ON DEAD-ENDS, PIT-STOPS, AND REIMAGINING THE ROAD: HOW FAILURE LEADS TO TEACHING EXPERTISE AND PEDAGOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Marco Dehnert* and Sarah J. Tracy

The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay shares our iterative voyage to examine the role of failure in teaching, which began with a theoretical model that suggests that risk-taking and failure are fundamental pit-stops on the way to expertise in any craft practice, including teaching. We conducted narrative interviews with three accomplished teachers of varying levels of experience. Analyzing the interviews, however, challenged our initial assumptions. Subsequently, we turned to literature in queer pedagogy that suggests the importance of failure as a method for purposefully diverging from dominant structures. The heart of the essay provides four lessons that emerged from considering failure through these two different views. These lessons include that: 1) taking risks is a key part of advancing pedagogical skill as well as improving the system, 2) failure hurts, especially for teachers who hold marginalized positions; 3) good teachers dance in a tension between mastering the current rules of the game while questioning dominant structures; 4) even experienced and accomplished teachers face classroom risks and experience failure.

KEYWORDS: teaching, skill level acquisition, failure, risk, queer

1. INTRODUCTION

What equates with failure, and is failure necessary and/or useful for pedagogical excellence? A quick Google web search suggests that failure is "a lack of success" or "the omission of expected or required action" with synonyms including "miscarriage," "misfiring," "dead balloon" and "fuck up." In the popular imagination, failure is clearly a bad thing; something that did not grow to fruition, hit the mark, or perform as desired. Such an approach aligns with retired NASA flight director Gene Kranz's viewpoint who titled his famous book, Failure is Not an Option (Kranz, 2000). This approach suggests that failure is metaphorically a dead-end, wasted time, and wasted resources, and to succeed requires rethinking, rerouting, and additional capital.

Despite these dismal views of failure, in the academy and professional world, failure has become quite fashionable. Among the most popular advice offered in a range of scholarship, business journals, and life coaching blogs are Samuel Beckett's "Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better" from his short essay

Worstward Ho (1983) and the adage "anything worth doing well is worth doing badly in the beginning" (adapted from Chesterton, 1912). In this view, failure is metaphorically not a dead-end, but instead simply a pit-stop along the way to a destination called success (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012). Or, as Henry Ford would put it, failure "is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently" (1922/2006, p. 24).

Indeed, scholars have made the case that failure and breakdowns are crucial for advancing in a skill, science, or craft practice. Firestein (2016) argues for the importance of paying attention to failures—not for the purpose of correcting them—but because of the interesting things they have to say, because they are humbling and make you go back and reconsider your long-held views. No failure is too small to be ignored or go unregarded. (p. 31)

And, one of the most influential models of skill level acquisition suggests that expertise in a craft practice requires trial and error, as well as the necessity to occasionally fail (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). Given these prevailing views of failure as necessary for success (Webb et al., 2013), we began this project with the quest to seek stories and insights from three different well-regarded teachers as they reflected on risk-taking and failure for improving their pedagogical craft and expertise. These three teachers, who we will call Susana (she), Loretta (she), and Janet (she), represent three different points in a teaching career. Susana (a Latinx, heterosexual, 20-something) has ~3 years of college teaching experience, Loretta (a mixed raced, queer, almost 40-year-old) has ~13 years, and Janet (a white, heterosexual, 60-something), ~36 years. According to the director of undergraduate education at their place of employment (a large, Southwestern United States university housing one of the largest schools of communication in the world), each is among the best 90+ communication instructors in the school given their overall years of experience. In this essay, we share the story of our iterative journey with these three scholars, and the discoveries and lessons we learned along the way regarding the roles of risk and failure for excellent pedagogy.

The essay unfolds as follows. First, we share how we began our inquiry with the sensitizing concepts from Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (2005) model of skill acquisition which suggests the importance of risk and failure as necessary pit-stops along the way toward achieving expertise in any craft practice. Second, we describe our interview design, process, and initial themes. This is where our journey took a turn. Our original intention of this essay was to conduct a typical qualitative analysis of the interview themes and how they connected with the literature already presented. However, our emic read of the interviews made us question the dominant views of failure that had accompanied us when designing the study. Namely, what we heard from our interviewees stretched our initial assumptions about the purpose(s) of failure in teaching.

As we describe in part three of this essay, we returned to the literature where queer pedagogy approaches suggest the importance of failure as a method for purposefully diverging from or transforming dominant structures. This viewpoint suggests that failure "is neither a dead-end nor a pit-

stop on the path to success but a generative, unsettling and revelatory force" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012, p. 1). Fourth, we re-entered the analysis of the interviews with this expanded notion of failure in mind. At this point, we chose against conducting a typical thematic analysis. Instead, we close the essay with lessons learned from this inquiry that may be helpful for new teachers to hold close to hand as they strive toward pedagogical practice that is not only excellent but can also be a form of intellectual emancipation (Rancière, 1987/1991).

2. Phase 1: Approaching Failure as a Necessary Pit-stop via a Phenomenological Model of Skill Level Acquisition

We began the journey of this essay with the assumption that failure and risk-taking are key parts of pedagogical excellence. According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (2005) phenomenological model of skill level acquisition, expertise is largely determined by the amount of contextual practice, and over time, the people who are at the top of their craft (whether that is driving, cooking, or teaching) are improvisers rather than rule followers. In this model, skill level advances in the following stages: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. Certainly, what these stages look like depends in part on the craft being practiced. In most studies, this model has been applied to crafts which have a largely stable structure and routine (e.g., things like playing chess or the violin) (Flyvbjerg, 2012). However, it has also been applied to teaching, as in the case of teaching dentistry (Lyon, 2015). And, arguably, many aspects of teaching could be considered craft practices that have predictable challenges (e.g., helping ensure that students understand course or assignment expectations) and related activities (e.g., leading discussion on readings, talking with students about grade complaints).

In terms of teaching, we would describe the phenomenological model of skill level acquisition as follows. In the first stage, novice, the instructor applies learned rules without a teacher's understanding of the classroom context. In such a stage, novices are likely to use someone else's lesson plans or policies as scripts and may act as a deer in the headlights when students go off script. In the second stage, advanced beginner, the instructor begins to develop an understanding for the teaching context but still relies heavily on predetermined rules or lesson plans to dictate their teaching. When the script diverges, they may engage in action but mostly to realign the interaction with the predetermined script. In the third stage, competence, the instructor works from a routine or set of scripts that provide them with a sense of certainty and security. They take these scripts and then consciously decide when and how to apply them. Oftentimes, people stall in the competence phase, relying on scripts like a tried and true recipe, with the lay philosophy that "if it ain't broke, why fix it?"

A qualitative leap, however, is required between the competence and proficiency phase, and this is where—drawing from this model—we conjure that failure comes in. In the fourth stage, proficiency, the instructor begins to spontaneously respond to what needs to be done in the current situation rather than relying on the routine. This requires lots of trial and error, effortful and conscious decision-making, and therefore may include lots of rumination, with teachers asking themselves questions like,

"did I do this right?" and "should I have really tried that?" It also would seem to require the willingness for teachers—in the quest toward improving their craft—to take risks, wipe out, break down, and slip up. And afterwards, would ask them to pick themselves up, shrug it off, seek social support, and try again. After enough rounds of this type of activity, they may break through to another level of skill level acquisition.

In the fifth and final stage, expertise, this model would suggest that instructors not only perceive what needs to be done, but (thanks to a lot of experience) intuitively understand how to achieve the goal. Or, "As Aristotle says, the expert 'straightway' does the 'appropriate thing, at the appropriate time, in the appropriate way'" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005, p. 788). Indeed, in illustrating this stage of skill level acquisition, Tracy (2012) explains:

Experts exhibit thinking and behavior that are rapid, intuitive, holistic, interpretive, and visual. Watch a round of speed chess, for instance, and it quickly becomes evident that expert chess players make their moves intuitively; they describe their hand as moving without conscious thought. This is much different from the slow, analytical moves made by merely competent chess players. (p. 122)

In sum, this approach toward learning and failure would suggest that teachers working at this level of expertise largely work intuitively and less with conscious decision-making. As a logical extension, and for the more immediate purposes of our study, this model suggests that teachers must be willing to take risks and go off the tried and true script if they aim to eventually achieve expertise. Here, failure operates as a pit-stop on the road to destination success.

With this sensitizing framework, we approached our interviews with this loose guiding research question: How does risk-taking in teaching result in failure as well as in increased skill level acquisition?

3. Phase 2: Conducting Interviews with Expert Teachers and Engaging in First Round of Data Analysis

Interviews, each which lasted about one hour, asked our participants to tell stories about their most memorable successes, failures, and risk-taking behaviors in the classroom. We also described the Dreyfus and Dreyfus skill level acquisition model (in ways very similar to the way it was introduced above) and asked them to reflect on the model as well as where they would rate their own level of teaching expertise. We closed the interview asking them for advice they would give to future teachers regarding success, failure, and risk. Interviews were transcribed and fact-checked, resulting in 85 pages of single-spaced typewritten pages. Both authors read through the transcripts multiple times using tenets from an iterative qualitative analysis (Tracy, 2020), with the guiding analytic question, "What seems especially striking or surprising?" Themes that came up included the importance of treating students as whole people, the risks of mentoring students in terms of their psychosocial health and sexual identity, being flexible to student needs, and how failures are key to breakthroughs when

discussing difficult topics like difference. All of these themes aligned with and helped elucidate the importance of failure as important on the way to teaching expertise. As we continued to analyze, though, we realized that there was something else happening in the data that could not be illuminated by the guiding "failure as pit-stop" and Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (2005) skill level acquisition model. This was triggered most poignantly by what we found in Loretta's interview in which she repeatedly discussed her desire to NOT succeed in the reigning model. For example, she said,

> Institutional metrics aren't something I look at except to put on paper. // I would much rather fail institutional expectations because it's allowing us to rethink what's possible constantly. … [The system] is designed to function to chew you up if you take risks. So, you have to be strategic in how you take risks.

This purposeful desire to avoid success in the pre-existing paradigm is not elucidated via the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) phenomenological model that suggests that skill level acquisition is derived through continual deliberative practice of said skill.

As we talked through and compared our interview data, we began thinking about how this model seems to work quite well for tasks such as playing chess or classical music. However, we also began thinking about how these types of deliberate activities rely heavily on predetermined and absolute sets of rules. Each chess figure is assigned a certain way to move upon the board, golfers hit the ball from specific areas using specially-designed clubs, and sheet music and conductors largely predetermine the way a violinist may master playing her song. In these situations, players do little to question the game or rules themselves. Indeed, it would feel odd if a chess player suddenly began throwing their pieces, if a golfer decided to kick his ball down the fairway, or if a violinist made music by banging her fiddle with drumsticks. These types of activities might be considered "performance art" but they would not be considered to be incremental steps of skill level acquisition. Said in another way, in activities such as playing golf, chess, and the violin, success is interpreted as following the stable and predetermined structure until, over time and lots of experience, masters may be able to transcend and intuitively embody the structure.

We were further motivated to expand our thinking by considering Loretta's response to our description of the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model. She said, "I think that it makes sense, I suppose. I just want to know, like, what's beyond expertise? Is that just where the goal is? I don't know. … At what point does expertise break into something else?" Based off our initial analysis, then, we were moved to examine other literatures or theories that might explain what we were seeing in the range of interview data. Through our discussions, we turned back to the literature.

4. Phase 3: Reimagining Failure and Teaching Excellence via Queer Approaches to Pedagogy

If success is the destination and failure can either be seen as a dead-end (Kranzian model) or a pit-stop (Fordian model) on the road to success, what else can one do on the road? Or with the road? And what does the road signify, actually? Triggered by our read of the interview data, we began to explore a third approach to failure; an approach in which failure is neither a dead-end nor a pit-stop on the road to success, but an approach that questions the very notions of success and failure in the confines of the dominant structure. Queer theory provided useful insight.

Queer approaches are useful in contexts far beyond issues of gender and sexuality (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014)—shedding light on why some things remain unquestionable (e.g., student teaching evaluations), whereas others are constantly questioned (the perceived "validity" or "reality" of transgender experiences, for instance). What's more, "queer theory shakes and unsettles sedimented knowledge but does so without recommending a particular remedy" (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 333). This openness provides an avenue "for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 89). Queer theory questions a pit-stop model of failure similar to critiquing the myth of the American Dream. Both posit that everybody can be successful as long as they try and try again. Especially in the United States, the mechanisms of capitalism reinforce the belief that "success depends only upon working hard and failure is always of your own doing" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). Such a "fetishization of excellence and outcomes" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012, p. 3) reinforces ideals of seriousness, rigor, correctness, and other criteria to determine success. What's more, success and failure are individual achievements, neglecting the influences of classist, racist, sexist, and otherwise normative forces and privilege.

In other words, such a pit-stop-approach to failure implies that there is one avenue to travel on to reach success, and one that is pre-written and pre-determined (by power-holders) in a given context. Notions like "rigorous" research methods, "proper" public speaking, a "good" teacher, or a "correct" way of teaching and learning "signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6). In short, both the dead-end and the pit-stop-approach reinforce pre-existing institutional structure, where failure is either defined as the inability to accommodate one's actions within that structure, or as not-yet-meeting the demands of that structure.

This third queer approach to failure challenges the assumption that a "good" teacher is successful in playing nice with dominant norms. Instead, it embraces failure as an opportunity to challenge the given map, discover new paths, and transform the road. Rather than following a predetermined route, "the goal is to lose one's way, and indeed to be prepared to lose more than one's way" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6). Forging new paths and addressing the toxicity of the current system offer alternative routes that do not depend on the typical binary of success and failure and its criteria for goodness. A queer approach to failure encourages people to "imagine alternatives foreclosed by the normative tyranny of success and expected outcomes" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012, p. 2).

A queer understanding of failure thus resonates with recent #CommunicationSoWhite pushbacks on academic buzzwords such as diversity, inclusion, and representation of marginalized folks within the communication discipline. While one might view assimilating into the dead-end- or pit-stop-approaches to failure and the associated neoliberal underpinnings as a valuable strategy for survival as a teacher in the academy, Chávez (2015) notes that "projects of inclusion don't rupture oppressive structures; instead, they uphold and reinforce those structures by showing how they can be kinder and gentler and better without actually changing much at all" (p. 166). Extending this argument, Calvente et al. (2020) push for a "politics of included exclusion," which they define as "a consciousness of being included by your very exclusion where standards of inclusion do not apply even and, at times, especially when you perform assimilability" (p. 204).

Further, queer approaches to pedagogy do not claim to be the better or right way of conceiving pedagogical success, but rather offer a third viewpoint on failure beyond failure as dead-end and failure as pit-stop. Rather, it offers the viewpoint of failure as opportunity for transformation and revelatory force, cognizant of privilege. As LeMaster (2018) put it, from a queer perspective, "we accept that failure is a point of departure as opposed to a point of foreclosure … In this way, failure is productive and absolutely necessary for cultural transformation" (p. 12; cf. LeMaster, 2017). Hence, queer failure highlights the ways in which normative expectations and regulative mechanisms are engrained in the larger socio-cultural context, including the ways in which folks resist, challenge, and/or transform those restrictive forces. With this expanded viewpoint on failure in mind, we re-entered our interview data. In what follows, we share the key lessons learned.

5. Phase 4: Lessons Learned from this Analysis

5.1 Lesson 1: Taking Deliberative Risks is a Key Part of Advancing Pedagogical Skill as Well as Improving the Larger System. That Said, Risk-taking Requires Self-reflexivity, Practice, Courage, Vulnerability, and the Willingness to Fail

One of the key lessons we learned from our interviews is the importance of risk-taking, or as Susana said, "I think risk taking is essential to my teaching. And I don't think I want to change that." Janet tells a story that illustrates how taking risks results in growth and learning:

> When I started teaching … I would go in with my lecture notes and I would prepare very rigorously. This was my first non-TA job. I was 24. … One day I just thought this is not working. So, I just completely put my notes away and I took the title of the book which was Writing with a Purpose, and we spent the hour talking about what that title meant. So, it was the first time I spoke without any notes, without any preparation, and it ended up being a great conversation. I think I learned a lot then about responding to the needs of the students and not following the notes.

Here, in putting away her notes for the first time, Janet had to face the reality that she may fail. Yet, through this improvisation in practice, she created a new expertise in terms of discussion in the classroom.

When we asked about risks, our interviewees brought up stories of meeting one-on-one with students who shared about their mental health, grief, and sexual identities. They also talked about going off-script and talking in their classroom about hot-button issues like immigration, racism, and sexual addiction. It was clear when they spoke about risks that they were not taken for simply the thrill. As Susana said, "[I'm not] just that person that pushes the buttons. I [take risks] solely for the purpose of my students learning multiple sides of things."

Although our interviewees agreed on the importance of risks, they also indicated that risk-taking is not automatic. First of all, it requires self-reflexivity. Loretta felt it was really important to know what your goals were as a teacher. She said,

> What's a teacher for me? For me, it has nothing to do with the institutional criteria, not deadlines, not grades, not attendance, that's all noise to me. Those are structural barriers that make this thing called education implausible for a lot of the people I grew up with. So, I don't invest my time in that. I invest my time in getting to know students as humans and trying to figure out what goals they have, and what skills I have to help amplify those goals.

In this quotation we see that identifying one's goals for being a teacher clarifies the extent to which risk-taking is a viable (or only) method to reach these goals. Emphasizing the importance of self-reflexivity, Susana said, "To engage in successful risk-taking behavior, I think you need to primarily know yourself."

Our interviewees also mentioned how risk-taking takes some practice. Janet felt most comfortable taking risks when she already had some competence in a skill. She said, "I was thinking just now there's so many things that I'm not good at and I'm not very good about taking risks with those things. … If I thought I was a terrible teacher, I probably would have been uncomfortable reaffirming that." Susana said, "risk taking should engage some trial and error. ... I don't think that there is necessarily a formula for risk taking." And, although Loretta disagreed that risk-taking takes practice, per se, she emphasized the need to be willing, saying, "You're taking them every day. And then weave those into the classroom. ... You have to take the risk. Be willing."

Indeed, willingness to fail is a key part of risk-taking. Susana said, "Failure should be, I think, a requirement of risk taking. You should take a risk and fail at it completely, so that you can learn how to better take that risk next time." Janet said, "I think you just have to be committed to failing. Committed to asking forgiveness if you need it and … getting to that fundamental level of competence

so that you can be vulnerable. If I thought I was a terrible teacher, I probably would have been uncomfortable reaffirming that." So, what we see in Janet's response here, too, reaffirms the notion that risk-taking becomes easier when we have at least some experience and competence.

Doing this kind of work, of course, takes confidence, courage, and the strength to stand up to criticism. As Susana said:

> I think you have to be confident in yourself. And know that you're not going to be liked, probably. … Are you strong enough? Can you emotionally and physically absorb the nonverbal feedback from your students, when they're like, "what is this? Why are we doing this?" Or the actual verbal feedback where "I don't agree with this" or "why are we talking about [immigration] when the textbook says this?" Being able to be headstrong. Comfortable and open minded to the fact that risk taking takes a lot. Not everyone does it. Because it's uncomfortable.

Our interviewees, three of the best teachers in their school, were comfortable in being uncomfortable, willing to move beyond prescribed course material, and strong enough to bear being unliked.

The risks of failure were worth it, especially in terms of shaking up the status quo and leading toward more just systems of teaching, as illustrated by Loretta:

> [I take risks because] I'm vastly underwhelmed by the status quo that does nothing. It angers me … how backwards this discipline [communication studies] is with regard to gender, race, sex, and basis of identity // I have no interest in investing in that status quo because it's doing nothing to help students, which is why working outside of the Canon in some ways is arguably more productive for our students because it makes them more viable for emerging interdisciplinary approaches.

Loretta repeatedly discussed how risk-taking was crucial for creating an emancipatory and humanizing pedagogy. She described how dominant systems largely encourage professors to enact a type of "cyborg presence" and serve as "a conduit for information." In talking about the way she takes risks that could fail in the classroom, Loretta said,

> I humanize my pedagogy by linking it deeply into my own body and using my body as a point of departure. And so, the risk is the vulnerability of the stories that I share with students to really try to enliv in the ideas that makes sense in a sort of reading, which is how I came to pedagogy through feminist pedagogy all those years ago originally. And that's exactly where that training began, was rooting it in the body and trying to use that in the point of departure.

Such work Loretta viewed as fundamental to being a good teacher, but required risk, opening oneself up to criticism, and taking a departure from dominant approaches.

5.2 Lesson 2: Failure Hurts. It is Vulnerable, Nerve-wrecking, and Opens You up to Criticism, No Matter Your Level of Expertise. And, it Often Hurts More for Teachers Who Hold Marginalized Positionalities. Be Compassionate with Your Own and Others' Failures

A second lesson that we learned from the interviews with our three expert-teachers was that although failure is generative, it hurts and it "mostly … feels like shit" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012, p. 1). Across all three interviews, Susana, Loretta, and Janet stressed that taking risks "takes a lot," involves vulnerability and threat. Janet, for example, describes how she returned to class the day after she had failed to call a student down on saying something disrespectful in class:

> I stood in front of the class and I apologized. ... I discussed with them what had happened. ... I thought that was really important for them to know because I had behaved inappropriately. They needed to see that it's okay to be called from the carpet and it's okay to say, "I was wrong and I apologize."

Similarly, Susana describes how she felt after opening herself up to a student who was crying in her office: "I didn't even think about it until after. I was like, "oh my gosh, my student knows all these things about me now." But, no, the risk I took in disclosing so much with him was successful, I think." Here, Susana shared personal details about herself. In doing so, she temporarily shifted the power differential within the student-teacher relationship. She says, "I'm opening myself up as not your professor. I am using language … where I am not this person of authority, I am just another person like you." Although this self-disclosure may seem to be determined by the specific context or moment one finds themselves in, Susana also notes that she strategically makes herself vulnerable in front of students: "In opening myself up with these types of vulnerabilities and risk-taking behaviors, my students get the most out of it by learning about themselves [and] also learning that education and that knowledge is distributed very differently." Further, Janet notes that making herself vulnerable and admitting that she "messed up," makes success possible when the teacher is sincere.

Being subject to criticism by students in class is a very real possibility when educators experiment with a new activity, discuss issues that go beyond the required material, or explicitly comment on their own positionality. For instance, Susana describes how her students "had a whole existential crisis" after she told them that she was a Mexican immigrant. Another more extreme case of criticism comes in the form of a student who threatened to sue Loretta for what the student perceived to be unfair treatment (Loretta not raising a grade when asked). Loretta described that the student "had got a lawyer involved, but I learned from [past work experience] that when lawyers are involved, I step away and hand it right over to my chair." Loretta relied on the organizational structure for protection from this drastic form of student criticism.

Even as our interviewees saw the value of failure for eventual success, they also cautioned, in one way or another, that "not everyone gets to rebrand their 'failures' as successes" (Taylor, 2012, p. 68). Identity and positionality spontaneously emerged as themes in all of our interviews. In addition to her being a Mexican immigrant, Susana describes how students sometimes question her credibility because of her age: "I think it's maybe once or twice at the beginning of the semester, and then it trickles down. … I hear students around say, 'oh how old is she?'" While students are quick to question Susana and her credibility because of her positionality as a young Latina teacher, Janet describes how her whiteness, tenure, and accomplishments influenced the treatment she received from the university. In speaking about a risk that she took in expelling several students from her class, she said,

> If I hadn't been white and an [endowed] professor ... [former] director of the school, I don't think I ever would have gotten away with it. ... I think that I was able to hang in there just because of all the privilege that I had. ... An international faculty member of color, who's particularly female, probably would find it a very hard thing to do. I don't know that she would get much support from the university.

And Loretta describes that, "It's risky every day that I'm out as a trans person who's also an educator." Her trans identity and the way she presents herself, "just being here" is a risk as she has "been accused of being a threat purely by being in the classroom." Loretta describes,

Just being on campus, wearing nail polish that I wear, and the jewelry that I wear, and the choices I make, and how to present myself. I don't present myself in my true self in this job. It's very constraining. … So, I think that there's a risk in just simply being here and choosing to continue to do this work.

This lesson highlights how failure hurts. And, that one's positionality affects the types of criticisms received and possibilities for risk-taking. As such, any understanding that "failure is important" should also be accompanied by the understanding that one's positionality "allows" for privileged teachers to rebrand their failures as successes more readily than it does for those on the margins.

5.3 Lesson 3: Good Teachers Dance in a Tension of a) Mastering the Current Teaching "Rules of the Game" While also b) Questioning Dominant Structures. Viewing These Not as Dichotomous Poles but as Constituting a Both/And Tension Provides Pragmatic Options for Teachers to Reimagine Pedagogical Excellence

As we reviewed our interview data as well as the two different ways of viewing failure, we began to wonder about whether teachers need to choose a specific philosophy toward failure or whether they can dance within them. This, in many ways, is a question of commensurability (Kuhn, 1970). On its face, it seems incommensurable that one can simultaneously hold onto the philosophy of "I will fail as a pit-stop along the way so that I can eventually master the system," along with the philosophy of, "I

will fail as a way to resist and transform the system." What's more, it's evident from our interviews that some teachers enact one philosophy more than another (e.g., Janet with the first and Loretta with the second). And, indeed, we would concur that, conceptually speaking, these two approaches are incommensurable.

That said, when we began carefully revisiting our interview data, it appeared that in life as lived (and not as believed or held as a concept), these good professors actually dance between these approaches of failure as pit-stop or as a method toward transformation. And, that doing so provides pragmatic options for simultaneously improving their own skills within the system and moving toward the creation of more just pedagogical structures. Janet said: "One of the things is you always want to do the right thing" (which suggests an interest in the current structure) and immediately followed with, "But I think I'm less concerned about that now because I recognize that there are lots of right things and you can make up the right thing" (which suggests the importance of improvisation for influencing tomorrow's "right thing"). She also discussed how student interaction was much more important than teaching evaluations.

Susana repeatedly emphasized in her interview that, as a new instructor, she is interested in continual improvement, respects the work accomplished before her, and hold onto set scripts when she is new to teaching a class. However, even as she admitted that she still "has a lot to learn" she still chose to push students out of their comfort zone and out of the dominant pedagogical structure. She said,

> I'm good in ... encouraging open mindedness, being uncomfortable, being vulnerable. In my classes, I very much so push buttons, knowing that there might be consequences. It's backfired on me, but it's been a huge learning moment for a lot of students. … Ultimately, I think that the reason why I'm good at what I do is because I care so much.

And, when asked in the final interview question what global advice she has for future teachers she said,

> Take risks. And if you have a safety circle that you fall back into that routine, that's also fine. It's knowing what you can and cannot do as an educator and testing your own limits, challenging your own limits, and being flexible. Because, at the end of the day, what is more important, your syllabus, your agenda, your learning lessons, or what the student gets to happily think about once they pay off that degree? Or when they actually study for things? Or what they get to walk away [with] from that specific class?

In these excerpts, we see her dancing between respecting the current structure but engaging in behavior that may simultaneously move students beyond it.

Loretta, as indicated throughout this paper, definitely leaned more heavily toward the failure-as-transformation model. For example, she did not view dominant structures like teaching evaluations as worthwhile. Furthermore, she did not adhere to policies that asked teachers to avoid talking with students about legally or medically hot topics. Indeed, when asked early in the interview about what it means to be a successful teacher, Loretta said:

> Knowing that I've kept alive dozens upon dozens of students, that's undocumented, will never be documented. Nor can I ever say that stuff out loud because I'm not a therapist. ... I'm not a healer, but I know how to tell students how to talk about suicide ideation without recognizing or saying it's going to trigger an actual automatic response. So, I think success matters in those regards. If there's a student that's alive … that's thriving [because] I helped to facilitate that they had another option available to them, that takes brave teaching and pedagogy.

Even while Loretta resisted dominant measures of success, she simultaneously appreciated what the system offered to her as a teacher. For example, Loretta said, "[Successful teaching is] about sustaining discomfort while knowing that you're held at the same time, that I'm also implicated in the conversation." The structure of office hours, student visits, and collaborative feedback provided this mutual comfort for Loretta. What's more, Loretta described how "I think that at the end of the day, I am like a social organizer and I know how to organize things and that's a skill that I can impart on students is how a structure works." So, despite the problems of the structure, Loretta nevertheless realized the important skill of helping students navigate the structure.

As illustrated, in life as lived, all these teachers danced within treating their risk-taking and failures as ways to master the structure and transform it. Doing this may seem difficult, but what all these teachers had in common, and seems to emerge as fundamental for managing this dance was their authentic care, concern for, and connection with students. Janet said that she really focused on taking students' perspectives, listening to them, and taking their questions to heart. The result in one class that Janet described:

> I have 80 students and I would say at least 60 of them spoke to me on the way out the door [after their final], maybe more. Many of them said, 'Thank you.' Some hugged me. Some said, 'This is the best class. I can't wait...' That was a thing that means more to me than the teaching evals.

Susana also repeatedly emphasized an ethic of caring, saying:

> It's that role of me being an educator, but also being a person, friend, at the end of the day. That my students matter, that whatever intervention that my role has, and flexibility, that I can go the extra 20 minutes at the end of my day. Life can wait. Because this one person

needs me not to be their teacher, at that point, needs me to be just a set of ears. // It's not that I'm here to save everyone, but I might have made a slight difference in this person's life.

Finally, Loretta repeatedly invoked the importance of authentic human connection, mentioning the word human or humanizing 13 times in the interview and creating distance from dominant structures that might encourage professors to instead be "cyborgs." She said: "So I think that when a person is able to see me, talk to me as a human, I think that's where the effectiveness is located."

5.4 Lesson 4: "The Educator is Never Fully Realized." Good Teachers View Excellent Pedagogy as a Never-ending Collaborative Road to Travel Rather Than as a Solitary Journey with a Final Destination

A fourth lesson emerging from this analysis is that, as Loretta states, no matter the stage of a teacher's career, "the educator is never fully realized." Although it could be easy to fall into routine (especially as an endowed and well-recognized professor), Janet states that, "The older I get, the more I do take those kinds of risks." When asked if she thought that there is still room for her to improve, she responded, "I would hope, I would trust, that if I'm here another five to seven years, I would get to another place. I don't know what it is because I don't have it yet."

Similarly, Loretta states that, as an educator, "you're always having to learn something else in order to engage in that pedagogy a little deeper, a little more meaningfully." Susana mentions how a good teacher is flexible, while noting that, "I'll constantly keep learning. And if I need to, at some point, take a step back and not take risks, then I'll do so. But at this point, I think that it's been very successful for me." No matter whether failure leads to expertise or transformation, all of our interviewees express how there is not a final destination where the teacher has become the fulfilled expert. Rather, they urge us to keep learning and taking risks in the class as a way of becoming a better educator.

Although our interviewees note their willingness to learn and become better teachers, they also describe how excellent pedagogy is a two-way road. For Janet to be a good teacher, "you have to really be focused on the students. You have to pay attention to what you're teaching and constantly improving it, constantly reading more. ... Because I've learned what I haven't done well, what I can do better." Loretta describes her approach to pedagogy and mentoring, which "often doesn't end with the classroom. ... I really try to be very proactive and meet where students are and help cross the line with them." Janet also describes how she sometimes goes beyond the required content. She states that her approach to teaching is that she is "not just teaching communication. I try to teach them to be more expansive people." One of the things she tries to teach every class is what she calls "perspective taking" which she described as helping the students realize that

> we're not alike and some things are really hard, like sexualities… It's one of the things you can't change, and the research says that over and over again. Some students have never heard

that. So, there's opportunities to talk about things that make them more expansive people even if it's not about communication [and] I think [they] are really valuable.

Of course, to evolve often takes time and effort. Loretta explains how this type of teaching and mentoring,

> is just very labor intensive and most educators will not put this time into their students, period. And it's largely because in higher education, especially in an R1 institution ... we are not rewarded for mentoring and teaching the way we are for research and writing.

As Loretta further describes, viewing pedagogy as collaborative

> is exhausting 100%, but it's not one way. It's not that [only] the students get something from it. I do too. And that's the part that's really important for others to really recognize, that this mentoring is actually two-way if it's going to be critical. Otherwise, I'm just waiting for a student to take knowledge from me. And that's stupid. That's absolutely ludicrous.

Through such a two-way approach to teaching, students learn from their teachers and can incorporate their successes and failures into their own teaching, once they start standing on the other side of the classroom. As Susana describes, it is about how other teachers approach their own failures and risk-taking in the classroom:

> I have seen and learned a lot from educators who openly make mistakes, but then own up to them. … It's being human, at the end of the day. We have, I think, traditionally seen educators, especially in college, as these fountains of knowledge, that have to have it all together, that have to be perfect, and reputable and walk in with the shoulder pads and the briefcase. But, no, I think that the best professors that I have seen, and I'm leaning toward being, are people that are flexible, open, understanding. And not so much on the metaphor of being on the high horse.

Ultimately, as the lessons we learned from our three expert-teachers show, teaching failures and taking risks in the classroom are generative, no matter what approach one takes toward failure and success as a teacher. Good teachers dance within the tension of mastering and transforming. While failure certainly hurts, good teachers view excellent pedagogy as a never-ending collaborative road to travel rather than as a solitary journey with a final destination. As Janet states, "I'm quite willing to believe that I'll have the opportunity to learn more things and to try more things and become a better teacher."

6. CONCLUSION

As we conclude this project on failure, risk-taking, and excellence in teaching, we find ourselves in a much different space that we had first envisioned. We first imagined this project to be a small qualitative study that would illustrate the role of risk-taking for skill level acquisition and pedagogical expertise. However, in listening closely to our interviewees, we realized that we needed to question

our view of failure in teaching, and how it not only helps build expertise (as is positioned by the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model of skill acquisition), but also serves to transform the system and expand our idea of what expertise even means.

We found that a queer approach to failure challenges what we consider to be successful teaching. Rather than viewing success as mastering the structure, for example, by successfully "transmit[ting] a determinate knowledge to subjects who do not possess this knowledge" (Althusser, 1964, p. 152, as cited in Rancière, 1987/1991, p. xvi) or depositing knowledge in students (Freire, 2012), critical pedagogies aim to question and emancipate. Said differently, rather than being determined to reach a certain goal and viewing failure as a necessary pit-stop of improvisational breakdown on the path toward that goal, a queer approach to failure means losing your way, forging new paths, "exploring and mapping … [and] detouring" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 24). Rather than "put[ting] the student on a trail" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 21), a queer approach to success and failure leaves the trail to question the destination and the trail itself, to question who determined the destination as well as who said that one must strive towards it. It thus signifies the instance where a student or teacher "is unwilling or unable to reproduce a given ideology" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 25). In stark opposition to a close-ended understanding of success and failure (either as dead-end or pit-stop), pedagogy in the spirit of queer and other emancipatory approaches is open, where open means "questioning, open to unpredictable outcomes, not fixed on a telos, unsure, adaptable, shifting, flexible, and adjustable" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 16).

Ultimately, rather than viewing failure as something that is to be avoided, or "an opportunity to begin again," such a queer understanding of failure follows Crisp (1968) when he states that "If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style" (p. 196). We hope that the examples and stories from our interviewees demonstrate the importance of failure and risk-taking for excellence in pedagogy, and how the different notions of failure as pit-stop and failure as losing one's way are both generative and can lead to pedagogy that is not only excellent, but also emancipatory.

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