

Chapter 9. On Failure: Notes Toward a Pedagogy of Risk

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I

Writing is built upon failure, dozens or hundreds of flawed openings, paragraphs, images. Full drafts of essays, scholarly papers, books.

For most anyone who has tried to make a career as a writer, this isn't news. Libraries are filled with failure, special collections with rough drafts by famous or local writers. For years, scholars have built careers on such cast-off writing. In one such library, completing research for my dissertation in an intimate study that featured Charles Dickens's writing desk and large paintings of the benefactors, I studied Virginia Woolf's notebooks and drafts, early versions of some of her most brilliant novels and essays.

They were profoundly flawed. Riddled with clichés, flat images, failed attempts at narrative. Woolf had crossed out vigorously, rewritten passages in the margins. Far from being the natural genius I'd assumed she was, writing stream of consciousness in a sustained session of inspiration, she was a hard worker who toiled away at draft after draft, throwing away sentences and chapters, tossing notebooks aside. Even for iconic writers, working full time their whole lives, failure, I discovered, inevitably came first. Failure came first and returned with every new project. It wasn't the peculiar fate of the novice. Failure was imminent in artful writing.

I sat at a polished table, copying Woolf's flawed sentences and revisions into my notebooks. I felt like a medieval scribe. I discovered her interest in inaccuracy, because in it imagination and discovery lay. I witnessed the evolution of her essay on the painter Roger Fry, how she'd wanted to sketch him with the same license for interpretation that Fry had as he painted a sitting subject. From her failures emerged beauty and truth.

Years later, I would tell this story in every writing class I taught.

I was encouraged by Woolf's failings. By then, I'd had a taste of failed drafts of my own, piles of terrible openings of personal essays and stories, only two of which eventually were salvageable enough to see publication. Reams of printed drafts with cross-outs stacked in a plastic storage bin in the corner of my small apartment. I'd saved the drafts in the hope that an image or line could be salvaged in another writing session, but mostly, failure had left me discouraged, feeling like a perpetual beginner. Stuck.

But after I'd seen the extent of Woolf's recurring bad writing, and the resurrected drafts, my faith in my own writing returned. I'd never be Virginia Woolf or Charles Dickens, but my bad drafts suddenly struck me as part of the natural life cycle of any essay or story.

The problem I faced is one many students of writing still face: in college and graduate classrooms that required faculty to assign letter grades, there was little room for failure. Some sympathetic professors graded holistically, and a writing student could earn an A for a body of sustained drafts if some of them panned out by the end of the semester. Others applied a kind of law of averages, assigning letter grades to each draft, under which system one failure could lower your overall grade point average. In one stunning instance, during the first week of a graduate writing class, the professor assigned a topic for our writing—something about the necessity of animals, a prompt that at the time left me uninspired, and wrote a letter grade in thick sharpie at the top of the first page—in my case a C+, the lowest grade I ever received in nearly twenty years of being a student. He then directed us to exchange our graded essay with the person sitting next to us, so that we could listen to an “objective” explanation of why the teacher's grade was our just deserts.

If writing began with failure, but I didn't want to fail my courses, it seemed that writing would have to wait for holidays and summers, for after graduation when I could write failed drafts that no grade-wielding professor could see.

And then I signed up for a graduate seminar, *Theories of Style*, taught by Richard Lloyd-Jones at the University of Iowa. His seminar would inform my teaching for years.

II

I'd never taken one of his classes before, and his reputation was huge. He'd been chair of the College Council of Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), associations central to the field of teaching writing. These were the organizations that held annual conferences where we strove to deliver papers, and studying with the man who'd chaired them was exhilarating. But intimidating. I entered the seminar expecting little room for any failed draft. Every paper, I figured, would need to meet the standards of CCCC and NCTE.

But that wasn't Jix's style. On the first day, he told us to call him Jix, a nickname that matched his informal classroom style and embrace of writing as a way of grappling with ideas. Writing that semester was a means of exploration and discovery. We emphasized thinking on paper, not finished products cast in stone. This approach struck me as all the more remarkable in that the course was not, officially, a writing course, but a theory course. And yet Jix's approach was writing-centered. We would not so much theorize about theory as enact it in our writing. It was one of the only courses in my doctoral program that related directly to my chief area of interest: writing.

Some educators assume that such a combination of informality, openness, and exploration is “education lite.” Not under Jix’s watch. We began with a formidable reading list. We read highly theoretical works: Walter Ong, Wayne Booth, Plato, William H. Gass, E.H. Gombrich, and others, along with an anthology, *The Concept of Style*, edited by Berel Lang that included some theoretical essays about the nature of style and the “styleme,” as well as essays on style in the visual arts, “narrative codes” political and theoretical writing, and poetry. We read writer-centered books, among them, Denise Levertov’s *The Poet in the World*, E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, and Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*. We studied classical rhetoric. We read theory by the then-trendy and new Stanley Fish. We read the quirky book *The Five Clocks: A Linguistic Excursion into the Five Styles of English Usage* by Martin Joos, already out of print near the end of the 20th century. Instead of writing term papers, we interrogated our reading in detailed reading notebooks.

Because Jix considered writing central to making discoveries, even in an academic course, he rewarded risk. Failure was welcome, as long as we explored, in writing, what had gone wrong and what we could learn from where the writing had taken us. In writing assignments in which we enacted what we were reading about—such as irony and epistolary form—whether or not we were excellent ironists or epistolary writers was beside the point. We followed each sketch with an analysis of how writing interacted with our reading and whether or not we found anything salvageable in the sketch.

Over two decades have passed since I took *Theories of Style* with Jix. The memories that stuck with me involve exploring style from the macro level (an artist’s choice of subject as an aspect of style) to the micro (punctuation, sentence length, types of sentences). Most of all, I remembered—or thought I remembered—that we employed imitation: a study of style by not only analyzing it, but entering it. Or letting it enter our own writing. Such exercises were in part about understanding a writer’s style by getting the feel of it, and in part about understanding our own style by forcing ourselves out of writing in it.

Such studies reminded me of how much more I learned about English grammar by studying French (where our learning was steeped in practice, in writing and speaking) than in elementary- or high-school grammar courses, where we had to memorize rules.

Years later, setting out to write about Jix and the pedagogy of risk I use in my own teaching, I reviewed the notebooks and writing I preserved from that class. Memory, as every writer of nonfiction knows, is never as detailed as a transcript or film. And one of the first things I discovered in those old notebooks from the class was a conversation between me and Jix about memory, in particular, what aspects of the assigned reading stuck with me days or weeks after taking copious notes in the journal he assigned. I hadn’t even remembered all of the books, essays, and articles that we’d read.

More significant, I’d forgotten that, on the first day, he asked us to prepare a hypothesis for our own reading, a program for our own interest in theories of style.

Each of us in the seminar might choose to be theoretical. Or pragmatic. Or metaphorical. Perhaps we'd want to conduct a case study. Our writing would not be the polished papers I expected, but rather ways of "testing out" the theoretical readings. He wanted us to let the reading tempt us to see language differently. He wanted us to be brave enough to write in ways we wouldn't ordinarily write. Jix had, in essence, allowed each student to customize his or her approach to the semester.

My previously unexamined memory of the class led me to the mistaken belief that every graduate student in it wrote a sequence of failed drafts followed by critical analyses of their failure, style-centered self-critiques. Reading through my notebooks from the semester, I discover that, with Jix's permission, my own hypothesis, writing-centered, failure-centered, led me down that path.

He created the ultimate seminar, one in which each of us could, with his direction, customize our relationship to the texts, interpret open-ended assignments, and engage in an individual dialogue with Jix even as we collaborated as a group in class discussions. Thus, my experience in and memory of the class will inevitably be different from others who participated that same semester.

I filled two 80-page perfect-bound composition notebooks with notes on my reading, page by page details pinning down key ideas and phrases, with margins filled with ideas for teaching and notes for revising or beginning various essays.

As I'd remembered, Jix encouraged us to apply our reading to the writing of canonical writers, to practice elements of style we read in assignments such as irony, epistolary essay, and demonstration of the self, and, finally, to write a sustained analysis of the style of a piece of our own writing, using every aspect of style we'd studied during the semester, macro, micro, and in-between. On the other hand, I couldn't find a single exercise in imitation, which I'd thought was the heart of the class. I've realized that a later seminar or independent study I took with Jix involved exercises in imitation.

For me, the notebooks became the heart of the class. They began as a dutiful students' copious notetaking, but ultimately became a conversation with Jix, who reviewed them every few weeks and put in margin comments of his own: "Society is normative," for instance. In response to an aside about falling in love with Joos's take on writing: "You do keep thorough notes; I've never been able to manage it. I too am very fond of the book, partly because a scale based on social intimacy seems so important." Or, when I questioned several passages in Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, he sometimes asked new questions along with me, other times agreed with my point, or offered a differing interpretation of Ong.

The notebook became a portrait of a growing intellectual exchange. As Jix responded first to my observations, then to the questions I dared ask of these theoreticians, I began asking Jix questions directly. The one that most reveals the clash of my world view and academic and writerly goals with the pressures of a Ph.D. program that had recently embraced critical theory was this: I listed the British and American novelists and poets whose criticism I loved, and asked whether, if I study and write about them, if I apply their view of texts to my studies, would I be

considered not just old-fashioned, but—as I put it in the journal—“even worse, a new critic or formalist”? Jix’s wry answer: “Only if one must publish.”

He encouraged my growing interest in the lyric essay, my use of quotations from the reading to bolster an argument and definition for making a place in teaching and writing for essays with that approach. Instead of resisting my interest in Taoist approaches—which I occasionally pitted against a theoretical position that struck me as overly dependent on finished products rather than processes—his margin notes made pertinent observations, sometimes referencing Heraclitis (“You can’t step into the same river twice”) and once, my favorite margin comment of his, obliquely, William Butler Yeats, with his simple: “dancer/dance.”

III

Teaching, like writing, involves rough drafts (little failures) and revisions. And a splash of imitation as the teacher seeks her own voice. Jix had been a great mentor. However, I was no more going to become Richard Lloyd-Jones in the classroom than I was going to become Virginia Woolf on the page. Nevertheless, I wanted to find a way to give my students Jix-style opportunities to use writing as a way of thinking openly and honestly (without fear of failure) about their reading. And I wanted them to be able to explore their original writing—whether essay, memoir, fiction, or poetry—without the pressure to produce a polished product on their first try. I wanted to shift the emphasis from finished product to the processes of exploration and discovery. I wanted them to explore the dancer and the dance, the motion of the river.

Often, my students start out suspicious of this approach. Until I studied with Jix, I was much like those students of mine, distrustful. Too many teachers had approached writing as the building of a perfect object, not the messy process of discovering our own voices. Charles Schultz captured that kind of student response in a 1975 comic strip featuring Charlie Brown’s little sister Sally, who raises her hand and asks the teacher, “Do you want us to write what we think, or what we think you want us to write?” I used to stand outside the office door where that comic strip was taped, and where I first encountered it: Iowa’s Department of Rhetoric, where Jix’s colleague Cleo Martin introduced writing as thinking and exploration to generations of college first-year students and graduate teaching assistants.

My students in Central Florida by and large come from a tradition of classrooms focused on writing what they think the teacher wants them to write. With students who are conscious of getting good grades and a system that requires letter grades for all courses, it’s a challenge, even if a teacher builds in opportunities for failure, to convince students to take those opportunities. To convince them that they are not traps. Or tricks. At the undergraduate level, I’ve found that low-stakes sketch assignments—graded pass/fail--used repeatedly at strategic points in the semester allow many of the students to accept the invitation to risk failure. After all, they know they will receive credit no matter how the draft pans out. In

two levels of workshop-style courses in literary nonfiction, we intertwine craft studies with sketches for several weeks before the due date of a more sustained and polished (and graded) draft. The sketches are short (two to five pages) explorations in response to somewhat open-ended invitation. These pass-fail sketches count for a full 20 percent of their final grade.

Currently, in the senior-level nonfiction writing class, in which students can be expected to have completed one semester of reading and writing nonfiction, we begin these pass/fail sketches with an imitation, a study of craft. They start by reading around in a volume of *The Best American Essays*, and on the basis of reading the titles and first paragraphs of every essay, selecting one they most want to read and one they would really rather not read. They follow up with an analysis of how and why one opening worked (for them) and the other didn't, and the ways in which the rest of the essay lived up to their expectations or failed to do so. They write about structure, setting, concrete details, and the like, and using terms mapped out in Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*, they analyze how the writer has created a self-implicating narrator and transformed the situation (what happened) into a story (an exploration or discovery). The students are also asked to do the more challenging intellectual work of exploring the difference between their personal taste and the qualities that make an essay well-crafted, even if it is not to their liking. They write about what qualities they think led to the essay's getting accepted for publication twice, first by the editors of the original journal, then by the editors of *BAE*.

Their first sketch is an imitation of the essay they selected as the one they most wanted to read. Students are free to interpret imitation in any way they would like, whether topic or opening strategy or some aspect of voice or structure.

The remaining two or three sketches in this series might involve a sketch about their first memory, a sentence structure-driven sketch (e.g., writing one long sentence or nothing but short, simple sentences and selecting a topic that "matches" that style), and a tough-topic sketch (something they've long been hesitant or even afraid to write about). As open and inviting of failure as these sketches are, they are not entirely throw-away exercises. The first graded workshop essay is generally an expansion of one of the sketches, revised after getting feedback from a small group of peers (as well as from me). Students are not forced to use any of the sketch material. If they deem all of them complete failures, they are welcome to start from scratch. Knowing that they have free reign with the sketch material adds another layer of assurance to students that these are not trick pass/fail assignments. They are invited to fail in each individual sketch as well as in the full collection of sketches.

Near the end of the semester, after they've written longer essays and conducted large-class workshop discussions, students return to writing low-stakes sketches before their final project, in most cases a major revision. These sketches invite students to explore writing flash nonfiction, using braided segmented structures, or writing in points of view other than first-person singular. Those later sketches,

like the first imitation sketch, blossom out of reading and studies of craft. Before writing a flash sketch, for example, students read the two brief essays that open Jo Ann Beard's *The Boys of My Youth* (the preface, and "In the Current") or some new essays from online journals such as *Brevity*, *Hippocampus*, or *Sweet: A Literary Confection*. Before writing in a braided form, they read Beard's "Cousins" and "Coyotes" (also from *The Boys of My Youth*). Before exploring a point of view beyond "I," they read short essays from the above online journals that are written in first-person plural (such as Jaquira Diaz's "Beach City" in *Brevity*) or a variety of second-person approaches, from simple second (such as Peter Ives's "Night Attack," in *Hippocampus*) to how-to (such as Billy Howell's "How to Leave Your Mother" from *The Florida Review*) to the epistolary form (such as M. Sausun's "Root," also in *Brevity*).

Before writing their final project for the course, a revision, my undergraduate writing students are asked to apply at least one of these experiments to the essay they plan to revise, whether rewriting the first page in another point of view or layering in a second, related narrative to form a braid. They know in advance that they will not be forced to use any of the material in this experiment—unless they want to. In this way, they experience, at least in a fleeting fashion, how revision can be discovery—even play. It's not always "fixing" up a draft. Your writing is not broken, I tell them. It's in progress.

With low-stakes assignments, students are less likely to become overwhelmed by the anxiety of trying to write what they think the teacher wants them to write in order to get a good grade. Low-stakes assignments invite students to be open to the possibility that they might dislike their draft—that it might be a failure—but that they can learn from that failure. There are a variety of ways to make sure that students understand—and trust—that any given writing assignment is not going to put their overall grade in danger. The method I tried first was to make all sketch assignments entirely pass/fail. No rubric. Turn in writing and you pass. This approach, I discovered, worked best for self-motivated students, who responded by writing with a real attempt to make discoveries. Already committed to devoting time to their writing, they were grateful to put aside concerns about how the product would be judged. But some harried, overworked, or less-than-motivated students dashed off quick drafts ten minutes before class, motivated, ironically, to aim for a failed draft since they'd earn credit no matter how quickly or poorly they wrote. Failure without trying didn't strike me as productive failure.

Over time, I've developed a rubric that has encouraged most of the students to see these sketch assignments as requiring a genuine attempt to make some discoveries, take risks, and try out new aspects of craft, while also rewarding them for doing so if the result is a messy draft that they don't like. Most recently, I've designed the course so that 20 percent of the grade consists of such sketches, and instead of pass/fail, they are scored on a rubric that grants five percent for including all aspects of the sketch indicated in the guidelines, five percent for careful proof-reading and editing so that the sketch is error- and typo-free, and ten percent for

a sketch that is fully developed, uses concrete detail and/or reflection, and shows attention to craft. Students who take the sketch assignments seriously and use them to make discoveries and risk failure inevitably earn the full 20 points.

Committed and motivated students tend to earn full points on all such assignments. Inevitably, however, the few students who dash something off on the way to class are of course prone to make clumsy errors. Worse, they are also unlikely to leave enough time to take risks with content and style or to engage in a substantive way with other aspects of craft. Those who are more grade-motivated tend to get serious after their first low score on what should be a fun assignment. After a while, students at all levels of skill and commitment write more effective workshop essays after these sketch exercises. They begin the full essay assignment as most professional writers do, with a few drafts to explore and expand.

At the graduate level, in our M.F.A. program in creative writing, where students are more motivated, all exploratory sketches are scored on a pass/fail basis. Like most M.F.A. programs, we offer workshop classes that focus on students' original work in their chief genre, supplemented by classes that focus on reading to explore craft and the historic or contemporary scene in their genre of choice. In some M.F.A. programs, writers have the benefit of an entirely pass/fail program, where workshop courses are focused on written commentary and discussion of their original work. In the M.F.A. program where I teach, letter grades are required. After years of trying out various rubrics where I could score graduate students' original writing for originality and craft, I've turned to an approach that aspires to the kind of freedom for exploration and failure that a grade-free course might offer. With the old rubric system, students writing revisions were rewarded more than those making discoveries. To allow for more generative writing, I began scoring all early drafts on a pass/fail basis. Under this system, the writers can work hard on an experimental essay that pushes their skill level, have it fail, but still succeed in the class. If a student tells me an essay is generative, then workshop discussion focuses on exploring the story, undercurrents, discoveries, and possibilities. Such essays are still in progress, in flux. If a student tells me an essay is a revision, we discuss it in a more rigorous way as a product.

To accommodate my university's emphasis on letter grades, and to hold students' feet to the fire in terms of dedicating themselves to reading each other's work seriously, I give letter grades on their written and spoken commentary to each other. Under this system, the dedicated students always earn those coveted A grades. The students who are likely not long for the program can still end up with the low B or C that signals their lack of commitment to the community of writers.

In the craft-centered courses that emphasize reading, I try my best to emulate Jix's approach and to use open-ended writing as a way of thinking. Students can opt to use open-ended notebook entries to reflect on (and question) the reading or to write short reviews focused on an aspect of craft that they find central to the book or essay under discussion. Or they can study one or more aspects of craft central to their own writing. Students who choose this option might, for example,

examine ways various writers structure a memoir, or how to create an engaging and complicated narrator, or how to use irony or research. After the reflection, they write an imitation based on any aspect of style they are intrigued by in the writer's work or wish to practice for their own writing. The craft studies receive a letter grade. The imitations are pass/fail and add up to count as a percentage of the final grade.

Graduate students tell me these are some of the most inspiring assignments they've encountered—although, inevitably, they are skeptical at first, assuming that as a professor I am more likely to trick them into writing the way I want them to write rather than embrace their glorious experiments and failures. For a surprising number of graduate students, it is one or more of the imitations—not the manuscripts they write for workshop—that end up as the inspiration for and basis of their thesis projects.

Their risks and failures, they report, lead to the kinds of discoveries that contribute to their becoming the writers they entered graduate school hoping to be. I find it striking that even with the permission to fail in their workshop classes, they so often learn more about their own writing from the imitation exercises. I suspect that, as Jix knew when he designed his seminar on theories of style, sometimes it is when writers are at play, distracted from—or looking only in their peripheral vision at—becoming the kinds of writers they were willing themselves to be that they discover their voices. As I look back at the margins of the reading notebooks I wrote in Jix's class, I see paragraphs of discoveries about essays in progress and old failed drafts. Some of those essays became the heart of my work as a writer.

With Jix's teaching as a touchstone, I found that risk and failure can be built into even the most stringently letter grade-centered program. And within such classes, students at all levels can experience the way little failures, surprisingly, are integral to nuanced thinking and writing that genuinely matters.