Naming What We Know

Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies

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imagine. Thus, becoming aware that the text exists outside the writer's projection and must convey meaning to readers is an important threshold in developing a more professional attitude toward the act of writing and what is produced. Insofar as writers see the text as not yet fulfilling initial ambitions, they can work to improve the text to convey as much as their technical skill and craft allow.

Collaborators, team members, supervisors, editors, and others who may share the work of producing text do not share the initial writer's attachment to the anticipated meaning and have only what the inscribed words bring; they thus provide better measures of what the text actually conveys. While they may view the text with a cooler eye, noting its limitations and failures to convey, they also may lack a sense of all the text may become and of the initial author's intentions. The emerging and changing text then becomes a site of negotiated work to produce the final document.

In response to the view that writing is expressionistic—revealing primarily writers' thoughts and emotions—composition scholars have over the last several decades promoted a view of writing as socially constructed, "crowd-sourced" we'd say these days (Flower 1994; Gere 1987; LeFevre 1987; Lunsford and Ede 1990). More fundamentally, this view is an extension of George Herbert Mead's (1934) understanding that we form our sense of the self through taking the part of the other in our struggle to make ourselves understood. Such a view, while no longer positing that the author is dead, does encourage us to see the text as existing independently of the author and thus capable of being changed and perfected by the author and others.

4.2

FAILURE CAN BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Collin Brooke and Allison Carr

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that the teaching of writing should focus as much on puzzling out failure as it does on rewarding success. We often forget, however, that successful writers aren't those who are simply able to write brilliant first drafts; often, the writing we encounter has been heavily revised and edited and is sometimes the result of a great deal of failure (see 4.4, "Revision Is Central to Developing Writing," and 4.3, "Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort"). As renowned writer

Anne Lamott observes, "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere" (Lamott 1995, 303).

As students progress throughout their educational careers and the expectations for their writing evolve from year to year and sometimes course to course, there is no way we can expect them to be able to intuit these shifting conditions. They must have the opportunity to try, to fail, and to learn from those failures as a means of intellectual growth. Edward Burger (2012), professor of mathematics and coauthor of *The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking*, explains that "in reality, every idea from every discipline is a human idea that comes from a natural, thoughtful, and (ideally) unending journey in which thinkers deeply understand the current state of knowledge, take a tiny step in a new direction, almost immediately hit a dead end, learn from that misstep, and, through iteration, inevitably move forward."

In the writing classroom, when assessment is tied too completely to final products, students are more likely to avoid risking failure for fear of damaging their grades, and this fear works against the learning process. They focus instead on what the teacher wants and simply hope to be able to get it right on the first try. Burger (2012) advocates building "quality of failure" into his courses and reports that his students are willing to take greater risks and to examine their missteps for what they can change about them.

One of the most important things students can learn is that failure is an opportunity for growth. As sites of language development, writing classrooms, especially, should make space for quality of failure, or what Lamott describes as "shitty first drafts," by treating failure as something all writers work through, rather than as a symptom of inadequacy or stupidity. Writers need the time and space to explore Thomas Edison's proverbial ten thousand ways that won't work in order to find the ways that do. Such practices will enable writing teachers and students to develop a healthy dialogue around the experience of failure, perhaps leading to the development of what we might call *pedagogies of failure*, or ways of teaching that seek to illuminate the myriad ways writing gets done by examining all the ways it doesn't. Embracing failure in the writing classroom in these ways makes failure speakable and doable.

Outside of the classroom, the capacity for failure (and thus success) is one of the most valuable abilities a writer can possess. The ability to write well comes neither naturally nor easily; the thinkers we praise and admire are not the lucky few born with innate talent. Rather, they are the ones who are able to make mistakes, learn from them, and keep writing until they get it right. J. K. Rowling (2008), for example, is quite

open about how she "failed on an epic scale" before she was able to write the *Harry Potter* series. In her 2008 commencement address at Harvard University, she explained, "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default."

4.3
LEARNING TO WRITE EFFECTIVELY REQUIRES DIFFERENT KINDS OF PRACTICE, TIME, AND EFFORT

Kathleen Blake Yancey

When someone wants to swim, they get into the water: if we want to write, we put pen to paper, fingers to keyboard, or fingertips to touch screen.

Through practice, we become familiar with writing; it becomes part of us. What we practice is who we are; if we want to be writers, we need to write. And in the practice of writing, we develop writing capacities, among them the ability to adjust and adapt to different contexts, purposes, and audiences.

One kind of practice provides fluidity. Much like a swimmer becoming familiar with the water, writers become familiar with writing—with the feel of a pen in the hand; with the sense of putting individual words on a page that then come together to form larger blocks of meaning, whether sentences, paragraphs, full texts; and with the habit of reviewing what we have just written to see how it fits with what we thought we were writing and with what it is we thought we wanted to say and to share—whether, from our perception, the writing will speak to situations and contexts using conventions of a genre and medium we recognize and think our audience(s) will, too (see 2.0, "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms").

Another kind of practice can refine technique, whether that be dialogue in a narrative, citations for a scientific research paper, or a rhetorical appeal to an elected official. With practice, we can create what seems otherwise out of reach or totally foreign, can compose a text—of words or of words and other elements—shaped by and in response to context. Practice can focus on the whole of a composing process or on different aspects of composing: inventing, researching, drafting, revising, sharing, editing, and publishing.

Practice can involve writing in different spaces, with different materials, and with different technologies. Some writers prefer to write at the same time of day in the same location; others like to change locations;