Possibilities from Failure: Pedagogical Dispatches from OSCLG

Desirée D. Rowe
Towson University, drowe@towson.edu

Jessica Kratzer
Northern Kentucky University, kratzerj1@nku.edu

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As Berlant (2011) notes in their explanation of cruel optimism, our lives are shaped through attachments to ideas or objects that move us forward towards an imagined ideal life. As we grow up, these ideas and objects drive our goals or paralyze us with fear. Ideas and objects of the ideal life shape our everyday performances of self and our expectations of others. Our paths are charted by the cruel optimism of possibility for a better life, a happier life, a richer life. These ideas and objects, though, are cruel because they don’t really exist and ignore the implications of race, class, ability, sexuality, or gender in the hope of imagining a bright and shiny utopian futurity. We are doomed to never attain this ideal. We are doomed to fail.

While some enjoy this ministry of cruelty (“that’s how we did it when I was young!”), for this conference we sought to create a space that refuses the reproduction of cruelty and the never-ending drive towards the ideal. Conference participants answered the call to unlearn their objects of cruelty and reframe orientations to a gritty materiality that is a reparative reading of failure. Following Sedgewick (2003), a reparative reading of failure recovers possibility within the cruelty. The hope we find in the possibility of reparation not only moves us forward but motivates us to know more about failure as feminist scholars and educators.

The contributions in this issue Special Issue of Feminist Pedagogy were presented at the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender’s (OSCLG) 46th annual conference held in October 2023. As the co-planners, we wanted to choose a theme that has touched everyone and one that we have seen play out in all aspects of life. We chose failure because it is universal, a constant, a cornerstone of humanity, and is among the most genuine of experiences. Whether it is a failure of small measure or a devastating one, we all experience it. Yet, failing allows us the opportunity to repair, to learn about ourselves and others, reshape our lived experiences, express vulnerability, explore recovery, and to move forward. Our goal for the conference was to open the conversation about failure through embracing it as a normal part of life rather than an anomaly. The discussions surrounding failure were vast, which further supported the idea that failure is universal.

In this special issue, we see how the conversation about failure and its reparations continues with pedagogical ideas and critiques. We offer a brief synopsis of each contribution beginning with the original teaching activities. First, while this teaching activity is framed within the public speaking classroom, Fredenburg’s approach and learning objectives can offer any instructor guidance on reparatively imagining failure within the classroom. Using debriefing, explanation, and assessment techniques rooted in feminist pedagogy, Unraveling Communication Failure guides students towards a reflexive self-assessment that pushes back against hegemonic tropes of failure within the university setting. Second, in response to masculinist (and colonialist) understandings of failure (and success), Crouse-Dick reimagines the Introduction to Communication Studies course through the framework of the Slow Movement. Through two weeks and four in person class sessions, Crouse-Dick offers instructors a material way to, first, frame what failure means within the discipline. Second, they deconstruct our sedimted masculinist logics of failure through self-compassion. We encourage you to read (and re-read) this piece through those same logics that Crouse-Dick advocates for using in the classroom.

This special issue also includes critical commentaries that provoke additional conversations about failure and reparation in pedagogy. Denker opens her piece by marking failures that we have all (haven’t we all?) experienced – that of the harsh anonymous peer.
review. Using her own harsh reviews, Denker implores us to make visible our own failures to our students as a way of power sharing and engagement. This vulnerability, Denker argues, pushes back against the norms of neoliberal, masculinist, and colonist institutions that we labor for. The sharing of peer reviews is just one strategy among many that Denker offers that recognizes both the faculty member and the student as a whole person. This recognition of emotionality and personhood is vital in doing the work of feminist pedagogy.

Through a discussion of her inclusive teaching practices, Scott offers ungrading as a “salve to the sting of fear of failure.” Scott’s commentary marks how we can engage students where they are, instead of foisting our own expectations and judgements on them. Scott’s provocation also offers the instructor more freedom in the process of grading in pushing aside the expectations (and fear of failure) from a letter grade towards more holistic, and potentially creative, feedback.

Like everyone else, it seems that that we are consistently in meetings about AI in the classroom. Kerber’s piece enters the conversation at just the right time. She offers us a distinctive perspective on the ChatGPT and, more broadly, AI debate as a generative rather than punitive space of pedagogy. I’m reminded of the time, in my own department, when we were called to arms in the battle against AI. I remember chatting with some folks afterwards, joking that we never signed up for this kind of pedagogy. I don’t battle anyone in the classroom. Kerber’s perspective reframes a pedagogy of worry to one of cautious possibility through renewed approach to assessment, opening the door to a feminist pedagogy in dialogue (rather than opposition) with our students.

Clark’s commentary centers on a much-needed investigation on the relationality between an instructor’s queer identity disclosure in the classroom and student (especially queer student) well-being. Clark offers a strong summation of both positive and negative implications of disclosure and reminds us that there are contextual dangers for the instructor as well. With a call for more research, Clark offers a roadmap to continuing this important conversation for feminist pedagogues.

Runge’s commentary emerges from their own experiences with student mental health within the community college classroom. As an instructor, Runge invites us to think about the structures of power in the classroom via homework and attendance policies. Runge’s classroom activities demonstrate this impulse through effectively centering the classroom space in both inclusivity and gratitude that create a safe space for students to recalibrate their understandings of failure.

Finally, this special issue offers a social justice strategy that offers readers resources for instructor growth and education. Ledgerwood’s piece centers Black students and their fears of failure within academia, especially writing. Through an explanation of Critical Language Awareness and an advocacy for Black linguistic justice, the move is clear: white instructors must do better for their Black students. And there are plenty of options outlined in the piece. Ledgerwood reassures us, “I know this is a lot to do” and well it might be. But they have compiled additional resources and guidance that make this social justice work coalitional. We encourage readers to check out those resources, because this is really (all of) our work.

The essays in this special edition have helped to open conversations about failure and its reparative possibilities for feminist scholars and instructors. We hope for more conversations about failure, and more pedagogy addressing failure, in the future.
References