotional as well as a cognitive activity.” We know the combination of anxiety and excitement that precedes a writing project, the frustration and agony of tapping out those first few sentences and paragraphs, the bliss of “the zone,” the sinking loss of confidence when we hit a wall, the cautious optimism of following a new, unexpected idea, and of course the combination of unbridled joy and nervous doubt when, finally, the draft is “finished” and ready for someone
else’s eyes. Such emotions are as much a part of the writing process as brainstorming, outlining, sketching, scratching out, starting over, revising, and editing; yet, as I made clear in the last chapter, our research on writing/process deftly sidesteps these less observable, less easily articulated components of composing. And this is where failure lives—in the unspoken, unseen corners of the writer’s total workspace. So, what does failure look like?

While the negative space of Pigg and Leon’s and Rule’s studies incorporated primarily material artifacts (such as screen captures, hand-drawn renderings, photographs, and filmed writing sessions), negative space as I imagine it also refers to the affective stuff of writing: not only the fits and starts of actively working through a draft, but the emotional profile encompassing the total process of writing, including thinking about writing, creating expectations for writing, actively not writing, struggling with big abstract ideas, and puzzling over the particulars of phrasing. Just as there are any number of ways to study the action of writing, so are there any number of ways to study the other stuff. Any approach, however, must develop ways of bringing the affective matter of writing to the center.

In this chapter, I describe the first phase of a two-phased qualitative research study striving to access this negative space. Because the study reveals the prominence of shameful emotions in the writing process, along the way I turn to research in psychology, emotion theory, and writing studies to explore shame, arguing that such an understanding can help us know more about the relationship of failure to writing. I close the chapter noting the limitations of this first phase.

**Study Design & Method of Analysis: Phase One**

During the academic year 2012-2013, I designed and conducted a qualitative study directed toward students at my large, public, urban university in the Midwest. The study was
comprised of two phases: Phase One made a web-based questionnaire available to 30,000+ undergraduates, asking participants to free associate on the term “failure” as well as to describe an experience of failure; Phase Two consisted of follow-up interviews with a small cohort of survey participants who indicated their interest in further discussion.

My initial plan for collecting data was, predictably and perhaps appropriately, a failure. As early as 2010, inspired by the vast collection of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, I attempted to establish The Failure Project, a digital archive of failure narratives. In my vision for the archive, which I built on Wordpress in the span of an afternoon, I imagined collecting tales of struggle and failure from across the U.S., inspiring public conversations about our simultaneous attraction and aversion to failure in American culture and—maybe—being invited to talk about the project on Oprah, or NPR’s Morning Edition, or TED. I posted a call for submissions on the WPA-L listserv and sent press releases to local organizations as well as my high school and college PR offices. While I did receive a small number of submissions (maybe 20 in all) and was invited to give a talk at my alma mater, the site never took off as I imagined, and I was at a loss as to how best to proceed. Over time, I abandoned the project, though my interest in learning how people process and talk about failure never faded.

The project failed for any number of reasons, among them my inability to frame the project as something that might be mutually beneficial for researcher and participants alike (see Palmer; Ridolfo et. al.), my failure to identify and consult stakeholders, and a lack of imagination when it became clear that my vision would not be realized. Further, it later became clear to me that even though I found failure to be an endlessly interesting topic of conversation and meditation, this was not necessarily the prevailing attitude among average folks, for whom failure may recall feelings of shame and doubt, so the very idea of sharing one’s failures in a
public forum was no doubt intimidating and off-putting. To top it off, the very language of failure *narrative*, a term I took to be fairly innocuous, has a particular academic sheen that surely made possibly participants’ eyes glaze over with boredom and disinterest.

With all this in mind, when it came time for me to devise a research strategy for this project, I held to more modest expectations. More importantly, because my target population would be undergraduates, I tried to design a study that would not turn potential participants away due to overly involved requirements. I asked myself what I was really interested in: the story or the language? This may seem an artificial distinction, as certainly the structures of storytelling help to determine the language used, and vice-versa, but part of what hindered me in my initial attempt to collect failure narratives was, as I mentioned, the emphasis on the term “narrative,” and the attendant generic or modal expectations. Ultimately what I was after were impressions of failure, not necessarily complete images—at least, not at first. Thus was born the two-phased project. Phase One aimed at breadth of coverage: I needed to get as much data as possible from the widest participant pool. Phase Two aimed at depth: I followed up with 50 survey participants who agreed to be contacted for further conversation. (In the end, only eleven scheduled and followed through with an interview.)¹¹ This way, I could track trends and anomalies in the survey data to draw some general conclusions, and then bring those conclusions into the interview environment to see how they played against individual experiences.

Late in the fall semester of 2012, with the cooperation of the registrar’s office, I sent an email (subject line: #fail) to all enrolled undergraduates inviting them to participate in the questionnaire; in the same week, I arranged to have a module advertising the survey built into the student interface of our course management system. After a collection period of about eight
weeks, I was able to download responses from 219 participants. Then began the emotionally taxing process of combing through the data and hoping for a clue as to how I might organize it.

**Question One: What words or phrases come to mind when you hear the word “failure”?**

First, I thought I might tally occurrences of each word or phrase, but soon determined that this would result in a data set that remained too fractured to make much sense. I needed an organization scheme that would help me see important themes and concepts. Conferring with a colleague on a particular set of responses, she noticed that much of the language reminded her of Lakoff and Johnson’s work on metaphorical concepts. For example, many participants wrote of feeling projects had been a “waste,” or, conversely, that their failures represented an opportunity to “gain” something, such as perspective or knowledge. Noting that this language easily connected to Lakoff & Johnson’s Gain/Loss metaphor, I set to work coding the data according to likeness in metaphor or affect (See Figure 1; see Appendix A for representative data sets). In addition to the gain/loss metaphor, other language includes metaphors of competition (“loser”), and of location (“I feel lost”), as well as ability (“incompetent,” “stupid,”), and physicality (“weak,” “lazy,”). A number of participants also offered reflective meta-commentary, writing “I didn’t try hard enough,” or “I thought I was better than that.” Most interesting to me are those responses identifying a feeling of disappointment, which implies a degree of longevity, as well as responses invoking morality (“bad person”), and shame/embarrassment, both of which reveal a deep connection with identity.
Figure 1: Initial Data Scheme
This initial organization scheme created twenty-five separate categories, giving me a broad, rough idea of how the data shook out. But, such a wide-angle view had little effect in making the data more manageable. Therefore, I found it useful to shuffle the data into different and larger categories following Silvan Tomkins’ well-known description of the emotions, which argues that the entirety of the human emotional system can be reduced to eight unique categories of affect. In this scheme, which I will discuss in greater detail later, emotions and metaphors related to shame and embarrassment (one such affect group) appeared in a full 45% of responses, far outpacing any other affect category (with the exception of distress/anguish, which was present in 40% of responses).

Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses across affect categories (only 6 of 8 total Tomkins categories were represented). Figure 3 shows a telescopic breakdown of the two largest categories, shame-humiliation and distress-anguish. Prominent emotions falling under the category of shame include disappointment, a loss of confidence, as well as direct reference to shame or embarrassment; prominent emotions falling under the category of distress-anguish include feelings of loss, feelings of being perceived as a “loser,” and crises of morality.\textsuperscript{12}
What does this data signify? It’s hard to say definitively, but one thing seems certain: failure runs deep, provoking emotional responses associated with pain and self-evaluation. Anybody who is honest with themselves about their own failures will not find this claim groundbreaking, but I do feel it is important that we as educators and researchers confront this claim more purposefully than we have up until now. We who are committed to the world-building, self-expressing power of composition and creativity would do well to account for the full emotional spectrum of the work we ask our students to do, validating the bad feelings along with the good ones. Doing so can open conversations about the practice of writing that better reflect the total scene.

More than this, however, the data shows that emotions of shame are more prominent than any other when young people are asked to reflect on failure. Therefore, it seems important that to claim knowledge of the experience of failure in writing, we need to know more about shame. Bearing this in mind, I now turn to research in psychology to describe how shame occurs in the body, a discussion I hope will provide additional context for the “fizziness” of failure in writing.
My goals with this illustration are twofold: first, I want to make clear the myriad possibilities for how individuals experience and react to the singular emotion, shame; second, I want to make a case for studying writing from an emotion-centered standpoint.

Where Shame Begins

Owing to the research trends of psychology and psychiatry, shame has been until recently (1990s) a rather enigmatic emotion. Considered “innate,” it stands alongside only seven other affects believed to encompass the entirety of the human emotional system. These affects, identified by Tomkins in 1962 and still uncontested today, follow a naming convention meant to represent the full spectrum of intensity, from mild to strong. For example, the affect “enjoyment-joy” is named to stand for the single affect that encompasses the full range of happy feelings, from mild pleasure to abundant joy, and everything in between. Tomkins’ eight affects are:

**Positive:** Interest-excitement; enjoyment-joy

**Neutral:** Surprise-startle

**Negative:** Fear-terror; distress-anguish; anger-rage; dismell-disgust; shame-humiliation.

For the most part, these affects operate independent of each other; while it’s perfectly common to experience, say, rage and disgust simultaneously, we would not say that one depends upon the other. This is not the case with the affect shame-humiliation, however. While joy, anger, fear, and the rest function on their own, “Shame requires the presence of other affects. Shame exists only in terms of other affects” (Nathanson 136). According to Nathanson, the body’s “neutral” or baseline state is contentment, a mild emotion on the joy-enjoyment spectrum. *Shame*, directed as it is toward interest, presents itself as an interruption of the positive affect(s). “Shame feels so miserable because it interrupts what feels best in life,” he writes (73). At the
same time, shame’s misery prompts the body to try to regain contentment by focusing ever more intently on the object of interest.

Shame affect is a unique biological mechanism. It is called into action when the organism remains fascinated by whatever had triggered its interest or remains desirous of communing with whatever or whoever might next have been a source of the contentment, relaxation, or mirth associated with the affect enjoyment-joy.

So the innate affect shame-humiliation is conceptualized as a mechanism that throws the organism into a painful experience of inner tension by attempting to reduce the possibilities for positive affect in situations when compelling reasons for that positive affect remain. (Nathanson 139)

How does shame begin? The “psychoanalytic archeologist” Leon Wurmser has called shame a “layered emotion” (qtd. in Nathanson 143), suggesting that its occurrence is triggered by a number of self-evaluative issues or insecurities, among them:

(1) I am weak, I am failing in competition; (2) I am dirty, messy, the content of myself is looked at with disdain and disgust; (3) I am defective, I have shortcomings in my physical and mental makeup; (4) I have lost control over my body functions and my feelings; (5) I am sexually excited about suffering, degradation, and distress; (6) watching and self-exposing are dangerous activities and may be punished. (Wurmser 27-28 qtd. in Nathanson 144)

Put more simply, we experience emotions on the shame-humiliation spectrum (including embarrassment and shyness) when an inciting event or trigger causes us to feel bad or wrong about one or multiple aspects of ourselves, damaging our identity or sense of self/worth. If we understand the positive and negative affects to be reflections of “goodness” and “badness,” those
rudimentary categories into which we sort our varied and nuanced experiences (and if we accept that most people strive for goodness in the eyes of others), then the onset of feelings from the shame-humiliation spectrum must mean that we possess conscious recognition of behavior that causes a transition from an identity that reflects goodness to one that reflects badness.

I turn to these terms because of the morality work such terms have been shown to affect in relation to literacy in Chapter One. Understanding shame in the context of morality helps underscore its deeply personal, deeply social qualities. This is what makes the affect shame-humiliation different from the others, despite its grouping alongside other “negative” affects. And this is precisely why it has relevance to the study of learning broadly and writing specifically, for these are activities that require a tolerance for that tension identified by Nathanson above between the desire to push on and the desire to withdraw or turn away. Indeed, the complexity of this tension is most obvious in learning environments, where it is present in three connected-yet-discrete layers. One layer has to do with the project of learning itself, which is fraught with the push/pull impulse Nathanson describes, “to reduce the possibilities for positive affect in situations when compelling reasons for that positive affect remain.” When we try to learn something new, we are confronted with failures over and again, producing the sense of wanting to get it right (and restore contentedness) while wanting also to withdraw from the activity to prevent future damage to the psyche.

Another layer has to do with the role educational environments play in schooling the emotions: the aforementioned tension of learning (layer one) helps train us to negotiate that emotional conflict in other aspects of life by purposely triggering the shame response in “practical,” “compulsory,” or “safe” environments.
The third layer has to do with the reverse of the middle layer: the innate quality of the push/pull feelings uniquely fostered by the shame-humiliation affect in fact prepares us for the classroom and the consequences of failure in the classroom, helping us to know when something is worth pursuing by introducing/recalling this tension, or causing notice.

Because of this, the affect shame-humiliation is not simply one of eight physiological sequences in the body signifying emotion, but serves as an impartial monitor and an interested motivator of self-development, representing yet another facet of shame’s duality. In this way, it is a powerful mechanism for self-assessment, causing us to plumb the depths of our psyches as we gather resources for coping with a shameful experience. More than serving as a deterrent against inappropriate or risky behavior, shame lends itself to the role of the priest hearing the confession (pardon the ecclesiastic metaphor), in some sense providing the self-evaluative headspace to reflect on the causes and resolutions of shame. Here, we commune with demons.

I am thus interested in shame for the way it enables us to look two ways at once, evaluating the inner self while calling into sharper focus the social gaze. There is an aspect of wonder here, as shame causes a reorientation of our own gaze so that we may see ourselves—and others—with stunning clarity (for more on wonder, see Chapter Four). Nathanson, too, is in awe of all that shame encompasses:

The very ability of shame affect to upset all mental activity, to render incompetent our ability to perform intentional activity, to afflict muscle tone in the head and neck, to wrestle gaze away from what might have occupied us only a moment ago—all these powers of shame force us to consider who we were before shame hit and to what we have returned as shame subsides. Shame is the affect most likely to produce attention to the nature of the self. Shame produces a painful self-
awareness at every stage in human development simply because of the ability of this affect script to interfere with every pleasant way we know ourselves. *Through shame we are forced to know and remember our failures.* (211, emphasis mine)

Because of its status as an “emotion of self-assessment” (Worsham 16), shame has been a subject of examination for scholars of many stripes, including writing studies and critical theory. 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* (1999), 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” (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 teach us not only how to feel but also 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 other infant studies), 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” (quoted in Sedgwick 37-38, emphasis mine). 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, “But 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 feel that way, if only for a time. 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 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 failure “reminds us with urgency what we are interested in.” 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. I find it useful to turn to grammatical forms in order to more accurately name what it is I’m talking about. The infinitive *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 simultaneously 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[ling]” 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). 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 in fact harmful, 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. It is my contention that our field—and our students—would benefit by acknowledging an experience that is a bit thornier.

And yet, despite the nuanced and deeply personal ways shame might afflict us, it is also as predictable an emotion as any other. Most people will react with a degree of shame to scenarios that cause them to look foolish, thoughtless, or otherwise divergent from cultural or societal norms, and though each person’s history will cause the personal experience of shame to vary wildly, the physical indicators of shame’s presence remain consistent across cultures, genders, and age groups: slumped shoulders, lowered eyes, and blushing cheeks. Such a biological script is part of what makes us human. (Shame does not appear in the behavior of our closest animal relatives, chimpanzees). Somewhat typical, too, is the human reaction to shame, tending to go one of four ways and illustrated nicely by what Nathanson calls “The Compass of Shame” (figure 4).
According to Nathanson, reactions to shame take the form of withdrawal (rapid exit from the scene), attacking self (blaming self, putting self down, self-harm), avoidance ['slow and deliberate movement away from an uncomfortable situation’ (313)], or attacking others (name-calling, physical violence). Despite such predictability though, shame remains the affect that we have the hardest time controlling and anticipating. Though one’s response to shame may typically fall within one of four possibilities, the intensity and shape of that reaction is unknowable, and not necessarily consistent from one experience to the next. There are simply too many variables: personal history, social context, the stakes of the shaming incident, the degree of shame’s feltness, its duration, and the range of potential response patterns. It is no surprise then to note that, like Worsham and Sedgwick, Nathanson agrees that, “Shame always speaks about our inner self rather than our actions” (19). Taking this to be the case, and understanding that writing, no matter the mode, is often at least in part a labor of self expression
or a form of work tied up with identity, it makes a great deal of sense to account for shame—and the emotions more broadly—when we study writing.

As I noted in Chapter 1, much of our study of writing success and failure has to do with process. We are interested in how writers identify blocks and how they cope with them, what they understand about “rules,” what habits they believe successful writers cultivate, and of course their thoughts on whether writing is achieved via hard work or the intervention of a muse. Our studies of struggling students do typically include discussion of emotion, at least in part, but so far we have not made emotion the central focus. And the reason for this has nothing to do with neglect or disinterest, I don’t think. But, it may very well be a problem of methodology. Most of our writing research relies on observation, talk-aloud protocol, and/or interviews about process, all methods of data collection that don’t prioritize emotion. When Flower and Hayes, or Perl, or Emig observe writers, for example, they’re interested in process—in the starts and stops of writers writing. They’re not looking for emotion on the writer’s face or body, and therefore not asking them about their emotional profile in follow-up conversations. But, as any writer knows, success and failure in writing are intimately, inextricably connected to pride and shame, or what Nathanson calls the “pride/shame axis,” against which “we evaluate all of our actions, and along which is strung our fragile and precarious sense of self” (20). Therefore, to round out the image(s) of writing we rely on to study and teach we need ways of understanding the whole writer—not only her mechanical, technical, or stylistic processes, but her emotional processes as well. And, as I’ve learned, shame is a central emotion to the development of identity from childhood through adulthood, and therefore its influence on learning environments should not be ignored.
Acknowledging the emotional content of failure has implications for how we think about assessment as well, though not in the way that might seem obvious, which is in the implementation of “soft” marks of evaluation, increasingly common in higher education. Though the exact shape of these marks varies from institution to institution, many writing programs rely on assessment practices that emphasize process over product—well-intentioned policies, certainly, but policies that nevertheless serve to limit, discourage, or dismiss a student’s prerogative to experience the emotion of the writing process in its fullest scope. At my university, this grade is the “NP,” standing for “Not Proficient,” and applicable to any grade below a C- in the first-year course. Students may earn an NP on individual writing projects as well as on their final grade report. In both cases, the grade signals that the student has not met the minimum requirements for passing, and must re-do the assignment or course. In a program that emphasizes the importance of revision, as my and likely all programs do, the NP may seem to be supportive of a programmatic commitment to expanding students’ understanding of how composition is done. Likewise on the grade report, in the context of which the grade is non-punitive, replaced when the student repeats and passes the course. In either context, however, the refusal of the teacher/program to acknowledge a failing grade\textsuperscript{18} with a D or F in favor of the non-punitive non-grade serves to invalidate a student’s feeling of “badness” or shame by removing the object toward which that shame would ordinarily be directed. Such policies communicate that we don’t want our students to feel bad—that feelings of badness have no place in the writing process—a message that effectively leaves them unmoored, adrift, and left to feel and process their shame alone, without the possibility of “righting” the wrong.
Question Two: Please describe an experience of failure. What happened, and how did you feel?

The trends I’ve identified in responses to question one are evident in responses to question two as well, but the most striking trend unique to this data set has to do with the mode in which students offered their experiences. I used the word “describe” in the prompt instead of something more mode-specific (such as “story” or “narrative”) in an effort to wield as little influence over the form of response as possible, while making it clear (I thought) that I was interested in a more robust account of failure than allowed by question one. Still, I was hoping for stories. Instead, I got what read more like reports than anything else—simple, factual accounts of isolated events. Of 221 participants, 186 chose to answer this question. Unsurprisingly, over half of the responses (136) address academic experiences in some capacity; the remaining 50 responses address personal, professional, and athletic endeavors. Some examples include:

*Being a cadet in the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), we compete in winter of our Sophomore year to be selected to train that summer at Field Training (our version of ‘boot camp’). With a lackluster GPA I failed to achieve my EA (Enrollment Allocation) for Field Training. By failing I was forced to repeat my second year in the program, which has had extensive repercussions.*

*After placing as a junior in my states [sic] high school wrestling state tournament my senior year I [sic] failed to even win one match. I was distraught for a couple of days that all the work and encouragement that my peers, coaches and parents had put in had gone to waste.*
I was taking a poetry course. Generally I am a good student. In the poetry course we were to read selected works and write our interpretations. All of my papers in the course were given low grades. I was told that I was not interpreting correctly and all of my impressions were wrong. I understood the imagery. I interpreted things based on my life experiences. I hated that class and instructor.

While emotion is present in these examples (at least implied if not explicitly named), the accounts are brief and seem more concerned with telling the “happenings” of the experience while skirting around the details of how the event made the person feel. We may chalk part of this up to the structure of the question and the complications that arise when a researcher develops questions designed not to influence the response; it’s possible, too, that the pressure of writing the details caused participants to sculpt their answers in particular ways. But we may also note the well-known and mostly un-refuted claim that humans are narrative beings, and make sense of their world and themselves through the telling of stories. So, while it would of course have been unreasonable of me to expect well-developed personal narratives, I do not think it out of line to be surprised by the report-like responses I received. At first, I was befuddled, and wondered if the data could even be used. But then I realized that the lack of narrative elements (or maybe the lack of engaging narrative elements) is itself notable. Were my study participants deliberately avoiding the narrative mode, so as not to have to recall the event with the emotional closeness that such telling requires (see Eakins; Anderson)?

However, I am intrigued by the lack of resolution these and other students reach for. Out of 186 responses, only 50 gestured toward positive outcomes in the end. Failure, it seems, feels final. One participant summed up the feeling nicely, writing, “When I fail, I feel like I have not learned something.” As if the occurrence of failure prevents the mental redemption. This trend is
especially noteworthy when viewed against interview data (Chapter Three), in which the impulse to view failure as a positive life lesson is strong.

Analyzing responses to this question has proved difficult, as there aren’t identifiable trends beyond what I’ve listed. While these trends are intriguing, I’m not sure they lead me any closer to generalizable conclusions about failure. And maybe that shouldn’t be the goal. Resistance of narrative and resolution does seem powerful, giving one the impression that the wounds of failure are still healing, still causing irritation and discomfort (indeed, close readings have the effect of bringing the reader into an emotionally icky place). But it’s hard to say whether these trends say more about failure or about study design. In the end, this form of data collection feels useful as a first stage—helping to identify ideas and concepts worthy of further exploration—but it can’t be offered as “proof” of anything. Failure is mystifying and particularly individuating. It blooms in human bodies, and therefore can only be usefully studied in this context, not on color-coded spreadsheets. Likewise, measuring accounts of failure against adherence to particular modal conventions (such as narrative), however interesting, is not revelatory from a research perspective. What a research question such as mine requires is a more intimate, experiential methodology that privileges individual voices over collated data points. In the next chapter, I describe and report on the second stage of this research study in which I interviewed nine survey participants about their personal experiences with failure. This discussion is preceded by a description of a methodological approach designed to get “at the heart of the matter,” as they say, helping researchers close the gap between researcher, participant, and data.
"Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English). “Now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!” (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off).

-Louis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

“A more honest strategy—for both quantitative and qualitative researchers—is to admit, from the beginning, that we are all storytellers.”

-Thomas Newkirk, “The Narrative Roots of Case Study.”

As I argued in previous chapters, we in Composition Studies are in great need of new models for studying writing. In this chapter, I continue discussion of my research study, focusing on Phase Two. To contextualize this phase, I begin by outlining the ethos of feminist qualitative methodology, which describes my orientation in the second stage of research. Along the way, I describe three particular research methods that inform my presentation and analysis of the data: rhetorical listening, narrative case study, and portraiture.

A feminist qualitative methodology represents a stance, or a way of studying a question (or questions) openly from a position of curiosity and possibility, and it is paired with feminist methods, or practical procedures for conducting research from such a standpoint. In the essay “Is There a Feminist Method?” Sandra Harding outlines a number of characteristics of feminist inquiry, among them, that the question arises “from the perspective of women’s experiences,” that the objective of the inquiry “is to provide women explanations of social phenomena that they want and need,” and that the researcher’s own subjectivities be “placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter” or, that the researcher’s own assumptions about race, class,
gender, and culture be part of the interrogation (8-9). Likewise, feminist researcher Jill Morawski suggests that feminist research methods “would have to be not only applicable to observing or measuring gender but also “gender-fair” or absent of unacknowledged gender meanings” (57). Such standards are crucial to the project of making space for research that rejects the androcentric methods and epistemologies that pervade conceptions of what kind of knowledge “counts.” Which is not to say that feminist methodology wholesale rejects empirical methods; rather, as Patricia Sullivan writes in “Feminism and Methodology in Composition Studies,” the characteristics outlined by Harding, Morawski, and others “reveal fundamental differences between a feminist approach and traditional approaches to empirical research in composition,” and from this place of difference, feminist methods represent only a rejection of “the positivist elements that still linger in the dominant paradigm of scientific inquiry” (57). In many cases, feminist researchers draw from time-tested methods but do so in service of the feminist project. “Techniques such as open-ended interviews and case studies enable researchers to generate descriptions of composing from the point of view and in the language of the writers they are studying” (Sullivan 57).

Representing something of a departure from or an extension of these ways of describing feminist research, Laura Micciche argues in “Writing as Feminist Rhetorical Theory,” that “Feminist methods are invention of pedagogy; feminist methodologies form the theoretical grounding through which these openings attain explanatory power and political significance” (174). I would agree; by working against positivist methods of making knowledge, feminist methodologies invite researchers to ask what has gone unnoticed, unstudied, unarticulated. Further, if we come to understand feminist methodology as invention, it is possible to argue that a project driven by feminist methodologies need not study gender
specifically (for a methodology should not place limits on what can be studied), so long as it approaches the subject of research with empathy and an intent to remain cognizant of situational differences between researcher and individual participants, as well as the understanding that knowledge gained from the study is neither impartial nor complete: there is always more to know, and more ways of knowing it (Micciche 175). From this standpoint, feminist researchers are able to draw on the foundational ethos of feminist methodologies while working on projects that do not necessarily lend themselves to a study of gender difference specifically.

Feminist methodology has a special relevance to research on failure. As I established in the previous chapter, failure is an inherently emotional process; not only that, it is an emotional process that is often overlooked or explained away as “recursion” in the writing process, or as “difficulty” and “struggle” resulting from social, economic, and cultural difference in learning environments. We know that failure is “necessary” to the project of learning, and that it signifies growth and effort. But these sentiments and cultural aphorisms are wholesale signifiers of a perspective on knowledge development that focuses on outcomes, quantifiable and indisputable markers of progress toward (what?) a square and rigid image of success. To understand failure as emotional, as the presence of emotion, or as the process of working through emotion in a social context requires an approach to research that makes space for emotion to be thoughtfully and carefully examined. My questions about failure are not gendered, in that I don’t seek to understand differences between the ways men and women fail (though such research is no doubt needed, as well as research into how failure shifts along racial and economic divisions); but, my way of approaching the problematic of failure is to draw from the feminist research ethic in opening an inventional space to observe the character of the emotions attending feelings of failure.
Methodological Framework

My research is influenced by Krista Ratcliffe’s work on rhetorical listening, which she defines as “a trope for interpretive invention” that “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (1). Rhetorical listening, as a concept and practice, strives to emphasize the active and intentional aspects of listening, challenging the listener not to translate another’s words into the context of her own (the listener’s) experiences—a passive process of appropriation—but to understand another’s words in their live context. “[It] turns hearing (a reception process) into invention (a production process), thus complicating the reception/production opposition and inviting rhetorical listening into the time-honored tradition of rhetorical invention” (46). Such a concept is useful for qualitative research of any sort, as it reminds the researcher of the impossibility of impartiality in interpretation and representation, while at the same time challenging the researcher to interrogate her own biases against those of the research subjects. It is particularly useful for a study of failure, a deeply personal—and for that reason—slippery and unstable concept. As I will demonstrate in my presentation of findings below, adherence to the practice of rhetorical listening helps to ensure that study participants are represented ethically while acknowledging that participants and researchers are always-already situated and imbricated in particular social, emotional, and cultural logics informing the character of speech and communication.

The question of ethics in representation is deceptive, in that any researcher who attains IRB approval for a project has already had to think deeply and thoroughly about the ethics of every stage of the study. But planning an ethical study is easier than executing one, for the simple reason that representing the contributions of study participants in an ethical manner is not as simple as transcribing their words, summarizing their perspectives, or describing interactions
in a supposedly value-neutral manner. As researchers, we have ways of asking questions or designing research that reflects something of our own biases, despite our best efforts. In analysis, certain details will take precedence over others based on our own ways of reading/listening. Ethical research acknowledges the inherent situatedness of the total research project. In qualitative research, especially that which relies on language (or whole sections of narrative) as its primary (or only) form of data, such as the case study, it can be tricky to determine how to pick and choose and analyze representative examples in an ethical manner. The act of selection is itself an act of privileging particular items over others, and that affects the final image of the participant and the concepts in intentional ways (to say nothing of the acts of arrangement and synthesis of the selected data, nor of analysis, interpretation, and mode of delivery). Therefore, it is the researcher’s prerogative to strive for transparency and clarity in her presentation of findings, even while acknowledging the impossibility of achieving those goals totally. What a researcher offers, in the end, is her own vision of the data that she has crafted in good faith with the twin goals of representing her subjects fairly, and achieving dramatic and pedagogical impact. Indeed, as Thomas Newkirk argues:

> We can claim that experimental studies strip the context, but in their own ways, so do case studies and ethnographies. Even those researchers who claim to account for the context must disregard or decline to report most of what they record. So the issue is not who strips and who doesn’t strip [the context] but how each strips to create accounts, narratives that gain the assent of readers. The issue is not which is more Real, but how each creates, through selection and ordering of detail, an illusion or version of Reality. (133)
In “The Narrative Roots of Case Study,” Newkirk pulls back the curtain on the inherent fallibility of case study research, suggesting that such fallibility is both its liability and its strongest asset. Drawing from Vygotsky’s theories of child development—preferring to study the “impediments, struggle, and transformation” (135) that evolutionary biologists ignore in favor of studying the smooth accumulation of separate changes—Newkirk advocates for the case study and narrative as a way of studying and presenting data that endures for its dramatic appeal.

To write the case study that works, the writer needs to see the data in terms of one of a variety of culturally grounded narratives [...] deeply rooted story patterns that clearly signal to the reader the types of judgments to be made. By using these narrative patterns, the account can move beyond the particular or “ideographic,” and come to embody a set of cultural beliefs. [...] As readers of these studies, we find them true or convincing not because of careful methodology (important as that is), or because of wealth of detail, but, I would argue, because of the gratification we get from seeing cultural myths being reenacted. (135-136)

Like rhetorical listening, the use of narrative in reporting on individual case studies also serves to convert the receptive processes of listening and observing into the productive process of invention. Here, the researcher strives to understand the position and perspective of the subject, and to reenact that perspective in the context of larger narratives or myths—sometimes showing alignment with familiar stories, other times using the new story as a point of contrast to reveal rifts, fissures, and tensions in existing narratives.

But for all the merit of importing particular perspectives into the realm of grand narrative, presenting data in this manner is not without its risks. Chief among them is the risk of over-simplification, wherein the researcher rounds edges and amplifies or subdues certain elements in
service of mythical alignment, thereby writing over or marginalizing details that might otherwise provoke alternative ways of knowing and understanding. This is, as I argued in Chapter One, how writing process researchers have managed to ignore the emotional work of failure. As an object of study, emotion must be treated both in the particular, given its highly subjective manifestation, as well as in a more generalized or culturally familiar context, given its centrality to the human physiological and psychological systems. Therefore, in studying emotion as articulated by individual subjects, it is necessary to gather and present data with eyes and ears prepared to understand a more total picture, the forest and the trees. If rhetorical listening helps us gather data in the context of the particular, and if narrative helps us organize data more generically, then portraiture helps us situate our data more holistically.

Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Davis describe “portraiture” as a “genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art” (xv). The adoption of the term portraiture provides a descriptive and easily understood concept for a method of inquiry that is interpretive, flexible, and rigorous in its commitment to non-positivist renderings of qualitative data. “Portraiture,” write Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, “blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (xv). Like those artists engaging in the centuries-old practice of representing another through portrait-painting, portraiture researchers record life as they see it, rendering images of subjects that are “probing, layered, and interpretive” (4), and that “[express] the perspective of the artist and [are] shaped by the evolving relationship between the artist” and subject (4). Portraiture is designed to make space for the researcher alongside the subject(s) of research, eschewing the notion of the “unbiased” researcher. (For more on portraiture, including a detailed discussion of its forbears, see Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).
The metaphor of the portrait is as instructive as it is eye-catching. Here is a form of art that is a) representative, offering one artist’s interpretation of the subject; b) textured, taking advantage of light and shaping brushstrokes to register contour and emotion; c) and situated, subject to natural, material, and emotional context as well as to the selection of the artist’s vision and hand. A portrait is at once stable and unstable, providing a long-lasting rendering of the subject that is nevertheless only a single rendering, a fleeting glimpse of the “whole” being. It is a form of art both staged/performative and “natural.” The goal of portraiture is not photographic realness, but the more abstract inner countenance of a subject dressed, posed, and otherwise manipulated (through conversation or other means) to project what the artist means to coax out of her. Used as a guiding metaphor for research, portraiture asserts itself as representative, textured, situated, fleeting, and performative, a significant contrast from positivist methods of representing human subjects (often reducing them to whatever qualities, insights, or observations apply across a representative sample of participants). Portraitist research does not strive for generalizable data. It revels in the particular.

Research relying on portraiture often takes the form of narrative report, with equal attention paid to describing the scene of research and the substance of it. In doing so, it means to draw upon the subjective intimacy local to ethnographic methods and combine it with the expressive goals of a novelist or artist. While the former promotes depth of understanding, the latter promotes readerly identification, presenting data in a way that draws a reader in, causing her to establish a personal and empathic connection with the research subject(s). This evocative component allows the research to “reach beyond the walls of the academy,” (9) and effect social change. Portraiture is especially useful as a guiding methodology for researchers whose questions are open and exploratory in nature, and for whom the end result may not be
generalizable statements but more pointed questions. Most importantly, by combining the rigor of ethnography with the creativity of artistic expression, portraiture at once offers a researcher great flexibility in her reporting while also requiring her to practice expert presence of mind during the research process, to pay explicit attention to detail in her representation of the research, and to approach the final presentation of her findings with an ethic of care.

Rhetorical listening, narrative, and portraiture emphasize discrete but intertwining components of the research process. Separately, they ask the researcher to pay attention to the data in unique ways; together, as practice, they compel the researcher to envision a totality without turning away from the particular. Like the shame response, it provokes a double movement—toward painful individuation and uncontrollable relationality. In the moment the researcher trains her sites on generalizable data, she is confronted with the starkness of specificity. This is a tension I would argue has great importance for researchers in composition, a subject that aims to create pedagogical models for all while creating enough space for infinite variation. We are, after all, a discipline that prizes “voice,” that rich metaphor signifying individuality and connection with others. These methodologies enable that duality.

**Methods**

The survey described in the previous chapter closed in January 2013. Over the span of two weeks in April of 2013, I met with nine participants who indicated their interest in being contacted for follow-up interviews. I gave all participants the option of interviewing in small groups or one-on-one. Two pairs of participants elected to meet together; the remaining five opted for one-on-one meetings. Interviews took place on my campus, and lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. Though I arrived at each interview with an approved interview protocol
(Appendix B), our conversations often deviated from that protocol, following a more natural course of conversation. My final pair of participants had to be disqualified from the study, as they revealed during their interviews that they were not undergraduates (one was an MD/PhD student; the other had left graduate school ABD roughly fifteen years prior to our meeting), and therefore ineligible according to the approved IRB protocol. Of the remaining seven participants, I have selected to report on six. My selection of these is based in part on what they had to say, representing a diversity of perspectives, as well as for the quality of the conversation we were able to maintain.

Drawing from the research methodologies described above, my report is offered in two sections. First, I offer brief sketches or snapshots of six participants with minimal commentary. With acknowledgement to the very purposeful practice of selection, description, and summary (a process that is highly subjective and representative of the researcher’s own reading and listening practices), my goal is for the participants to speak for themselves, for their ideas about failure to lay starkly on the page. As I’ll argue later, part of an epistemology of failure is about training our brains to resist the move to redemption when confronted with uncomfortable experiences; as researchers, this is also about resisting the move to generalizable conclusions. And so it is in this spirit that I present sketches of stage two participants without analysis.

I invoke the metaphor of the sketch with instructive purpose. As a form of art—and in contrast to a portrait—the sketch is a form of representation that is tentative and contingent. Often undertaken as a first rendering of a project to be filled out at a later date, it is meant to give the artist a sense of the lines, shadows, and most compelling details of a scene, object, or person, but does not strive for fullness or finality. Yet, it is not a throwaway form; for example, thought it is not my intention to compare myself to masters of art, we would consider the sketches of
Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo to be masterful works of art that endure across centuries, not only aesthetically but symbolically (many of Da Vinci’s drawings were imaginings for three-dimensional sculptures and machines he would later create). Unlike portraiture, there is an extemporaneous immediacy associated with sketching, a sense of having encountered a scene, image, or idea that the artist wants to capture for later development (or not). Like portraiture, however, the sketch is representative, textured, situated, fleeting, and performative. As a metaphor for research, it embodies the tension of the research methodologies described above, requiring the researcher to focus on each line, each shadow, all while remaining attentive to the entire scene, striving to capture something specific and provocative. Additionally, this is a metaphor that opens invention space for imperfect, incomplete, and offbeat research, particularly with regard to subjects that lurk in the negative space of disciplinary agendas. Research sketches enable researchers to play in inquiry with the goal of visualizing the lines, shadows, and tentative shape composing further research.

Following these sketches, I provide discussion of the participants as a group according to points of convergence and points of divergence. This may seem a contrary move on my part, and I accept that charge. But I would argue that there is something to be learned from each method of presenting data—after all, there is always more to know, and there are always more ways of knowing. In the first instance, we are confronted with the stark particularity of individual participants. These sketches serve to enlarge and complicate our subject. And yet, as Newkirk notes in his discussion of case studies, we are drawn to familiar narratives. That we seek identification with others—that we strive to make connections between ourselves and (multiple) others—this is a natural human impulse of empathy. And our meditation on the broader implications of those connections is evidence of high-order analytical brain function. My intent
in presenting data both “raw” and synthesized is to provoke this empathic, analytical response. Before presenting the sketches and discussion, though, the next section begins with a meditative description of my own subjectivity, offered for the purpose of being forthcoming about my own biases, expectations, and questions that inform the shape and content of my analysis.

Down the Rabbit Hole

If my research interviews have led me to one certainty about failure, it is this: failure is a term delineated by dotted lines, not solid ones. I had hoped before beginning that the interviews would help me hone in on a more precise way of thinking and speaking about failure, but I have concluded them feeling more in the dark than before. In our conversations, interview subjects offered thoughts about failure that were both wildly divergent (from each other, as well as from my own imaginings) and predictably synchronous. Without exception, each student defined failure in opposition to success, though they were careful to do so with their own personal takes on this cultural script. When asked directly about how they define the term, all of them placed the term in relation to goals, that is, not meeting one’s goals. But maybe failure doesn’t exist, they posit, so long as you learn from your experiences. Michael, an aspiring physicist, tells me that many scientists spend their entire careers being wrong, and yet every wrong answer represents progress toward the right none. “What is that? We stand on the shoulders of giants,” he says proudly. “Not taking something from your experience, not learning—that’s failing yourself.”

And yet, for Amber, failure applies equally to matters both grave and trivial: the first example of failure she recalls is messing up in Color Guard rehearsal the day before we spoke; when I ask her to tell me about failure in the writing classroom, she describes a course in which
her work was not well received, but is quick to defend herself by telling me that she’s just “not
good at essay writing” and that she’s better at “telling stories.”

While most interview subjects identified failure as an experience involving feelings of
embarrassment and self-doubt, Lestat\textsuperscript{21} describes failure as an emotional void, or a state of
feeling completely \textit{empty} of feeling, an idea I have trouble wrapping my mind around. Even
more baffling, Cheshire acknowledges that experiences of failure are laden with humiliation, but
that she can “back away” from that feeling and choose not to experience it. This, she explains, is
why she’s never experienced failure.

Of my nine interview subjects, only one, Carrie (who goes by “Rie”) makes no move to
explain, justify, or reconstruct failure in the image of something more pleasant or boot-strappy.
Instead, she describes failure as a kind of mechanism for detecting previously unseen limits or
“resistances,” and describes the process of coping with failure as one of “recalibration,” or
determining a new angle of approach, and “recovery,” which involves coming to know oneself
again in light of these new limits or setbacks.

Much to my chagrin, asking my subjects directly about failure yielded reports of making
mistakes or experiencing, to my ear, minor lapses in judgment; the subjects speak nonchalantly,
unaffected, making me question the scent I’ve been chasing. Maybe it is nothing. Maybe we
don’t talk about failure in composition studies because there’s nothing to talk about.

And yet. When I pull back the throttle and ask questions that aren’t so pointedly designed
to elicit particular responses, our conversation dips ever so slightly beneath the surface. My
interview subjects don’t want to talk about failure—this is a non-event, barely a blip on their
radars—but they will talk about classroom experiences when they were blindsided by a teacher’s
assessment of their work (experiences that alternately dredge up feelings of nonchalant dismissal
and intense self-doubt); they will talk about spoiling their good reputations with one bad decision; they will talk about feeling humiliated and sad, and about the fear that filled the moment when their self confidence bottomed out. There is something here in their refusal to give failure as a term any weighted consideration. There is something in their impulse to talk around failure, explaining and pontificating in spirals until we have both forgotten the question. But how do we talk about the negative space?

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**Lestat** is the first person to be interviewed, though he has elected to take part in a group interview with one other person. Lestat identifies failure as the result of having not met a goal, noting that he rarely sets unattainable goals, presumably so that he will not have to confront an experience of failure. I press him, asking if there’s not even one example he can share, and he tells me about switching majors from Computer Science—what he *really wanted to do*—to Physics. His interview partner, Travis, asks what made him switch, and Lestat matter-of-factly responds that he just *couldn’t do* Computer Science, couldn’t figure it out. Physics, he explains, felt easier due to its comparative status as a much broader field of study. I ask him to think about that process, about all the thought that went into the decision, and to describe if he can what it felt like. And that’s when Lestat really surprises me, describing failure as an absence of feeling, a state of mind in which there’s nothing to attach his emotions to; for Lestat, failure is a kind of void. I ask if the word “unmoored” would be an accurate term to use, and he agrees.

***

**Cheshire** is a senior, about to graduate with a BS in psychology. She tells me she’s not entirely sure how to define failure because she doesn’t think she’s ever experienced it, but “imagines” it as “a really bad feeling… hopelessness… your self worth would be pretty low.” I
ask her to elaborate on her claim of never having failed. She explains that she comes from a highly educated family (both of her parents are university professors) who have always supported her and helped her succeed. Leaning on the connection between failure and goals, she reminds me that she’s young and hasn’t had a chance to be let down yet. Her goals are still future-oriented: go to graduate school, be a mom, etc. I ask her to imagine failing at one of those goals. How would she react?

“I think I would reason in my mind, as like a defense mechanism, any way to not feel failure.”

“And what might that feel like?” I ask.

“I associate failure a lot with humiliation, and that’s a feeling I don’t like to have.”

I ask Cheshire if she can recall a time when she felt really humiliated. She tells me about being sixteen years old, living in a small town in Pennsylvania, sneaking into a college party, and getting caught by the police for drinking underage. Her name was in the paper. It was a small community; everyone knew her and her parents. She tells me it’s the closest thing to humiliation she’s ever experienced, but she “decided not to feel that way, not to recognize those feelings.”

I ask her to clarify.

“Those feelings were there, but I decided not to go there.”

I ask how she’s able to perform such mental gymnastics. She then refers to the experience as a “fuck up,” a discursive move that helps her to perceive the entire affair as “cool.”

“You can just compartmentalize like that?” I ask.

“Yeah! It’s a coping mechanism. I just played the whole thing off like it was totally cool.”
As a result of this event, Cheshire’s parents pulled her from her last year of high school and sent her to college early. Cheshire tells me she doesn’t do well with rules. “High school is a place with a lot of rules.”

***

Michael describes himself as a “Type-A” person heavily invested in order. “I have this dream: I want to know everything there is to know,” he tells me, going so far as to explain his wish to download the contents of his brain to an external drive in order to make space for additional knowledge. This detail informs the story he tells me about his most memorable failure: failing an algebra test in high school.

Mathematics had always come easily to Michael. He uses the word “natural.” He describes the moment of failure as one that filled him with self-doubt. “Stuff stopped coming naturally,” he said. I ask him to tell me more about why this experience stands out to him, and he tells me that it represented “an inability to know everything,” a realization in direct conflict with his life goal. It wasn’t until he came to terms with this reality that he was able to regain confidence in his intellect and his ability to reach his goals.

I ask about his goals.

“I want to build a space elevator,” he replies.

I furrow my brows in confusion, prompting him to launch into an extended explanation of The Grand Unification which leads perilously deep into his thoughts on fourth dimension wormholes before I am able to politely interrupt with a final question on what he imagines success in the long term to feel like. Michael pauses, squints through his glasses, and offers a thoughtful reflection:
I define failure very broadly, and to not fail, all you have to do is take something away. And I think that’s a good definition. I like it. But I don’t necessarily adhere to that definition. I hold myself to a much higher standard, or at least I think I do. If I were to give up, and by “giving up” I use this term very broadly—if I were to change my major, if I were to go into a non-science field, if I were to drop my mathematics or if I were to do poorly in one of those courses, I would consider that a failure. Because I want to—it takes a lot of—not just knowledge—but it takes a lot of determination to become—like, I see on The Discovery Channel all these theoretical physicists who are really intelligent and know all this stuff, and it takes a lot of effort and a lot of stuff, you know, a lot of knowledge and determination to be that. And I constantly question myself. “Can I do this? Can I really be like one of those guys?”

“Why physics?” I ask.

“Because it’s not easy. It makes me want it more.”

***

Nia is thirty-two years old, the oldest of the participants, and trying to finish a chemistry degree. I ask why she volunteered for an interview and she tells me she wants to know how best to deal with failure. Like the others, her definition of failure is goal-oriented, and by this understanding, she’s failed a lot (weight loss, relationships, school), and wants help. “Is there some kind of a switch, a key, a turn on for me to be able to understand my failure and to deal with it properly, as opposed to just dealing with it any way I can?”

“Do you think there is a proper way to fail?” I ask.
I feel like a good way of failing is sticking with the facts… Also a good way of failing—you’re giving it your all, you actually put forth the effort… You do, and you still fail, you can’t sit there and be mad at yourself. It’s still—you put it out there, you don’t know what might happen, what dominoes you’ve started to knock down although you’ve been like “the goal I put in place, the expectation, didn’t happen.” Bad failing: you don’t try, you don’t do anything, almost like a sense of entitlement.

Nia explains that she first enrolled in college in 1998 in pursuit of a chemistry degree, but had to leave after a few semesters when her grades caused her parents to pull her out to attend school in her hometown. She lived at home for much of this time with her parents who, I gather from the stories she tells me, are a hypercritical pair with whom it was difficult to live. She was never totally clear with the details, but she stayed in her hometown in and out of school and work until 2012 when she returned to a branch campus of our university to finish her Associate’s degree and gain admission to Main Campus, where she’s now enrolled. Her goal is to earn a B.S. in chemistry and attend graduate school for cosmetic science, with which she eventually hopes to design her own line of cosmetics. Through this time, Nia felt failure often, a feeling that arises when she’s “not doing what [she] wants to do.” Reflecting on this time, she says, “Everyone else is happy, but I wasn’t happy.” All Nia wants, it would seem, is to be free to fail without enduring the critical gaze of others. “Let me just keep trudging,” she says. “It’s gonna be ugly, but let me just keep going.”

I ask Nia to close her eyes and visualize “success.” She is quiet for a time, and visibly and audibly moved when she describes what she sees: sitting in her home surrounded by her
family watching MSNBC, seeing the initials of her future cosmetics company scroll across the
ticker. “That’s me. That’s my company.”

***

**Amber** is a first-year student enrolled in Exploratory Studies, our version of
“Undeclared.” She wanted to pursue nursing but is now planning to file papers for the College of
Education to major in early childhood education. Like the others, she describes failure in relation
to goals and expectations, “doing something you know you could have done better.” She
connects it with embarrassment, and when I ask her to tell me about a recent failure, she
describes messing up (dropping the flag) in Color Guard practice the day before.

I ask her about school, about her self-assessment of her abilities. She tells me about her
first year writing class last semester, a class she feels didn’t teach her anything. She wrote a
paper on lighting in the theater, something at which she considers herself an “expert.” During a
peer review session, her classmates and teacher suggested some changes (the nature of which
were unclear to me). She chose not to take their suggestions, and in her telling, she seems
offended by them. “They didn’t know anything about it,” she says, “until I told them.”

I ask her to tell me more about this class, and she describes a scene of gross
miscommunication: students not understanding assignment instructions or expectations, teacher
explaining over and over again without variation, both sides failing to connect despite their
frustrations. She tells me she knows she’s a good writer; she wrote lots of stories in high school
and received much positive feedback from her teachers. Essay writing is just “not my thing.”

Gravely, she tells me, “I hated that class.”

I ask her how it felt.
“Degrading. Like there was a bad vibe. I would just walk into that room and feel tired, which is how I get when I’m upset.”

I ask her to describe success.

“Independence.”

“And failure?”

“Having a job that I hate, massive debts, living paycheck to paycheck, run down trailer parks, not being happy with what I’ve done with life. I’ve been there.”

***

**Carrie**, who goes by **Rie**, is about to graduate with a creative writing degree and plans to move south after graduation to live with her husband, who is stationed at an Army base. She tells me up front that she’s had a rough time getting where she is. She grew up poor, “like, food stamp poor,” causing her to stand out socially, though she excelled academically. “The kids thought I was really weird.” Her mother encouraged and praised her academic abilities, even having her IQ tested (and learning she was considered a prodigy). As she grew older, she discovered that the thing she wanted—social acceptance—was unattainable, while the thing she cared least about—academic performance—is what marked her as “successful.” Ironically, because school came so effortlessly to her, it made her feel like a failure, judged successful without doing anything. Bored and frustrated by her lack of social life, she “withdrew from everything.” Her grades slipped, and she became, in her words, “a failed prodigy.”

After high school, Rie tried to get into art school but failed. She tried to get into an easier art school, succeeded, and left because she was terrible at it. Finding herself living in Arizona for a time, she decided in a rather sudden fashion that she “needed to be in Pittsburgh. Like, I just needed to be there.” So, she hitched from Phoenix to Pittsburgh, found a job and an apartment
with some friends, and applied to the University of Pittsburgh honors program in philosophy.

And then, failure.

“In one day, I didn’t get into the University of Pittsburgh, I lost my job, and I lost my

apartment. I failed at Pittsburgh.”

In the immediate aftermath, Rie says she moved into her dad’s and lay on the floor “for

about 16 hours basically motionless.” From there, she slowly tried to return to the things she

loved, trying to “recalibrate,” a term she elaborates on. To recover from failure, she explains is to

ask, “Where do you go now? There is the possibility of revisiting previous goals, but you have to

approach it from a new angle as if it is a new thing entirely.”

For Rie, failure is not as simple as not meeting a goal, but rather an instance in which “I

tried and did not succeed at the point where there are major setbacks and I might not even want

to try again.” Nevertheless, Rie assures me, “I think it’s important to experience some kind of

failure, because then you can know where your resistance is. […] And it requires analysis, too.

You have to analyze something to see whether you’ve failed or not.”

***

The Shape of Failure

What seems evident from these interviews is that while failure has a recognizable

shape—falling short of an expectation—its onset, as well as the degree to which it is felt, is

unpredictable. Michael, for example, was blindsided by his failed algebra test; though the test

ultimately had no bearing on his final grade (he was allowed to throw out his lowest test score),
it unsettled a core belief about himself, that he was capable of knowing everything there is to

know. Nia, on the other hand, expects to fail often; she’s spent more than ten years trying to earn

a bachelor’s degree. Failure is simply part of the terrain for her, and yet, her speech quickens and
her breath shallows when she tells me about her failures. They are potent, moving, even in retrospect. Cheshire seems to fear failure so much that she won’t allow herself to consider it in relation to herself, speaking about it in the abstract, and leaning on more comfortable and predictable terms to describe her own missteps. Amber describes physical feelings of dread when approaching an environment that makes her feel like a failure; Lestat shuts down emotionally, and Rie’s failures cast her temporarily out of commission. Some of these experiences, like Rie’s, feel objectively awful, while others, like Amber’s first example of messing up in Color Guard rehearsal, seem pretty minor. But that’s the thing about failure: it’s not any one identifiable or concrete thing, but lives and blooms in the gut, cultivated by contexts and histories as diverse as our microbial fauna.

Failure is uncomfortable; this may be the only conclusive statement I can draw from this research. Beyond that, I’m left with questions. What is the use of talking about failure? I began this project believing that to be able to name it, or to take ownership of it in a manner that resists the move to redemption narrative, we’d be able to get ahead of it, predict it, work with it. But I’m not so sure this is true, nor am I sure I want it to be. The power of failure is its unpredictability, its rough edges, its ability to leave us breathless and hunched over, gasping for air. In triggering the shame affect, failure forces us into a position of self-evaluation, and therein lies the potential for world-building (or world-wrecking, as the case may be). Yes, I want failure to be speakable, but I don’t advocate “talk therapy,” or the kind of discursive reduction that comes with robbing a word of its negative connotations. I’m not here to “reclaim” the f-word. But I do think we take great risk when we study, teach, and write about writing without acknowledging failure’s significance to that enterprise. As Zach Beare noted in a conference presentation, “Our work continually fails. The whole enterprise of academic work and publishing
relies on this fact. Our projects never fully succeed, our arguments are forever incomplete, resolutions are continually deferred. There is always more work to be done.”

**Looking Out**

I claimed in the first chapter that Composition Studies has largely left the question of failure unaddressed, with some exceptions. Like Cheshire, Michael, Amber, and the others, scholars in composition talk *around* failure, for the most part, declining to use the word but describing likely circumstances. When they do confront it head-on, the result is typically a controlled narrative. Consider Sylvia Church and Elizabeth Powell’s chapter, “When Things Go Wrong,” in Cindy Selfe’s *Multimodal Composition* (2007), a sort of resource book for best practices in teaching multimodal composition. Church and Powell’s chapter acknowledges at its opening the great likelihood of experiencing failure when incorporating new teaching methods and tools into the classroom. In fact, they would seem to embrace that likelihood, writing, “Nobody likes to experience failure. It’s painful, frustrating, and humbling. However, in tandem with success, failure can be a powerful teacher” (133). From there, however, Church and Powell proceed to advise teachers and students to anticipate failure at every turn so that they may avoid it whenever possible. “…Teachers and students will want to think about when and where things can go wrong *before* the start of any project” (134). The chapter offers a “troubleshooting guide” for working with audio and video tools, providing instruction on how to handle common problems when working in these modalities. The guide includes advice such as “Review manuals for help with the software” (140), “Practice [using the software] before editing valuable files,” (136), and “Save, save, save” (144). Church and Powell are concerned chiefly with *mechanical* failure here, and I’ll not fault them for it, except to say that it seems to be a piece that would
benefit greatly from a discussion of what kind of struggle attends mechanical failure, or what struggle teachers and students are likely to encounter in addition to possible mechanical failure. Particularly considering the time of its publication, when audio and video technology was not as ubiquitous in the classroom as it is today (when it is literally in the pockets of many students at all times), here is an opportunity to talk about the pedagogical and curricular struggles that will accompany teaching and learning with new tools and in new modes.

I don’t mean to punish Church and Powell for not addressing an issue they never set out to address (for an edited collection that likewise is not concerned with the more ethereal components of multimodal composition), but want to use this as an example for how eager our field has been to control the conditions of (possible) failure. As I mentioned in Chapter One, our scholarship on error, process, and cognition is guilty of this impulse, and it’s an impulse that is not local only to composition studies. In fact, in the above sketches, we see Cheshire and Amber especially striving to downplay their experiences in order to mitigate or head off the unpredictable risk involved with calling it failure. Cheshire uses language to temper the fear and shame of a sullied reputation, and Amber brushes off her struggles alternately with a kind of self-righteousness (“They didn’t even know until I told them,”) and with casual indifference to the thing signaling failure (essay writing is just “not my thing”).

But, it might be more useful to think of Cheshire’s and Amber’s interviews not as conversations that failed to produce conclusions about failure, but instead as conversations that lead to more questions about the nature and experience of failure. After all, Amber does indicate that the root of her failure experiences in her writing classes has begun with miscommunication. She did not hear or understand the feedback from her peers or the instruction from her teacher, leaving her feeling alone and lost. This is not an end, but a beginning. What do we do with
miscommunication? In Amber’s story, the teacher and students repeated the failing processes over and over again, to no avail. If someone had been able to interrupt that pattern and to acknowledge the failure, students and teacher may have had to work together to invent alternative ways of connecting with one another.

Cindy Selfe’s essay, “An Apprehensive Writer Composes” performs a similar service. In it, Selfe describes her effort to study a single writer with the goal of understanding the writer’s apprehension toward writing. The study, in Selfe’s words, “provides only a superficial understanding of how apprehension functions in connection with writing” (92), leading Selfe to reflect on the limitations of her study, noting, for example, that it would benefit from methodologies more suited to revealing the many facets of apprehension as emotional and cognitive states that serve to demotivate at times and motivate at other times. More pointedly, this “failure” (my descriptor) of a study causes Selfe to ask some serious questions that would give any writing researcher pause.

We may also wonder what role education plays in the development of writing apprehension. What specifically, for example, do we as English teachers do to encourage or dampen anxiety in the students who attend our composition classes? Do we […] encourage high writing apprehension by evaluating highly apprehensive students less positively than we do less apprehensive students? (93)

Is it our fault? No doubt this is the question underlying many stories about failure, whether directly or obliquely. Selfe’s questions provoke a shameful response in the reader, causing us to turn inward while at the same time (hopefully) demanding our attention. Is it our fault? I suspect if we began re-reading our literature from the point of view that looks for glimmers of failure such as this one, we would recognize it more often than we might imagine.
Unsurprisingly, Peter Elbow memorably confronts his own failure in “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard: Reflections on the Inability to Write,” writing,

I realize now that much of the texture of my academic career has been based in an oddly positive way on this experience of complete shame and failure. In the end, failing led me to have the following powerful but tacit feeling: “There’s nothing else they can do to me. They can’t make me feel any worse than they’ve already done. I tried as hard as I could to be the way they wanted me to be, and I couldn’t do it. I really wanted to be good, and I was bad.” These feelings created an oddly solid grounding for my future conduct in the academic world. They made it easier for me to take my own path and say whatever I wanted. (7)

Likewise, Doug Hesse writes honestly and tenderly about his failure as a husband, father, and WPA in “The WPA as Husband, Father, Ex,” identifying the qualities about himself that caused the unraveling of all three positions: “Because of my own background, I elevated breadwinning and caretaking roles over relationship-building ones, and those rules justified, in my mind, a dynamic of efficiency and responsibility, […] and being a good provider in a world I construed as hostile to people like me had to come first, relationships later” (52). And in the same vein, David Bartholomae, reflecting on the process of writing his dissertation (a period fraught with struggle), rejects conventional descriptors for the writing process in favor of a model of his own making:

If I think of my own experience as a writer, the most powerful terms I can use to discuss the composing process are not prewriting, writing, and revision, but tradition and imitation and interference and resistance. […]I try very hard to
interfere with the conventional force of writing, with the pressure toward set conclusions, set connections, set turns of phrase. (“Against the Grain” 21, 24)

My point in offering these examples is to show examples of what I’ll refer to as “productive failure” in the next chapter. Selfe, Elbow, Hesse, and Bartholomae each confront failure not by explaining it away or seeking a redemptive resolution, but by presenting their own shortcomings as avenues for more important questions, or gateways for inventing new ways of being and working. As Rie so sagely advised, “[You ask] Where do you go now? There is the possibility of revisiting previous goals, but you have to approach it from a new angle as if it is a new thing entirely.”

In the final chapter, I begin from this premise, asking how studying and making room for experiencing failure in our classrooms and hallways can lead to more inventive possibilities for the ways we teach, learn, research, write, and behave.
“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.
“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”
Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question. “What sort of people live about here?”
“In that direction,” the Cat said, waving its right paw round, “lives a Hatter: and in that direction,” waving the other way, “lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they’re both mad.”
“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.
“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”
“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.
“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.
- Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

What, for example, would be the shape of a text that valued the process of wonder-induced inquiry over the efficiency of propositional proof? Or one that valued the materiality of experience and image over disembodied, impersonal, academic prose? Unadorned text, written in plain style and organized in a way that can readily be outlined, has long been the paradigm for scholarly performances, and it has been presumed to fit all “legitimate” academic scholarship. Legitimacy, however, is a conservative, hereditary principle that protects the interests of those who claim it – Susan Delagrange, Technologies of Wonder (10).

So far, I have argued that despite its prevalence in the processes of learning and writing, failure is conspicuously absent from scholarship on writing; I have argued that this is due, in part, to research methodologies that privilege patterns which are a) observable, and b) recognizable as relevant to writing activity, and/or that c) rely on a subject (usually a novice writer) who is expected to have the cognitive wherewithal to both identify and track any mental activity relevant to writing coupled with the bravery to offer that information to researchers.
With the goal of understanding more about how people conceptualize failure, I have also offered a description of a study revealing that despite the varied perspectives on the subject, the vast majority of participants associate failure with shame and disappointment, signifying long-lasting emotional distress for the individual, and that due to its connection with shame, failure has a peculiar ability to make a person painfully aware of their social embeddedness while at the same time triggering feelings of loneliness and isolation. The second stage of that study revealed that what feels like failure to you may not match another person’s sense of the experience; that feelings of failure arise when an individual is derailed, so to speak, or when they are made to confront an image of the self that does not match their own (or others’) expectations; and that despite its ubiquity, failure always manages to catch us by surprise.

In this chapter, I want to argue for failure’s virtues. Taking for granted the notion that failure is a socially mediated process, I want to argue that the conventional way of conceptualizing failure—as antithetical to and yet shadow companion of success—is neither useful nor sufficient in encapsulating failure’s complexities. I reject that success-failure binary in favor of another. Drawing primarily from the work of Karen Burke LeFevre and Collin Brooke, I will suggest that failure is more usefully regarded as a gateway to the rhetorical practice of invention. Understanding failure in this manner enables us as writing scholars to develop a pedagogy of failure, a way of teaching writing that makes space for the surprising, frustrating, and often uncomfortable work of failure. Then, drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work on wonder and Kathleen Stewart’s work on bloom space, I will argue that a pedagogy of failure gives way to an epistemology of failure, a way of coming to see the world and our work with fresh eyes, and with a discomfiting blend of fear and awe. My aim is neither to destigmatize failure, nor to extract its teeth; neither to devise coping mechanisms nor to offer innoculatory advice. That failure is
painful—scar-inducing even—is its strength, what causes it to be a catalyst for invention. In the spirit of the above epigraph excerpted from Susan Delagrange’s *Technologies of Wonder*, the final section departs from tight, linear argument in favor of exploratory reflection.

**The Trouble With Invention**

The first of the five canons, *invention*, one could argue, is the central concern of the vast majority of scholarship in writing instruction. Put another way, composition, as a discipline, begins with invention. Historically, there are two competing views of invention: one positions the writer as the ultimate author; the other imagines invention as socially mediated (both are described below). For the most part, scholarship on writing subscribes to the social view of invention, but for the pesky problem of research, which positions the writer alone and (presumably) in control of the total situation. The gap between these views is troubling for our discipline: while we reject the Romantic notion of aesthetic genius prized by Coleridge in favor of pedagogies that stress collaborative processes, much of our research responsible for the entire notion of writing process studies student writers working on their own without the benefit of, say, a writing group or other classmates or even a teacher for support and conversation. Here is the Platonic writer, engaged in “a private, asocial act of recollection aimed at uncovering the ultimate truth” (LeFevre 11). So there’s this disconnect between what we know we do and how our research frames what we do.

The image of the solitary genius is not local to scholarship on writing; indeed much of Western thought and philosophy is predicated on the idea of individual gumption, self-reliance, and the unique self. Likewise, as described in Chapter Two, the western education system is structured to teach and reinforce this idea, insisting always that students compete against one
another for privilege, recognition, and advancement. At the heart of this system is the Platonic view of invention that, as LeFevre describes it, “assumes that the individual possesses innate knowledge or mental structures that are the chief source of invention” (11). LeFevre continues:

   Invention that proceeds from this perspective is a private activity carried out through introspection and directed by an innate mechanism. This view assumes that an individual possesses knowledge or the structure or mechanism to generate it and that the goal of invention is to express these innate materials, projecting them onto the outside world. Invention is the unfolding of the individual’s ideas, feelings, personality, patterns, or voice, all of which are seen as existing independently of others. (12)

The research reviewed in Chapter One confirms this view. Emig, Perl, and Flower and Hayes all design studies that begin from the assumption that composition is a solitary activity. In fact, one would be hard pressed to locate research on writing that speaks against the image of the lone artist. Yet, we know that writing is collaborative and social, even if we are not interacting with others in a visible or experiential way. Expert and novice writers alike write with the voices and influences of others in mind, “doubters” and “believers” both (Elbow). At the very least, we commune with an internal voice that is somehow “other” to “ourselves.” And so the Platonic view, embedded as it is in our most central and basic paradigms, is at least partially inaccurate or at odds with how writing actually happens, forwarding an understanding of creative activity that “promotes an oversimplified view of what an individual is, [and …] is not sufficiently comprehensive to account for what happens when writers invent” (LeFevre 23). The consequences for accepting and relying on this view are many and grave. Reviewing them would pull us too far afield of the argument at hand; suffice it to say that understanding invention in this
manner—as a closed or contained process—is what enables the success-failure paradigm to hold such a tight grasp on western thought. And *failure*, in this model, represents the failure of the individual to access that “innate mechanism,” an event that is unaccounted for in the phrasing. Either the classical/romantic ideal proves false, or the individual proves herself vacuous. Let us not accept the latter.

Composition studies and writing process theory/pedagogy would be better served by qualitative research that makes a fuller commitment to a social view of invention, a way of teaching writing that acknowledges, firstly and directly, that the practice of composition is always socially mediated. LeFevre concisely and helpfully outlines seven qualities of invention/creation that would need to guide us toward that end. I excerpt them here, edited for space. They are:

1. The inventing “self” is socially influenced, even socially constituted […]. With this perspective, invention may be seen as social even when its agent is a single individual.

2. One invents with language or with other symbol systems, which are socially created and shared by members of discourse communities. The important role that language in particular plays in invention provides another rationale for regarding invention as social even when its agent is an individual.

3. Invention builds on a foundation of knowledge accumulated from previous generations, knowledge that constitutes a social legacy of ideas, forms, and ways of thinking.
4. Invention may be enabled by an internal dialogue with an imagined other or a construct of audience that supplies premises or structures of belief guiding the inventor.

5. Writers often invent by involving other people: as editors and evaluators whose comments aid further invention; as “resonators” who nourish and sustain the inventor as well as the invention; as collaborators who interact to create new ideas; and as opponents or devil’s advocates who provide challenges and alternate perspectives to work against. To create certain kinds of discourses such as tracts or treaties, two or more rhetors (often in adversarial positions) must collaborate in order to invent.

6. Invention is powerfully influenced by social collectives, such as institutions, bureaucracies, governments, and “invisible colleges” of academic disciplinary communities. These collectives…serve to transmit expectations and prohibitions, encouraging or discouraging certain ideas, areas of investigation, methods of inquiry, types of evidence, and rhetorical forms.

7. The reception, evaluation, and use of what is invented depend to a great extent on social context. (33-35)

Of these characteristics, the final three strike me as especially important, as they pointedly remind us of the embedded nature of creation, that even the expert writer is one who works in a vast social context borrowing, revising, retooling, responding to and further developing others’ ideas. The goal of such work, in an ideal scenario, is to gather these materials, to learn how they have been used in the past, and to fiddle with them until they become something new. This is what the remainder of the rhetorical canon is for: arrangement, style,
memory, and delivery. What these final three characteristics enable, however, is an ideological decentering of the creator. Instead of an image of the writer generating material anew, you have an image of the work and all its associations and relationships existing already, and a writer having to work diligently, patiently to make something new.

It’s true that in the decades since LeFevre’s *Invention as a Social Act* was published, we’ve seen a major migration in the field toward the social-epistemic paradigm for writing on a theoretical and pedagogical level, a move that crystallizes most prominently in the rise of post-process pedagogy. Indeed, it was John Trimbur who, in a book review appearing in *CCC* in 1994, drew a distinction between process pedagogy, oriented around cognition, and post-process pedagogy, oriented around the social. Though scholars disagreed on whether this discursive move was a fair one—some argued that post-process was a separate paradigm and others argued that it was an extension of process pedagogy—most seem to agree that its contributions to writing pedagogy broadly include the ideas that writing is interactive (#5 above), public (#6), and situated (#7) (Matsuda). Despite having embraced this expanded view of writing (and the writing process) more than two decades ago, we have not yet achieved a total commitment as a discipline, for, as mentioned above, our research continues to privilege the solitary author. Furthermore, the “social” or post-process view continues to hold at its heart a general commitment to *process*, a term that implies, even in all of its nuanced complexity, a beginning and an end, a closed system of productivity in which invention is expected to draw on that “innate mechanism.” In agreement with LeFevre, I am interested in a dialectical model:

What I am suggesting is that they [“individual” and “social”] be regarded as dialectically connected, always codefining and interdependent. A change in the individual influences social dimensions, which in turn influence the individual.
Since every act may cause a reaction that in turn prompts another adjustment or action, it is impossible to say which is first, or which predominates.

[…] As writers who adopt this perspective, we will regard invention as an act that involves both the creation and the continuing use of a text, extending through readers’ responses, revision, publication, criticism, and defense. *We will value invention not just as a method of retrieving what we already know, but as a process that constitutes our inquiry.* (37, 122-123 emphasis added)

More recently, Collin Brooke has offered an image of invention that enables this discursive revision. Pulling the term “proairesis” from Barthes, Brooke draws a distinction between *hermeneutic* and *proairetic* invention. “Hermeneutic” invention “relies on the relative sturdiness of a final object and the negotiation of meanings within it” (68). When the vast majority of college composition takes the final form of a written document, notions of invention tend to be constrained by that particular media. Brooke, an advocate for digital and multimodal composition, suggests that breaking out of such constraints allows a re-theorization of invention unbound by textual limitations. This is what Brooke calls “proairetic” invention, or a shift from understanding invention as merely the generation of new material to an understanding of invention as that which “resists closure” (77), thereby enabling writers/composers and audiences/re-composers to remain open to a text’s plurality (76). This is truly exemplary of the social turn, away from notions of individuality and closure, toward a collective effort at expansion. Such a term might also apply to the *inventional* stance toward research that feminist methodology enables, as described by Micciche in the last chapter.

In resisting closure, a social and proairetic view of invention transforms the entire enterprise of composition, as well as the writing process. No longer is the writer interested in
moving through a (recursive, nuanced) series of actions or *processes* in search of an end point, but is instead swayed toward a *practice* that entails “tradition and imitation and interference and resistance” (Bartholomae “Against the Grain” 21). Conceiving of the entire writing scene as *practice* rather than *process* is crucial to the project of adopting the social and proairetic perspective. Where the term “process” invokes connections to systemic or mechanical circuits of activity with clear start and end points and a clear sequence of steps, the term “practice” better captures the recursion, improvisation, difficulty, and potential for change that our scholarship readily acknowledges is inherent to the work of composing. The objective of engaging in a process is to see it through to an end point; but when we set out to practice an activity—playing the piano, swinging a golf club—the central focus of that work is to pay attention to what is happening: what seems to be working; what is giving us difficulty; what adjustments seem to indicate progress. And in this work, we are rarely powered by our own individual genius, but instead rely on input and influence from teachers, peers, professionals, instruction manuals and, yes, our own sense of things. And while the general goal is to get better—become an expert, even—most of us know that we’ll never have the luxury of ceasing practice altogether. Practice keeps us sharp, keeps us alert, and teaches us to give up notions of finality or closure even when we may wish for that moment badly.

Learning to write is no different. It requires great attention, an openness to experiencing difficulty, a willingness to completely reinvent our perception of best practice, and the humility to do all of this in the presence of others. Not by coincidence, these are the conditions that give rise to failure, and perhaps ironically, they encompass the eight “habits of mind” identified as forming the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” (2011): curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Identifying this
connection may be a way of saying, plainly, that while the gulf between conventional notions of success and failure may seem vast, the line between them is actually quite thin. It is a matter of perspective, or orientation.

**Toward A Pedagogy of Failure**

*Isn't there, perhaps, a very literal advantage, now and then, to failure?—a way of turning even the most melancholy of experiences inside-out, until they resemble experiences of value, of growth, of profound significance?—Joyce Carol Oates, “Notes on Failure.”*

Despite our relative lack of interest in the experience of failure in our classrooms, there is a great deal of research and reporting suggesting that the success-driven classroom models prevalent in American education do more harm than good, as they promote a narrow view of possibility for student learning. In *Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes* (1993) Alfie Kohn reviews an astounding number of studies illustrating unequivocally that incentive-based learning decreases students’ creativity, interest, motivation, and willingness to take risks in their learning. Though the reasons for this behavior are numerous, one of the most prominent explanations evident in the literature argues that when students are presented with an incentive, “do this; get that,” they focus only on the bare minimum of effort it takes to achieve the reward; subsequently, they are far less likely to exert much effort in future tasks that do not promise some sort of reward. Summarizing much of this research with a clever metaphor from Professor Teresa Amabile, Kohn reminds us of the rat trying to find cheese in a maze. “The rat does not stop to weigh the advantages of trying another route, starting off on a path where the cheddar smell is less pronounced in hope of finding a clever shortcut. No, it just runs toward where it thinks its breakfast waits, as fast as its tiny legs can take it.
“The safest, surest, and fastest way out of the maze [is] the well-worn pathway, the uncreative route,” says Amabile. “The more single-mindedly an external goal is pursued, the less likely…that creative possibilities will be explored.” The narrow focus induced by rewards is similarly worrisome, she adds, since being open to “the seemingly irrelevant aspects [of a task] might be precisely what is required for creativity. Incidental learning may turn out to be integral. (Kohn 63-64)

But what about simple praise, in lieu of material rewards? Kohn reveals that this, too, has detrimental effects on learning. Describing a study by Mary Budd showing that elementary school children frequently receiving praise from their teachers showed lower levels of persistence than their peers, Kohn argues that “praise sets up unrealistic expectations of continued success, which leads people to avoid difficult tasks in order not to risk the possibility of failure. If we steer clear of situations in which we might fail, we eliminate any chance of being criticized by the very person who just praised us” (Kohn 99). Kohn attributes these behavioral trends to the structure of learning environments, which implicitly and explicitly encourage children to measure themselves against their peers, constantly engaging in competitive behavior, the outcomes of which, as I described in Chapter Two, directly influence their personal sense of self and potential. The solution, according to Kohn, is a school environment that discourages competition and incentive-based learning in favor of exploratory and collaborative work. Using grades as an example, Kohn suggests several possibilities for change, including limiting the number of assignments that earn letter grades, limiting the gradations of the grading scale (from ABCDF to check/check-plus/check-minus), offering only “A” and “Incomplete” (or pass/fail) on projects that demand evaluation, refusing to assign grades on in-progress work, never grading for
effort, never grading on a curve, and involving students in the evaluation process (208-209). Ultimately, these and other pedagogical shifts serve to eliminate or drastically reduce occasions wherein students will be tempted by extrinsic motivation and instead design learning environments that encourage students to develop intrinsic motivation.

More recently, NPR’s Alix Speigel reported on the differences between how intellectual struggle is perceived in American classrooms and Asian ones. “Struggle for Smarts? How Eastern and Western Cultures Tackle Learning,” which ran on *Morning Edition* in 2012, features Speigel’s interview with psychology professor Jim Stigler, who describes a research trip he took to Japan as a graduate student in 1979.

“The teacher was trying to teach the class how to draw three-dimensional cubes on paper,” Stigler explains, “and one kid was just totally having trouble with it. His cube looked all cockeyed, so the teacher said to him, ‘Why don’t you go put yours on the board?’” (Spiegel)

Immediately noting the contrast from American classrooms, where it is usually the smartest students who are invited to the board, Stigler was intrigued. He says the young boy stayed at the board for nearly an hour, and every so often the teacher would ask the students, who were working on their own, if he’d gotten it right yet. They’d shake their heads and go back to their own work. As time wore on, Stigler himself began to feel anxious for the young boy. But, says Spiegel,

the kid didn't break into tears. Stigler says the child continued to draw his cube with equanimity. “And at the end of the class, he did make his cube look right! And the teacher said to the class, ‘How does that look, class?’ And they all looked
up and said, ‘He did it!’ And they broke into applause.” The kid smiled a huge smile and sat down, clearly proud of himself. (Spiegel)

The experience caused Stigler to continue research on the perception of struggle in American and Asian cultures, discovering that while struggle in American culture—especially emotional struggle—is considered a sign of weakness, in Asian cultures the opposite is true. “It's just assumed that struggle is a predictable part of the learning process,” he says. “Everyone is expected to struggle in the process of learning, and so struggling becomes a chance to show that you, the student, have what it takes emotionally to resolve the problem by persisting through that struggle.” The importance of developing emotional strength is evident in pedagogical practice, where teachers regularly give students tasks that are beyond what the students should be capable of doing. The students work and struggle and practice. When they eventually master the task, teachers respond not with praise or rewards, but with a verbal assessment of their accomplishment. For example, when a Taiwanese mother met her nine-year-old son after he won first place in a piano competition, she said to him “You practiced and practiced with lots of energy…It got really hard, but you made a great effort. You insisted on practicing yourself” (Spiegel).

And the conversation is not limited to students, but applies to teachers as well. In her heavily circulated interview with Sara Scribner of Salon published in 2013, Diane Ravitch says of merit pay:

…When I go out speaking to teacher audiences and I go through the failure of merit pay, I get huge applause because teachers don’t want merit pay. The reason they don’t want it is not because they don’t want more money – sure they’d love more money. They don’t want to be placed into competition with their colleagues.
They understand that when you work in a school you’re working in a collaborative environment and you’re not there to just hide what you’re doing that works and not let anybody see it. Rather, you’re all working for the same goal—you’re trying to help these children do better in school by a whole lot of different measures. The only way that’s going to work is if people work together.

(Scribner)

And so in this example you have teachers fully embracing and illustrating Kohn’s argument—that extrinsic rewards do little to promote achievement—but they are trapped in a system that forces them to operate under those conditions, and forces those conditions onto its students. The result is not lower test scores (Ravitch notes that test scores and graduation rates are higher than ever), but a generation of students entering higher education and the workforce poorly equipped to thrive in environments that require great degrees of flexibility, improvisation, openness, and emotional strength.

In sketching a pedagogical framework for failure in the writing classroom, my central claim is this: by shifting the focus in the classroom away from the hypercompetitive and atomistic racket of quality-based grades and achievements, and instead toward the labor-oriented, communally embedded, and affectively motivated practice of failure, we create conditions under which students (and teachers) are more likely to compose creative and inventive work that is rhetorically, personally, and socially meaningful. These are conditions that invite students to take greater risks in their work, potentially setting them up for failure that is safe, because it is expected and welcomed, and productive, because it occurs in the company of others who are prepared to help each other make use of the unique if uncomfortable perspective failure offers.
In asserting this claim, it becomes necessary for me to review terms drawn from Asao Inoue’s recent essay reporting on several years’ research into failure in US writing assessment. Inoue’s work is primarily focused on external markers of progress—namely grades—but includes assessment of students’ happiness and satisfaction with how they are evaluated in their writing courses. In the essay, Inoue describes three different types of failure: *quality-failure*, *labor-failure*, and *productive failure*.

*Quality failure* refers to assessment that measures how well a student’s work measures against classical, prototypical, and exemplar expectations. The classical model refers to assessment based upon predetermined abstract textual features; the prototypical model refers to assessment based upon an “ideal text:” and the exemplar model refers to assessment based upon an assemblage of previous, actual texts that demonstrate excellence. In other words, quality failure—derived several ways—measures the quality of a student’s work, and therefore serves to either limit students’ willingness to take risks or causes them to deviate from what they feel is expected, choosing instead to stick with what they know or to engage in “performance-avoidance,” a behavior focused on avoiding failure but not necessarily striving for success. As Inoue asserts in his critique of this model, “grades signify so many things about students and their capabilities that they quickly become the most important thing in school, the thing students end up caring most about. In one sense, the reification of failure through grades transforms intrinsically motivated learning into extrinsic motivators, grades, and scores” (Inoue 335).

*Labor failure* refers to assessment that measures whether a student has fulfilled terms of labor, such as “write for ten minutes” or “bring in a two page reflection” and is most often accompanied by a grading contract, outlining clear terms for student success. Similar to a pass/fail evaluation, this assessment model de-emphasizes how students measure against other
factors and instead offers commentary on whether they fulfilled minimum expectations. Inoue reports that students subject to this model of assessment were less likely to view an evaluative mark as a personal judgment or an indicator of their fitness, and were likewise not surprised or left wondering about the rationale behind a mark. Removing their personal sense of vulnerability from the balance, Inoue suggests, helps students tap into their intrinsic motivation for learning and typically results in better reports of satisfaction overall. In Inoue’s research from the writing program at Fresno State (CA), students experienced greater rates of failure in courses adopting a quality failure model vs. courses adopting a labor failure model. (It is important to note that both quality failure and labor failure can be described as systems that judge whether or not a student has met extrinsic expectations.)

Lastly, Inoue describes productive failure as that which signals the opportunity to learn, grow, and develop in purposeful ways. Thus productive failure can happen when students and teacher negotiate learning at the point where an absence of success, quality, or sufficient labor seems visible. […] Perhaps most important, productive failure falls outside the conventional grading system. It does not produce grades or evaluations by teachers; instead, it produces judgments, investigations, negotiations, and discussion among students and with the teacher about expectations, new drafts, and future practices. (345)

In a productive failure model, students and teachers are always negotiating what should be expected and what is possible. This is a model that emphasizes the social quality of creative and inventive work, to be sure, but places equal emphasis on flexibility, personal engagement, and openness toward alternative practices or unexpected challenges; perhaps most important, in establishing struggle as part of the enterprise, it acknowledges the difficulty of failure without
encouraging avoidance or discouraging the taking of risks. The “framework for failure” that I propose below is designed to push students and teachers toward productive failure.

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To begin, in order to cultivate a culture of failure teachers must learn to cast failure as a practice, an activity we integrate into our daily experience in the same way that we might practice shooting free throws in the driveway. Given the parameters I’ve established already—that failure is social, public, affective, and unpredictable—practicing failure in the context of writing means that our classrooms must privilege communal activity over solitary activity, and public writing over private writing. Making these moves, we raise the stakes for students who would prefer or have been groomed for a more conservative approach, thereby setting them up for failure (cruel though it sounds), creating the conditions that enable the study of the emotional unpredictability of the experience and thereby encouraging the metacognitive work that will gradually help students learn to fail better. At minimum, such a pedagogy must be grounded in a modest number of guiding principles.

• First and foremost, teachers and students should adhere to an ethic of care, engaging in ongoing dialogue regarding comfort/discomfort, self-efficacy, and “open” or proairetic goals.
• In addition, a pedagogy of failure must regularly ask students and teachers alike to take risks, to be uncomfortable. For teachers, settling into discomfort may happen at the moment of commitment to running a course on this alternative model, as it more than likely asks teachers to sign on to a way of teaching that highlights insecurities and requires some surrender of control and power. Students, too, may be resistant to a course that would seem to abandon many expectations of higher ed—a set number of “major” papers emphasizing
particular thinking skills, a known grading scale, an understanding of the minimum requirements for a passing grade, etc.

• For that reason, it is recommended that students not feel forced into a learning model that would disempower them; though the goal is to create a learning environment that regularly exploits moments of discomfort and failure, students ought to have the choice of participating or dropping the course for something more conventional.

• And because it seems unlikely that any credit-bearing course could abandon assessment altogether, teachers practicing a pedagogy of failure would need to create a course that emphasizes productive quality of failure (Burger 2012; not to be confused with Inoue’s quality failure) as the primary concern of assessment. The course grade would need to be figured holistically according to teacher and student dialogue and negotiation of expectations.

With these principles in mind, below I have sketched a handful of assignments designed to promote a pedagogy of failure in practice. I have imagined these as discrete assignments or exercises in order to promote maximum transferability to all types of writing programs; but, I do want to note that while they would certainly fit easily into a “standard” course format—a student-centered, discussion-based class that emphasizes revision—they might be even more effective in a studio model, prominent in art and design curriculum, where class meetings are minimally dedicated to lecture on important concepts (usually at the beginning of some project) and more pointedly focused on students working on self-designed projects: testing ideas on their peers, thinking aloud, asking for help working through a problem, etc. In this model, time is divided roughly into four different types of learning: approximately 25% dedicated to teacher-directed instruction, 25% dedicated to unstructured work (students working communally on
individual projects), and 50% dedicated to critique of ongoing projects (further divided into
group critiques half the time and one-on-one critiques for the other half).

Lastly, with the possible exception of the first two suggestions, you’ll notice that none of
these exercises include clear and final objectives or achievements in the description. My
intention is not to discard programmatic learning outcomes such as helping students gain
awareness of rhetorical strategies, research skills, documentation procedures, style, and other
concerns, but rather to offer ideas meant to be adapted to fit the varied curricula of higher
education. Some assignments may work perfectly well as abstract creative exercises in some
programs but may need more structure and clearer objectives in other programs.

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’ 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 how their strategies for learning, but also their feelings and thoughts about difficulty and 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 practices (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 ways of knowing and doing work undergo change. The emphasis here is on flexibility, improvisation, discomfort, restlessness, and on causing notice. Decentering the notion of “success” in the classroom in favor of a focus on struggle and failure will create space for students and teachers to engage in the teaching/learning enterprise in a way that better promotes creativity, emotional flexibility, and struggle. In other words, a classroom grounded not in logos, but in pathos.

As I noted above, these assignments are untested, and are collectively meant to be a generative starting point for others who are interested in encouraging productive failure in the classroom. Ultimately, it is my hope that increased practice of this teaching model might lead to the development of a disciplinary epistemology of failure.
Conclusion: Toward an Epistemology of Failure, or
The End is the Beginning

Wonder, v. To be struck with surprise or astonishment; to marvel; to feel some doubt or curiosity; to be desirous to know or learn. (OED)

Wander, v. To move hither and thither without fixed course or certain aim; to be (in motion) without control or direction; to go or take one’s way casually or without predetermined route; to go to a place by a devious and leisurely course; of persons, (or things completely, or in part, personified): to deviate from a given path, or determined course; to turn aside from a mark or object proposed; to stray from one’s home or company, or from protection or control. (OED)

In ancient Indo-European, the ancestral language of nearly half of today’s global population, the word er meant “to move,” “to set in motion,” or simply “to go” (Spanish speakers will recognize it as ir). That root gave rise to the Latin verb errare, meaning to wander or, more rakishly, to roam. The Latin, in turn, gave us the English word “erratic,” used to describe movement that is unpredictable or aimless. And, of course, it gave us “error.” From the beginning, then, the idea of error has contained a sense of motion: of wandering, seeking, going astray. Implicitly, what we are seeking—and what we have strayed from—is the truth.
-Kathryn Shultz, Being Wrong (41).

If a pedagogy of failure describes a way of teaching failure, than an epistemology of failure describes a way of knowing failure, or coming to know with failure. The pedagogical model described above is grounded in the idea that, divorced from success, failure begets invention. In that model, failure was framed as something external that we might consciously do, or practice. Extending from my exploration of failure as a worthwhile practice to consideration of it as a worthwhile affectation to adopt, I mean to frame failure as an affective skin to take on or come into or grow, a way of being that is not so easily discarded or terminated as a practice may be. It refers to a permanent commitment to impermanence, unpredictability, re-orientation. Here, failure begets wonder.

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A few years ago I sliced off the tip of my thumb with a chef knife while mincing chives. I’m comfortable with a knife—I’ve spent the better part of my life working in kitchens—first my
parents’ own professional outfit and later a string of cafes—and my own kitchen has been a sort of safe haven for me during my advanced schooling. And so it wasn’t lack of attention or improper technique or unexpected distraction that caused the accident, only the briefest of delays between the synapses guiding my right hand and the synapses guiding my left. I felt it in my throat before my eyes registered what had happened. I gasped, cursed, felt immediately sick from the adrenal surge, and immediately thrust my thumb beneath running water and then wrapped it in a towel. My stepfather, working across from me at the time, sat me down to take a look. We agreed it probably needed a stitch or two, but I didn’t want to deal with all of that so instead we wrapped it in sterile bandages and I returned to the task of making crab cakes.

The wound healed slowly. First the small bit of remaining flesh gave up and fell away; then, over a period of several months, the skin regrew. Over that time, my thumb took on the sensitivity that fresh and exposed flesh offers, not only to temperature but to texture and pressure too. And though it was only a small wound, less than a half-inch long, its sensitivity, sustained over so many months, caused what I can only describe as an unsolicited hyperawareness of the tactile conditions of my surrounding environment. I felt everything differently.

Imagine the number of things we experience with our hands on a daily basis. Our hands are designed to be sensitive, but not overly so. Beyond use value as appendages that allow us to grip, slap, scratch, and balance, the hands—and in particular our fingertips—communicate with the brain on the subject of heat, sharpness, stickiness, and so on, helping us develop knowledge about safety and danger. Over time, we wear callouses and grooves into the hands, signs of their durability and continued use. When I sliced my thumb, twenty-six years of patterned use sloughed off in a bandage. Four years after the fact, the thumb still bears evidence of its trauma, a smaller, firmer disc of skin with clear edges differentiate it from the remaining body.
“Wonder,” writes Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “works to transform the ordinary, which is already recognised, into the extraordinary. As such, wonder expands our field of vision and touch. […]s an affective relation to the world, [wonder] is about seeing the world that one faces and is faced with ‘as if’ for the first time” (*Politics* 179).

Paired with shame, failure invites—practically forces, temporarily—a re-orientation of/in the body. It causes de-familiarization with one’s body, or maybe re-familiarization. Re-calibration. Inhabiting one’s body as if for the first time. Pushed to the margins, we are afforded the opportunity to critique ideologies of habit, of familiarity, of comfort, ease, momentum, forward motion. From this vantage point, this negative space, extricated from the fast-moving stream of progress, from the trajectory of success, we are afforded an outsider’s view of whatever has ejected us from its grasp.

Failure, I want to suggest, is an affective, embodied process that pushes us into wonder. It stands not contrary to but apart from the narrative of success and progress that rears us. What does proximity have to do with it? In “Happy Objects,” Ahmed writes:

Happiness might play a crucial role in shaping our near sphere, the world that takes shape around us, as a world of familiar things. Objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon. We come to have our likes, which might even establish *what we are like*. To have our likes means certain things are gathered around us. (“Happy” 32)

The objects Ahmed describes—happy objects—are generally markers of social good. What makes them “happy objects” is not so much that they make one personally and privately happy, but that they accumulate social and moral *value* as more and more people incorporate
such objects into their bodily horizons. Such objects may be material, such as particular cars or handbags; or they may be ethereal: receiving a promotion at your white collar job, marrying the “right” person, producing healthy (read: genetically normative), well-mannered children. Ahmed refers to this accumulation of positive affect (and the concomitant incorporation) as a kind of “sticking,” “what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (“Happy” 29). And this stickiness enables oneself to be a marker of positive affect by virtue of proximity. When one orients one’s body toward these happy objects, incorporating them into their bodily horizon or near sphere, one becomes associated with that positive affect. As participants in a common social and moral economy, we are taught to turn toward markers of the social good; *we come to have our likes, which might even establish what we are like.*

Ahmed continues:

> Those things we do not like we move away from. Away-ness might help establish the edges of our horizon; in rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go, the things we do not wish to have, touch, taste, hear, feel, see, those things we do not want to keep within reach. (“Happy” 32)

I want to make clear that it is not “happiness” or unhappiness that concerns me here, but proximity. Proximity is the primary way we demarcate what we are like, who we are like. What we are near, what we turn towards says something about what we are in our own self-image and in our worldly context. And this works in both directions. “When we feel pleasure from [objects that circulate as social goods], we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good” (“Happy” 37, emphasis added).
Thus, via accumulation, our bodies become embodiments of social goods or social ills. No longer pulsing systems of bone and sinew and exquisite neurological sophistication, our bodies become instead icons or avatars for cultural materiality. This economy of positive affect is maintained by its participants. When people question the objects that shape another’s bodily horizon, “they make their judgment against another by refusing to like what another likes, by suggesting that the object in which another invests his or her happiness is unworthy. This affective differentiation is the basis of an essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value” (“Happy” 35).

In the first chapter I described the ways that literacy acquisition has come to be perceived as a moral quest. And in the second chapter I showed how schools enforce that notion through the use of shame. We are taught that literacy is desirable and that it offers social and moral rewards; shame serves to temporarily disabuse us of those rewards, making them even more desirable and in turn worsening shame’s sting. This—literacy—is a happy object. It signals rightness, morality, fortitude, success. In arguing for an epistemology of failure, I’m arguing for a kind of illiteracy, or ill-literacy, a way of knowing that stands apart from conventional ways of moving up in the world. The acquisition of literacy denotes an acquiring, a process of coming to possess that which grants one access to higher and happier realms of happy. Because that’s the odd thing about happiness as Ahmed describes it. “If happiness is what we wish for, it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness. Happiness might even conjure its own wish. Or happiness might keep its place as a wish by its failure to be given” (Happiness 1). In emphasizing illiteracy, I mean to place a premium on ways of knowing and doing that would expel us from the path of morality and righteousness. Illiteracy casts us into the wilderness.

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The physiological process that overcomes my body in the event of failure is not unlike the physiological response one experiences upon encountering a bear in the woods. A typical fear response—heart palpitations, adrenal surge, increased skin conductance, heightened vision and hearing—represents adaptive behavior. Our endocrine system works together with the heart to increase blood flow to the limbs, preparing the body to fight or flee. Self and species preservation.

The physiology of fear makes us aware of our bodies in a way that we aren’t during the course of ordinary habits. It pulls us out of autopilot and forces us to see and interact with the world around us with sharper vision, poised for hair-trigger action. Fear dis-orient in order to re-orient.

Shame produces a similar effect. When we feel ashamed, we exhibit characteristic bodily behavior: slouched posture, lowered head, limbs positioned in a protective manner. Our arms are crossed, perhaps; knees drawn close to the torso; hands balled into fists; feet contorted and tensed, as if preparing not to fight but to be fought, to be abused. We see and feel ourselves differently in this position (Probyn).

Physiologically, emotionally, shame and fear are connected. Shame induces fear (of ridicule; of abuse), and fear induces shame (of weakness; of incompetence).

The onset of shame, Elspeth Probyn suggests, realigns mind and body; shame “reconfigures how we think about it and about the body. In this sense, shame enlarges the man by opening up possibilities of how we conceive of the relationship between ideas and affects, or between thinking and feeling” (81).
And wonder, Ahmed insists, “is bodily. The body opens as the world opens up before it; the body unfolds into the unfolding of a world that becomes approached as another body” (Politics 181).

I move away from bodies for a moment and turn to optics in order to bring these several concepts into some kind of cohesion. Consider the prism: a three-dimensional, geometric figure that breaks light into its spectral colors. Ordinary white light enters the prism, where it bends and emerges on the other side as red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, allowing us to see light from a new angle, so to speak. The prism gives pause to what we take for granted, what we accept without thought, and asks us to pay attention. What can we do with red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet that we cannot do with white? How do our worlds expand and unfold when viewed in spectrum? How are our bodily horizons frustrated or re-inscribed (inscribed anew) when viewed through the prism of failure? In the figure below, I offer a model.

![Prism Diagram]

Shame and fear here represent those “unhappy” objects we’re taught to move away from. They come together in a full-bodied, poly-dimensional experience of failure. But here, failure is not an end point, not a full stop. It becomes a lens that makes it possible for us to see the ordinary as extraordinary, to wonder. Could we imagine our bodily horizons defined not by what we like but by how we see?

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[I am a writer. I have bad habits. I use serial commas and hyperbole. I split infinitives and leave too much unsaid. I lean on personal narrative to ground my arguments, and when I notice it, I overcompensate by diving headlong into theory I only half understand. I am too in love with my language to see the void left in its wake. I feel insecure about every word I write, knowing that every word I write is subject to scrutiny. Every word I write comes from my head, my ears, my mouth, and my fingers. I am every word I write. I worry that my words are too vague and too showy, too eager and too amateur. When I hit a wall I read my words aloud, hoping to be drawn into a rhythm that propels me forward when I should be focusing on the meaning behind the words, on what they are saying instead of what they sound like. But I am focusing on what they are saying. I listen for the viscera, for the thought that moves through my fingers, forearms, biceps, and shoulders, moving them to movement. It’s something like kinetic synesthesia: I am listening for the ideas that stretch my muscles, pulling me out of stasis and into activity.

[I was a late bloomer. I didn’t listen well in class. I cut corners. I waited until the last minute. I skimmed the stuff I didn’t like, which was always the stuff that felt too hard. I was afraid of not being smart enough to understand the hard stuff. I resented the classmates who seemed smarter than me, and out of jealous awe I complained about them behind their backs. I wanted to upstage them. I want to be the best. I covet praise. I feel sick when confronted with my inadequacy. I feel sick when I disappoint others. I am a disappointment. I want to test the limits. I want to feel sick, uncomfortable, unsafe, unmoored. I want to feel the dark wash of blood and adrenaline pulse through my arms and legs. I want to feel a knot in my throat. I want to work through it. I want to feel what I’m doing.]

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Failing, wondering bodies are, in a moral economy, toxic bodies to be controlled and expelled with a round of aggressive antibiotics. But toxic bodies are also, Stacy Alaimo suggests, “volatile, emergent, and continually evolving [and…they encourage us to imagine…an epistemological space that allows for both the unpredictable becomings of other creatures and the limits of human knowledge” (262). Toxic bodies are bodies that do not fit into the normative narrative of progress. Toxic bodies are bodies that mutate, bodies that adapt, bodies that bend and flex and reorient to see and feel and touch and taste and experience the world anew.

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In the end, as in the beginning, I am interested in how composition studies can remake itself as an epistemological and pedagogical model for deliberate and “productive” failure. I use the term “productive” in scare quotes because I do not intend the term to be figured in the conventional sense—as producing a product, an end point. Rather, paired with failure, I wish to think of the phrase “productive failure” as denoting a sort of continuous making, a world making, or a world wrecking, as the case may be. Might we imagine Composition as the antidiscipline, then? If we can abandon process in favor of practice, might we be uniquely poised to lead the charge away from the modern university’s emphasis on marketability and deliverables toward something more chaotic, less defined, more improvisational, more sensory? Might we remake ourselves into the antidiscipline in search of “new rationales for knowledge production, different aesthetic standards for ordering or disordering space […] more questions and fewer answers” (Halberstam 10)? My belief is that failure helps incubate what Kathleen Stewart calls “bloom space,”

an allure and a threat that shows up in ordinary sensibilities of not knowing what compels, not being able to sit still, being exhausted, being left behind or being
ahead of the curve, being in history, being in a predicament, being ready for something—anything—to happen, or orienting yourself to the sole goal of making sure that nothing (more) will happen… It demands collective attunement and a more adequate description of how things make sense, fall apart, become something else, and leave their marks, scoring refrains on bodies of all kinds—atmospheres, landscapes, expectations, institutions, states of acclimation or endurance or pleasure or being stuck or moving on. (340)

World-wrecking and world-remaking. Less like following a path or procedure, less like strategizing or making plans, less like goal-setting and outcome-generating; more like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole.
Notes

1. In fact, one could argue that most traditional Christian hymns are premised on admission of failure and the seeking of redemption. See especially Charles Wesley’s corpus of work. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to suggest that faith traditions the world over are rooted in the experience of humankind being made to recognize their own inadequacies and striving always, imperfectly, and with many failures, to live up to a spiritual ideal.

2. In this case, the gendered pronoun is intentional, referencing the particular labor profile of 19th century mercantilism.

3. Phrasing borrowed from Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), whose rhetorical work with her primary term I mean to mirror with mine.

4. Also during this time, members of the CCCC Committee on Language Statement published the “Affirmation of Students’ Rights to Their Own Language,” (1974) a document that challenged previously held notions of the existence and supremacy of “standard written English,” and foreshadowed the social-epistemic shift in pedagogy that would take shape in the late 80s.

5. Of the study, Perl would later (1996) remark that “Ultimately it was not the code that was important. Rather, the code enabled me to get inside this body of data. I came to know the data intimately and eventually was able to know what was missing and what the code could not
detect, particularly in the silent moments that eluded all coding and led me then to a deepened questioning of what I was observing” (“Early Work on Composing,” 94).

6. As defined by Perl: “Standardized—it introduces a coding system for observing the composing process that can be replicated; Categorical—it labels specific, observable behaviors so that types of composing movements are revealed; Concise—it presents an entire sequence of composing movements in one or two pages; Structural—it provides a way of determining how parts of the process relate to the whole; and Diachronic—it presents the sequences of movements that occur during composing as they unfold in time” (320).

7. “1) General planning; 2) local planning; 3) global planning; 4) contemplating; 5) interpreting; 6) assessing; 7) questioning; 8) talking leading to writing; 9) talking and writing at the same time; 10) repeating; 11) reading related to topic; 11.a) reading the directions; 11.b) reading the question; 11.c) reading the statement; 12) reading related to one’s own written product; 12.a) reading one’s sentence or a few words; 12.b) reading a number of sentences together; 12.c) reading the entire draft through; 13) writing silently; 14) writing aloud; 15) editing; 15.a) adding syntactic markers, words, phrases, or clauses; 15.b) deleting syntactic markers, words, phrases, or clauses; 15.c) indicating concern for a grammatical rule; 15.d) adding, deleting, or considering use of punctuation; 15.e) considering or changing spelling; 15.f) changing the sentence structure through embedding, coordination, or subordination; 15.g) indicating concern for appropriate vocabulary; 15.h) considering or changing verb form; 16) periods of silence” (320-321).
8. Lunsford & Lunsford replicated the Connors & Lunsford study on a smaller scale (due to IRB constraints) in 2008, and found that though the types of errors students made were slightly different, the frequency of errors per 100 words (2.11 in Johnson’s 1917 study; 2.26 in Connors’ & Lunsford’s 1986 data; and 2.45 in Lunsford & Lunsford’s 2006 data) remained virtually unchanged. Thus, they note, “mistakes are a fact of life.”

9. Interestingly, Rule’s study and Pigg and Leon’s study were completed while all were graduate students, which may say something about their ability to look outside institutional reifications of what counts or doesn’t count as data when it comes to observing the writing process. Like most graduate students, Rule, Pigg, and Leon likely felt befuddled by their own habits of writing outside the structures they’ve been trained to teach, and channeled that befuddlement into formal research.

10. Stage One asked participants to take photographs of their writing environment(s) and to write some reflective commentary on what stands out about those photographs. This stage also asked participants to give visual (hand-drawn) representations of their writing process and their writing workspace(s), and to again reflect on these drawings. Stage Two asked participants to video record themselves writing on three separate occasions. Stage Three consisted of an interview between Rule and individual participants about the submitted materials. Full disclosure: Rule is a colleague of mine, and I was a participant in her study.

11. Two of these were later disqualified, revealing late in the process that they were graduate students. My protocol called only for undergraduates.
12. I should note that my strategy in grouping emotions into categories is artificial; looking at the data again, I may qualify “disappointment” under “distress-anguish” and “morality” under “shame-humiliation.” Let this be a testament to the unstable nature of subjective and abstract data points. The larger assertion, that feelings related to shame dominate reflections on failure, remains true.

13. In writing studies, the terms “affect” and “emotion” tend to bleed into one another. But in psychological fields, the terms hold firm distinction from one another. Donald Nathanson delineates them as follows. “Affect” refers to the biological process that occurs in reaction to a trigger: fear may cause our muscles to tense and our perceptual organs—eyes, ears—to become more sensitive; shame causes our bodies to slump and brings a blush to the cheeks, etc. “Feeling” is the awareness that such processes have occurred, and refers to the instant in which we have been caused, cognitively, to take notice of a change in the body. “Emotion” refers to the manner in which we process and name those changes, and includes our own personal histories in determining that reaction. “If affect is biology,” Nathanson writes, “emotion is biography” (50). Finally, “mood” refers to the duration of an emotion, occurring when the memory retrieval drags up potential unresolved issues causing us to remain in a persistent state of emotion for an extended period of time (49-51).

14. “Dismell” is a Tomkins’ neologism meant to describe the recoiling of the head when one smells something rotten; it parallels disgust.
15. Tomkins names these affects with pair words; for the sake of readability, I’ll often abbreviate them to one word when sentence rhythm demands so.

16. Though I would not begin to claim understanding of the finer details of evolutionary development, Nathanson links shame’s co-dependency with its status as “the most recent affect to develop through the process of evolution, with the possible exception of the tears leaked when we are “overwhelmed by emotion” (136).

17. Not to be confused with the “neutral” affect surprise-startle, an affect that might be more accurately described as “neither positive nor negative.”

18. Of course, as we know, “failure” is subjective, not only applying to Ds or Fs. For some students, anything less than an A signifies failure. But I am speaking here of the longstanding and accepted structures established by systems of education, understood by students even if individuals set higher standards for themselves.

19. Ratcliffe analyzes this term usefully, breaking the compound word into its component parts. “Standing under, that is, consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others, while consciously acknowledging all of our particular—and very fluid—standpoints” (28).

20. Unless otherwise noted, all names are the students’ real names and are used with permission.
21. A pseudonym

22. And in fact what we do enact, much of the time, in the form of peer review and whole class workshop. But in the end, students are conditioned to treat the process as an isolated one.

23. Though, inquiry into the collaborative nature of writing does appear in scholarship on professional writing (see Gere, 1994; Lunsford and Ede, 1986; and Rankin, 2001).

24. LeFevre’s argument, which I’ve no reason to dispute, identifies four major problems with the Platonic view: that it “leads us to favor individualistic approaches to research and to neglect studies of writers in social contexts;” that it “depicts invention as a closed, one-way system;” that it “abstracts the writer from society;” and that it “assumes and promotes the concept of the atomistic self as inventor” (23-26).

25. It is also of great importance to note that Inoue’s work is especially concerned with students who he describes as more likely to experience failure—students of color, multilingual students, and working class students. My work in this project does not address difference, to its detriment, as it is outside the scope of my expertise, though my intention has never been to erase or overlook matters of difference. I would recommend Inoue’s work highly to those wishing to learn more about how the frequency and degree of failure shakes out along such lines.
Works Cited


CCCC. Students Rights to Their Own Language. 1979. Print.


Appendix A

Representative Data Sets, Phase 1

Initial phase one data was divided into twenty-five categories according to likeness in metaphor and/or affect. The categories are named below, followed by the number of unique participants whose responses fell into the category, and a list of representative words and phrases making up the category.

1) Other Names/Specific Examples (6): epic; school; F; blowing it; messing it up; fucking it up; mistake.

2) Fault (6): misunderstood; did not understand professor’s expectations; unfair professor; procrastination.

3) Affect/Anxiety (6): stress; anxiety

4) Affect/Sadness (26): sad; depressed; sadness; down; grief

5) Termination (8): game over; done; stopping; roadblock; nothing more to be done

6) Disappointment (54): disappointed; disappointing; let down; disappointed parents; “I’m disappointed in you.”
7) Affect/Morality (40): not good enough; good for nothing; bad at life; “you’re a horrible person.”

8) Social/Competitive (30): loser; losing; getting beat; defeat

9) Social/Relationships (12): loneliness; words of a verbally abusive parent; failing my parents; rejection; looked down upon; unpopular

10) Affect/Positive (5): laughter; funny; accidents that turn into funnies

11) Affect/Regret (4): regret

12) Loss (39): hopelessness; loss something valuable; zero; there is no hope; lack of completion; worthless; waste of time, money, effort.

13) Gain (19): room for improvement; redo; learning opportunity; change, grow

14) Shame/Embarrassment (35): shame; ashamed; embarrassed.

15) Affect/Anger (18): anger; frustrating; mad at one’s self; self-loathing.

16) Ability/Confidence (42): stupid; debilitating; inadequate; I was lost and slower than the other students; dumb; dope; incompetent.
17) **Location (5):** behind

18) **Limits (3):** restriction

19) **Actionable/Reflection, Rationale (45):** not trying; take a breath and try again; giving up; prioritizing; I wish I could’ve tried harder; no motivation; slacking; what am I going to do?

20) **Affect/General (28):** lazy; fear; jealousy; misery; harsh; desperate; discouraged; awkward.

21) **Physical (16):** broken; weak; knotted stomach; impotent; ouch

22) **Against Success (41):** unaccomplished; unsuccessful; not getting a good grade; not meeting expectations; goals; expectations; not trying your best.

23) **Type (4):** drop out; drug addict

24) **Consequences (15):** having to re-do something; no graduation; no Dean’s list; not having a life in the future; identity crisis.

25) **Anomalies (4):** sorry to inform you; high school; my children.
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

(IRB approved December 2012)

1. What made you want to participate in the online questionnaire?

2. What made you volunteer to talk more with me? Did you come here with any specific ideas in mind that you wanted to discuss?

3. What typically comes to mind when you think about failure?

4. Can you tell me about a particularly memorable experience of failure? How did you feel? What did you do?

5. In your experience, how has failure been talked about in classroom settings? How do your teachers talk about it? How do your classmates talk about it?

6. One thing I’m interested in is the felt-ness of failure. Do you feel failure in a physical way, in your body? How deep does it go? How long does it last? How do you process those feelings?

7. I’m also curious about gradations of failure. Can failure range all the way from “falling down the stairs” (an example from the data) to “a failed marriage” (another example). If we think this term, “failure,” applies to both situations, how do we define the lines that separate one from the other? Certainly the feltness of one far outlasts the other, so… and maybe this is the real question… What does it mean that we reach for this word to describe both? Put differently, what’s to be made of our obsession with #fail/epic fail/failure?