Feminist pedagogical requirements of vulnerability in writing failure: Bad claims and worse reviews

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Cover Page Footnote
[1] As they can.

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In the graduate qualitative methods class, as we discuss revisions, I dig out my ugliest review letters (hopefully you never got them). I make copies and we read them together. This reading is, of course, impacted by my embodiment and status. We examine the comments, the harsh comments, and the embarrassing comments (we all have oversights). Students are floored. They ask, “How did you ever recover from those comments?” During our discussion, questions return to taking feedback, ego hits, and moving forward. We return to the question again and again: How do we handle harsh evaluations of our work and, often implicitly, ourselves? In reflecting on this conversation, I consider our academic socialization and how we participate in the academic conversation, without passing out.

Every year, we welcome new cohorts of students into our classrooms and programs with big dreams, some that they will be future faculty. However, the challenge of writing and research can detour many. Writing challenges can compound other access issues that shape students’ sense of belonging and also persistence in the classroom. If our students are to continue in high education and with confidence in the classroom, then we, as feminist scholars, need to employ practices that create better understandings of the challenges and rewards in writing, as well as our students’ inherent capabilities in achieving great outcomes.

Roadblocks

We understand the many persistent and pressing problems that push back against our students’ chances of success. From individuals entering with writing anxiety (Wynne et al., 2014), to fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2000), working with unrelenting stereotype threat (Steele, 2010), to negotiating feelings of imposter syndrome, students face unrelenting emotions that can limit their education beyond the traditional challenges of the classroom (Brookfield, 2015). Learning academic writing requires an understanding of the academic road running (non-linear paths) that takes place in educational growth (Brookfield, 2015). Students need to see the steps forward that we make when we get a revise and resubmit, but also the steps back when the theory section no longer works. Students need to be shown that the difference between prolific writers and students is a resource issue (time, feedback, mentoring, etc.) with ties to power.

This is why it is imperative that we enact feminist pedagogy in our classrooms. At the center of feminist pedagogy are calls to engage in our vulnerability, attend to issues of identity and power, remove power barriers that hamper the classroom, and also attend to the emotionality of learning. As feminists, we should avoid normalizing writing as one linear path forward, but rather as knowing the pitfalls and problems associated with approaches, channels, and gatekeepers. By engaging in vulnerability and sharing our own challenges, we work against

1 I am a seemingly able bodied, white, female, full professor, so this act of vulnerability is not with the same risks that other might experience. There is danger in asking those of us in more vulnerable positions to remove more of the few wrappings of authority. In these instances, it is the responsibility of other faculty colleagues to share their materials that can be used instead. Can your chair share stories of their own challenges?

2 Available on request if you need samples for your students.
the norms of individualism and meritocracy that keeps everyone struggling in their own lane, head down, feeling like shit.

**Considering Alternative Options**

As feminist pedagogues, how do we address this problem? How can we plan for more conversations around the process of writing and research in our classes? Start the semesters by talking about both the joy and challenge in writing. Share your wins first—especially if there is the risk of credibility threat. Mentor and teach from a place of vulnerability. Are you keeping your writing/writing concerns top of mind and front of conversation? Are we normalizing talk around writing challenges with our students?

Before we get to the large writing projects, or even instances where students need to start making their own arguments and claims, we need to make space in both our syllabus and lessons to discuss: 1. That often good things are hard, 2. Hard doesn’t equal bad, and 3. Faculty have failed so many times.

Writing talks might be weekly check ins. Take the time to remind them, we are (X) days/weeks from assignment (X). For me, this means that my goal would be (%) way through the project. Show them how you backtrack your deadlines. Use existing readings as models, talk to students more about what elements of their writing were exemplary and maybe what didn’t work.

Share resources with your students. Incorporate other voices on the challenges of writing, from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, to Schwartz’s (2008) stupidity in scientific research, shadow CV’s, and specific articles as relevant to the course, like challenges in writing autoethnographies (Denker et al., 2020).

Teach students the possible tools of the trade, recognizing that they might not all work for everyone. From SMART goals, to Pomodoros, to writing/accountability teams, and tracking calendars (Silvia, 2018), a tool can be transformative. Consider sharing your own tracking documents as models.

We should also be modeling good habits for students, enacting transparency. Consider writing with them. If there is a semester long project, can you match up one of your current studies with the course work. This might not be a clean match, but having students see your process (planning, struggling, tracking, etc.) and you do the work is important.

Help students in establishing a work contract at the start of the semester. Central to this contract is knowing yourself and examining your past work. Students consider questions like: When do you work best? What are their goals for the semester? What tools are they going to use to stay on track? What steps for accountability will they put in place? How will they reward themselves when they hit goals? Having a plan up front for writing normalizes these conversations and offers a point to return to in the semester.

Build process assignments in the class for larger assignments. Acknowledge the iterative nature of learning to write well requires also supporting a revision-based process of course work. We cannot ethically discuss the 1000 hours approach to skill building, and then assign an end of term paper without stages. Although un-scaffolded final projects work better with our workloads, they do not work with an interest in making higher education more equitable. Students who inherently think they belong will continue along without concerns or fears of a
major project, whereas those who feel less invited will continue to see this as one other reason that they should not step through the door.

**Moving Forward**

The struggle to engage in the academic conversation is not new. Neither is students struggling to create papers they feel meet the standards they see in published research. What needs to be renewed is our feminist commitments to vulnerability, identity, power sharing and the whole student, allowing us to create more accessible points for entering the academic conversation. Futures with less threatening failures are possible for students with our collective commitment to radical honesty and vulnerability in failure.

**References**


