



Welcome to “Failure Club”

Supporting Intrinsic Motivation, Sort of, in College Writing

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This article examines the challenges of supporting a generative orientation toward failure in learning. By generative failure, I mean students pursuing intellectual and creative challenges that do not lead to polished finished products or other tangible metrics of accomplishment, but that do lead to greater (if less salient) experiential rewards than would be possible if every task converged toward more traditional signifiers of “success.” In conceptualizing failure as an opportunity for anti-teleological growth, this approach reflects Jack Halberstam’s (2011: 2–3) argument that under “certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.” As I examine below, this approach also situates itself amid strains of generative thinking about failure in rhetoric and composition. In fact, for students across English studies, the learning rewards of failure potentially include: finding unexpected and poignant connections between disparate ideas or domains of knowledge, cultivating a more nuanced understanding of complex concepts, and composing compelling and vibrant (if unruly) texts in various genres and modes.

However, efforts to make failure generative are constrained by the institutional design of formal schooling in the United States. Various reasons contribute to this problem, but I contend that perhaps the most impactful ones involve the affective, discursive, and material relationships that the education system manufactures between failure and motivation. In contem-

porary American society, the prevailing ideology of motivation is that human beings are driven by material incentives and disincentives; psychologist Barry Schwartz (2015: 7) calls this the “incentive theory of everything.” Formal education operationalizes this ideology via grades; the standardized tests, drills, and surveillance that are now ubiquitous features of the accountability movement; and the performance-based incentives that policy makers foisted on schools through (failure-phobic) initiatives like No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Every Student Succeeds. However, while such extrinsic rewards drive people to work harder under some circumstances—especially when work is repetitive and algorithmic—scholars of motivation argue that in general people work with greater creativity, persistence, and focus when they find the work intrinsically rewarding. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (1985), who are among the most prominent theorists of intrinsic motivation, posit that humans are driven by three basic psychological needs: having autonomy to choose which activities to pursue and how to pursue them, becoming competent at these activities, and feeling connected to other people. Neither intrinsic- nor extrinsic-based theories of motivation offer an unvarnished window into human nature, but they do have significant ramifications; of most relevance to my purposes here, they have great power to shape student perceptions of failure. Following Deci and Ryan, I argue that within environments that foster intrinsic motivation, failure represents constructive feedback in an ongoing process of growth, thus supporting students’ deep engagement with learning; within environments characterized by extrinsic motivation, failure too often causes psychic harm.

My own motivation to understand motivation and its relationship to failure emerged from years of struggling to cultivate civic and political engagement among college students. As I have written elsewhere, these efforts began with teaching students how to go public with their writing, but recently I have focused more on the question of why to pursue public writing, a question that seems more pressing in a neoliberal ecosystem so focused on individual responsibility (Feigenbaum 2012). In shifting from how to why, I sought to help students reorient their professional aspirations toward social change. Instead, I was stymied by a basic pedagogical conundrum, in that my primary tools for motivating students were the same carrots and sticks that lead most of us, like good subjects of the neoliberal state, to prioritize personal responsibility and career advancement. Over time, I came to believe that beyond civic disengagement, this problem fuels disaffection with formal education in general. To be sure, some English studies teachers explicitly seek to enhance intrinsic motivation. Ruth Kaplan and Kimberly O’Neill

(2018), for instance, discuss their efforts to promote autonomy amid the constraints of required literature courses. In fact, any teacher who supports student-centered learning at least implicitly supports intrinsic motivation; as Kaplan and O'Neill point out, the "aims of the student-centered classroom are closely aligned with increasing student autonomy" (33–34). Nevertheless, most students come to us driven more by extrinsic rewards, and English studies has insufficiently grappled with the pedagogical challenges of shifting students' motivational allegiance. In this article, then, I investigate the prospects of cultivating intrinsic motivation within extrinsically oriented institutional environments.¹ I focus on college writing, but schools begin shaping students' affective relationship to motivation—and to failure—early on, meaning that the issues I address here bear not only on English studies but the broader education system.

I first juxtapose what Deci and Ryan call autonomy-supportive instruction, which privileges intrinsic motivation, with controlling instruction, which privileges extrinsic motivation. I emphasize how controlling education induces fear and anxiety about failure and, in turn, negatively impacts student engagement; this anxiety is especially palpable for writing. I then address the complicated role of failure in rhetoric and composition, highlighting threads of generative failure in queer writing pedagogy and contract grading. Regarding the latter, I argue that while contract graders seek to support intrinsic motivation by establishing trust with students, they are compromised by the enculturated effects of controlling education. Nevertheless, although the institutions we represent constrain our practices, there is value in seeing how extensively we can push back against these constraints. Toward this end, I discuss the lessons of "Failure Club," a course I designed with the expressed intent of supporting student autonomy. Inspired by the eponymous concept whereby people pursue lifelong dreams they previously avoided owing to overriding fears of failure, this course represented a prototype, or what design thinkers (and fans of failure) Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (2016: 81) call a way to "test the waters" through small-scale responses to big problems. They explain, "It is okay for prototypes to fail—they are supposed to—but well-designed prototypes teach you something about the future" (81). As a prototype, Failure Club provided important feedback about the challenges of autonomy-supportive education. Based on these experiences, I contend that helping students reconceptualize motivation and failure is an ethically, affectively, and progressively critical component of writing pedagogy. However, as with contract grading, we have to earn the trust of students, who are often (and rightly) skeptical and conflicted, because the

incentives-based system students are accustomed to is itself untrusting of them.² We cannot expect trust to come freely, and pedagogically speaking, we may have to meet students more than halfway. Put another way, the pursuit of trust amid systemic mistrust, and of intrinsic motivation amid enculturated extrinsic motivation, is itself a Failure Club project.

In situating autonomy support as a progressive pedagogy, I recognize that for many justice-oriented teachers, this approach may seem unusual. On one hand, autonomy support resonates closely with goals traditionally placed under the umbrella of critical pedagogy, particularly the idea of liberating students from the politically and economically coercive structure of formal education. Ira Shor (1988: 35), one of the most influential critical pedagogues, sees his praxis as “situated in the life, language, culture, and themes of the students.” For Shor, the teacher-student dynamic creates a “vacuum into which students pour their own meaning,” thus helping them learn to “think autonomously” and to “find their own authentic voice” (35–36). However, Failure Club did not explicitly cultivate critical consciousness, a goal associated with Paulo Freire and various American educators who, like Shor, hoped that critically awakened students would engage in institutional critique and collective action. In fact, critical pedagogy has produced such backlash in recent decades that, as Kristopher M. Lotier (2017: 151) notes, where this praxis was “once acclaimed, it now finds itself roundly opposed.” Recounting Freire’s admonition that progressive American educators “may need to conceive of their practices and theories in terms radically different from those” Freire himself proposed (153), Lotier calls for pragmatic responses to the impact of neoliberalism on the education system. As someone who, like Lotier, supports the political goals of critical pedagogy but who struggles with the ethical and practical concerns of raising critical consciousness in spaces of formal education, I too seek to support progressivism by “not following Freire.”³ Hence, as my evaluation of Failure Club will show, establishing environments where students experience generative failure does not, and cannot, guarantee that students will become social activists, although Ryan and Deci (2000: 74) note a “more positive relation between autonomy and collectivistic attitudes than between autonomy and individualistic attitudes.” Just as importantly, I argue that the prevailing system, driven as it is by incentives and debilitating failure, is highly conducive to the neoliberal state, where citizenship is esteemed entirely via one’s participation in the market economy. In other words, the system we have now—what one might call the neoliberal anxiety agenda—does guarantee that most students will not become activists.

The shift from controlling education to autonomy-supportive education can, then, be a real, if modest, strike against neoliberalism.

The Role of Autonomy in How Students Approach Failure

Before examining approaches to failure in rhetoric and composition, I want to address how autonomy-supportive and controlling environments shape student motivation and, in turn, their affective relationship to failure. For, among the three needs associated with intrinsic motivation—autonomy, competence, and connectedness—autonomy most significantly impacts student engagement with the curriculum. Deci and Richard Flaste (1995: 34) explain that a sense of autonomy “encourages people to fully endorse what they are doing; it pulls them into the activity and allows them to feel a greater sense of volition.” In education, supporting autonomy “means being able to take the other person’s perspective and work from there. It means actively encouraging self-initiation, experimentation, and responsibility, and it may very well require setting limits. But autonomy support functions through encouragement, not pressure” (42). Hence, when a student has freedom to set personally meaningful goals, competence and connectedness emerge via self-driven engagement with the learning process, especially feedback from experts and peers; as Kaplan and O’Neill (2018: 34) put it, “Autonomy and intrinsic motivation are mutually constitutive.” Competence is most strongly experienced when one pursues an optimal challenge within the zone of proximal development—that is, when a task is just beyond the edge of one’s current abilities. To feel competent, one need not be the best; rather, “one need only take on a meaningful personal challenge and give it one’s best” (Deci and Flaste 1995: 66). Optimal challenges demonstrate the benefits of generative failure because people in the zone of proximal development will make frequent mistakes as they (at times clumsily) work to extend their capabilities. Following Jean Piaget, Deci and Ryan (1985: 123–24) note that children naturally pursue optimal challenges for the joys of discovery, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Diane Eyer (2004) emphasize that for children, learning emerges naturally from play. In other words, when engaged in personally meaningful tasks, children perceive the experience of rigor and struggle as consistent with the experience of joy. Only with the commencement of schooling do children, now transformed into students, come to expect tangible rewards.

And once extrinsic rewards enter the picture, they can displace learning for its own sake. This motivational shift can also suck the joy out of rigor

because, when students become “alienated” from the “vitality and excitement” of intrinsic motivation, they push themselves “to do what they think they must do” to satisfy the demands of those doling out the rewards (Deci and Flaste 1995: 29). The primary distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, then, is that the former supports autonomy while the latter restricts it. Unfortunately, as Kaplan and O’Neill (2018: 27) explain, “Over the last half-century, an impressive amount of research has demonstrated that when people perceive themselves as operating under the external control of others, their intrinsic motivation diminishes.” Controlling education of this sort particularly undermines tasks that require creativity and cognitive flexibility (Amabile 1996), such as the inquiry-based projects that contemporary writing teachers routinely ask students to tackle.⁴ Absent its playful elements, rigor can feel artificially imposed and monotonous. According to Jack Halberstam (2011: 6), rigor becomes a “code word” for “disciplinary correctness,” signaling a “form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing,” but not allowing for “visionary insights or flights of fancy.”

To be sure, competence and connectedness are also experienced in controlling environments, if in very different ways. Making students more competent is, after all, a key purpose of school, and students will inevitably forge relationships with peers, teachers, and administrators. However, students have little choice over the skills and domains they should demonstrate competence at; moreover, the system sets the terms of their connectedness, especially their hierarchical relationships with teachers and administrators. Students often work hard in controlling environments, but absent the chance to pursue personally meaningful goals, their affective relationship to failure can morph from generative discomfort into a more debilitating fearfulness. To use Ryan and Deci’s (2000) language, this is the point where students become alienated from intrinsic motivation. In fact, absent autonomy, students often dial back efforts to little beyond what is necessary to receive their material rewards (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 1999), and they are more likely to engage in behaviors such as plagiarism (Gray 2013). Of course, some students sustain interest in learning for its own sake, at least in certain subjects, but I can attest that discussions with students over many years strongly support the idea that learning unencumbered by incentives is the exception.

Controlling education is inconsistent with the intellectual struggle and creative risk taking that I call generative failure. Instead, failure operates as a source of anxiety, or what one might call the spectral other of success. And as developmental psychologist Peter Gray (2013: 80) explains, anxiety

“forces thought along well-worn channels” rather than toward previously unexplored mental landscapes. Moreover, evidence suggests that failure-related anxiety has intensified for students in recent years. For instance, associations between grades and failure now extend considerably beyond the actual F grade, especially among students at the most prestigious colleges, for whom it can feel as if only two grades exist: A and F. In a *New York Times* article about how highly selective colleges seek to relieve students’ fear of failure, a Smith College counselor explains, “We’re not talking about flunking out of pre-med or getting kicked out of college. . . . We’re talking about students showing up in residential life offices distraught and inconsolable when they score less than an A-minus” (Bennett 2017). But this “if you ain’t first, you’re last” mentality has had trickle-down effects. At my own primarily working-class, Hispanic-serving institution, I teach many pre-law students, and each semester I hear widespread apprehension that grades less than an A will diminish application prospects. Perception becomes reality because it scarcely matters whether a B (or worse!) will significantly impact students’ postgraduate opportunities as long as they believe it will. Failure can be even more toxic for students who struggle academically, including many of those in first-year and (especially) basic writing courses. As Rebecca Cox explains in *The College Fear Factor* (2009: 27–28), her aptly named ethnography of community college students, “Math and composition . . . evoked by far the greatest anxiety for the vast majority of students. Students’ fear of the composition course was particularly intense.” Joyce Inman (2017: 11) similarly notes that for students in basic writing courses, “being labeled as nontraditional students in need of additional assistance leads to, at minimum, a fear of failure.” Years of messages about not being “good writers” often undergird these anxieties, particularly for those outside the cultural and linguistic mainstream.

Tensions around Failure in Composition

The interrelated consequences of controlling education are reflected in composition’s historically vexed relationship to failure. The field emerged in response to perceptions of students as failed writers, first by those charged with assessing the writing of incoming Harvard freshmen in the late nineteenth century, and soon after by institutions of higher education nationwide. As Asao B. Inoue (2014: 331) explains, “Educators produce failure because it suggests something to audiences at their institutions and outside of them, something about the rigor of writing programs, about standards held (against many students), and about teachers doing their job right.” Hence the “failure” of some students to meet institutional standards certifies the “suc-

cess” of those who do, and of those who assess them. Of course, as the field developed, scholars conceptualized more generative approaches to failure. Inoue highlights Mina Shaughnessy’s argument that the local and global errors—what we might call “mini-failures”—made by basic writers have logic and meaning. However, he notes Shaughnessy’s own failure to address how dominant linguistic conventions marginalize and suppress alternative ways of language making, thus limiting students’ opportunities to take intellectual and creative risks. According to this sociocultural view, “Writing failure stems from irreconcilable differences between expectations of White, middle-class literacies in school and the raced, cultured, classed, and gendered home literacies that learners attempt to use in school” (331). Scholars associated with movements such as Students’ Right to Their Own Language and translanguaging have shown that assessments about the correctness of language use are situated amid institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic imbalances of power—that is, failure is in the eye of an interpellated beholder (Smitherman 1995; Horner et al. 2011; Canagarajah 2013). Other strains of the field have more directly supported autonomy, perhaps most notably expressivism, the legacies of which persist even if few scholars name its influence on their work (Goldblatt 2017). A key goal of Peter Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers* (1973) was to liberate writers from the constraints of formal education. Encapsulating the spirit of autonomy, competence, and connectedness, he explains, “This book tries to show how to gain control over your words, but it requires working hard and finding others to work with you” (vii). However, attempts to promote autonomy and messy learning remain inhibited by institutional preoccupations with order and productivity. As Robert McRuer (2006: 151) explains, “Despite a decades-long conversation about process and revision, composition in the corporate university remains a practice that is focused on a fetishized final product whether it is the final paper, the final grade, or the student body with measurable skills.”

Even as many writing teachers embrace failure, then, the institution remains focused on success, which generally means “college and career readiness” (O’Neill et al. 2012: 520). These tensions between autonomy-supportive pedagogical values and controlling institutional imperatives are vividly illustrated in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a joint 2011 publication of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP 2011). The *Framework* ostensibly supports intrinsic motivation and generative failure, as indicated by the inclusion of curiosity, openness, engagement, and creativity among its “habits of mind.” In fact, the

Framework suggests that “creativity is fostered when writers are encouraged to take risks by exploring questions, topics, and ideas that are new to them” (4). And as Patrick Sullivan (2012: 548) explains in his enthusiastic appraisal of the *Framework*, curiosity and openness are the “wellsprings of intrinsic motivation, where passion and engagement begin.” However, despite including multiple citations of motivation theorists, Sullivan overlooks their consistent argument that the school system discourages intrinsic motivation. Granted, the *Framework* was intended more to inject disciplinary voices into public discussions about writing pedagogy than to support intrinsic motivation. But as I argue below, citing intrinsic motivation as a pedagogical value is insufficient to resolve students’ prior conditioning; on the contrary, even when teachers prioritize autonomy, we cannot assume that curiosity and openness will flourish.

In a far less favorable response to the *Framework*, Judith Summerfield and Philip M. Anderson (2012: 546) question the document’s preoccupation with college and career success, which in their estimation neglects the importance of “plunging into ambiguity, uncertainty, and discomfort”—that is, experiencing generative failure. This critique of the success-failure binary was later extended by Daniel Gross and Jonathan Alexander (2016), who called for alternative “frameworks for failure.” Like Summerfield and Anderson, Gross and Alexander challenge the *Framework*’s instrumentalism, which they perceive as depoliticizing writing and eliding opportunities for students to practice institutional and cultural critique. Situating failure amid discourses of queer pedagogy, the authors perceive failure as a way to “reorient [students] against unjust norms” (290). Focusing specifically on basic writing pedagogy, Inman (2017: 16) similarly makes students’ “‘failure’ to place into traditional composition courses” a “starting point for discussions of writing in the academy as politically determined.” These frameworks for failure embody Halberstam’s (2011: 16) autonomy-supportive vision of education that is “open to unpredictable outcomes, not fixed on a telos, unsure, adaptable, shifting, flexible, and adjustable.” To be sure, various scholars note that queer pedagogy is itself destined to fail because its resistance to mainstream conceptions of discipline, order, and success occurs within institutions structured around these social norms (Alexander and Rhodes 2011; Inman 2017; Waite 2017). But Jacqueline Rhodes (2015) argues that even if queer pedagogy must fail, it is worthwhile to “queer” pedagogy, replacing the adjective with a verb and emphasizing process over outcome. Indeed, while not emerging directly from discourses of queer pedagogy, the Failure Club course I examine below exhibits similarly anti-teleological thinking about failure.

In practical terms, perhaps the most concrete obstacles to autonomy support involve grading, and a number of compositionists have confronted this challenge through grading contracts. Inoue (2014), for example, uses contracts to subvert quality-failure—the typical method of evaluating writing based on how closely it meets conventional standards of content and style—in favor of labor-failure. Quality-failure disadvantages students whose demographic and linguistic backgrounds do not conform to middle-class white literacy practices, whereas labor-failure is “most often judged on a binary scale: work is done or not done. . . . Everyone can spend an hour on a draft or write a page. When students don’t, they understand this failure is not a personal judgment about them or their ideas; rather, their failure is an identification of what they have done (or have not done, but could have)” (339). Having implemented contract-based assessment in the first-year writing program at California State University, Fresno, Inoue points to a study showing that, according to blind reviews of final portfolios, labor-failure did not reduce the quality of student writing. Explaining these results, he argues that students “find reasons to learn and grow as writers when their labor is truly honored, and they listen more carefully to feedback when grades are out of the way, perhaps especially because their writing labor is being acknowledged and quality is assumed to be a consequence of that hard labor” (343). For Inoue, the shift from assessing quality to labor produces in turn a motivational shift whereby students, as they come to trust the authenticity of teacher support, begin writing for intrinsic reasons. And just as important as students trusting teachers, he insists, is that “we have to start trusting our students” (344).

I agree wholeheartedly that we have to start trusting students. After all, a core principle of autonomy support is that people are innately driven to learn; therefore, the less we seek to control student behavior, the more engaged they should be. Unfortunately, formal education operates from the premise that students cannot be trusted to learn absent incentives. It is, then, one thing to trust young children who you believe are biologically predisposed to learn; it is another to place such trust in students who, by the time they reach college, have been enculturated in mistrust. In fact, despite his optimism, Inoue notes that motivation was not an explicit focus of his study, and while conceding that not all students respond well to labor-failure, he spends little time addressing why they might find the shift cognitively and affectively jarring. But precisely because quality-failure is so pervasive, it is reasonable for students to question the appeal of labor-failure. For one, as Cathy Spidell and William H. Thelin (2006) have shown, students can cling to familiar assessment systems, and Marcy Bauman (1997: 165) similarly

remarks that when students do not see grades on assignments, anxiety about their standing in the course can lead to “tedious” discussions about contract terms. Joyce Olewski Inman and Rebecca A. Powell’s (2018) study of contract grading in writing courses helps explain this dissonance. Analyzing students’ responses to questions about not receiving traditional grades, Inman and Powell found a wide range of themes, adding that “contradictions arose within individual student responses. A student sounded notes of freedom and improvement with notes of fear. Clarity was both appreciated and yearned for in the same response. These contradictions sounded the dissonance of students’ experiences and pointed to the surprising influence and specter of grades” (38). Inman and Powell’s observations reflect the affective challenges students face when they move from highly controlling educational environments into more autonomy-supportive environments. Even if students dislike the impact grades have on the learning process, “the absence of grades might evoke dissonance and yearning” (36).

Perhaps equally significant is that, the more comprehensive a contract, the less room there is for job crafting—a practice by which people “shape, mold, and redefine” their jobs in order to draw greater personal meaning from work (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001: 180). Job crafting necessitates the use of incomplete contracts, whereby some “job duties are specified explicitly, but many are not” (Schwartz 2015: 58), allowing people significant autonomy over how to carry out their duties. Similarly, to facilitate what one might call assignment crafting, teachers must trust that students will respond conscientiously to the greater responsibility that comes with autonomy. As Barry Schwartz explains, the key is to “make a good faith effort to do whatever it takes to achieve our objective” (59). Such incompleteness can be seen in Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow’s (2009: 252) fuzzy criteria, which highlight what the authors “value most about good writing no matter how indefinable.” To build trust, Danielewicz and Elbow “don’t accuse someone of failing to meet one of these fuzzy criteria (such as ‘no effort’) unless the violation is grossly flagrant (for example, drafts far short of the required length)” (251). And when in doubt, they “take the student’s word for it” (251). I suggest, however, that Danielewicz and Elbow’s efforts to cultivate trust are limited by their grading policy’s hybrid structure. Students receive no grades up to a B, just feedback, but they must meet more conventional standards to obtain an A. Hence this system simultaneously seeks to eliminate grades as a detriment to intrinsic motivation while preserving the A’s “aura of excellence” (251). But as discussed earlier, widespread anxiety about grades means that many students will find a B unsatisfactory. I am therefore skeptical that hybrid grading

contracts create much pedagogical space for students to take intellectual and creative risks.

To be sure, contract grading partially mitigates the affective stakes of failure. However, while directing some attention away from quality, practitioners still surveil student labor fairly closely, indicating a limited commitment to autonomy. Furthermore, as Inman and Powell's (2018) research indicates, students who have endured years of highly controlling education might experience conflicting emotions when they find themselves in less controlling environments. Therefore, I argue that part of supporting generative failure amid the systemic fear of failure means making room for students to potentially behave in ways that—at least initially—suggest greater loyalty to the system they know; this might include working less when we surveil them less and/or producing writing of lower quality when we stop putting grades on assignments. It also means trusting that students can overcome this conditioning, even if it doesn't happen in one semester. Finally, it means accepting that for the students who do embrace failure, the writing they pursue might be a lot messier, if more ambitious, than if grades were foremost on their minds.

So how do we detach the affective experience of failure from what we might call the transcriptive fear of grades lower than an A? I argue that in changing the conditions of failure, teachers are ethically charged to earn students' trust by, for instance, not grading them on how effectively they negotiate these new conditions. That is, when we encourage students to challenge themselves intellectually and creatively, and when we assure them it is okay—even desirable—to produce disorganized, unpolished work, we should be prepared for their skepticism. And, as I examine below, the further we push against institutional norms to establish and maintain trust, the more we confront basic questions about writing pedagogy, including what we mean by rigor. In a sense, we face the prospect of offering students the opportunity to get an A for failing.

Failure Is Encouraged, but Don't Panic! You Can Still Get an A

As mentioned earlier, my interest in the connections between motivation and failure developed from trying, and mostly failing, to cultivate civic and political engagement among students. In my experience, relatively few students have been willing to pursue much community-based work (beyond required service-learning projects) unless it is directly relevant to their careers; the exceptions have mostly been students who were already engaged beforehand. After all, the neoliberal anxiety agenda suggests that community work is

an unjustifiable expenditure of time and labor and, therefore, a recipe for professional disaster. In learning about motivation theory, I came to understand how formal education—despite its supposed charge to create a robust citizenry—ensures most students’ civic disengagement. But this disengagement is linked to students’ immersion in controlling environments, and to the fear of failure these environments engender. So I wondered if supporting autonomy might be a prerequisite for shifting students’ mindsets about failure and, ultimately, about pursuing social change. Then I discovered Failure Club and, in doing so, believed I might finally have found a way to cultivate both an autonomy-supportive community and a generative orientation toward failure.

According to social entrepreneur Philip Kiracofe (2012), one of the concept’s originators, Failure Club was designed to “fundamentally redefine failure” as something “fun, fulfilling, and inspiring.” The basic premise is for seven to ten people to each choose a highly ambitious goal that they have previously avoided due to their fear of failing—examples he offers include pursuing a music career, opening a men’s haberdashery, and winning a horse jumping competition—and spend one year making as much progress toward that goal as possible; club members meet regularly to discuss progress and to provide moral support. By intent, each goal should be impossible to realize in the given time frame, ensuring that each participant will “fail.” According to Kiracofe, with the outcome certain, participants stop fearing failure and end up achieving far greater progress than they imagined possible at the outset. Of course, redefining failure also means redefining success, which Kiracofe characterizes as “what we let ourselves settle for when we are afraid to fail at something truly life defining. Success is comfort, success is justification, success is often disappointing, and it is always short lived.” By contrast, failure “can be incredibly liberating.” As conceived by Kiracofe, Failure Club embodies the autonomy-supportive idea that failure can be transformed from a problem to fear and avoid into a purpose to embrace and celebrate. And for my purposes, Failure Club’s emphasis on process and peer workshopping made it suitable for adaptation in a writing course.

I thus set about reimagining an upper-level course called “Community Writing”—which previously required students to engage audiences beyond the classroom on social issues—as a prototype for a college-based Failure Club, which I proceeded to teach three times over three years. In designing the curriculum, I faced significant logistical challenges because, unlike Kiracofe, I would have to proffer final grades. To cultivate trust, then, I sought to take grades “off the table” by offering a fairly straightforward path to a final

A. On the first day of class, after discussing the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and introducing students to the Failure Club concept, I explained that everyone had begun the term with an A, and that as long as they submitted work on time and were, from my perspective, working “conscientiously,” they would maintain this A. In exchange, they would receive only feedback on assignments. Missed coursework would result in automatic, predetermined grade deductions. I also told students that if I did not think they were working conscientiously, I would warn them, and if the problem continued, their course grade would begin to drop. I was unfamiliar at the time with Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) fuzzy criteria, but my “conscientiousness” clause resembles their efforts to use incomplete contracts. As a fairly mild disincentive against halfhearted engagement, this clause also represented what I hoped to be a minimal concession to institutional (and my own) expectations about rigor—a concept I return to later.

Much of the course writing occurred through journal-based dialogues between each student and me. Journal entries addressed both weekly texts and my comments from prior entries, with topics focusing on the complicated relationships between education, motivation, failure, and health, as well as the constraints and affordances of mastering one’s craft—whether it be writing, music, sports, cooking, and so forth. To build community, I required each student (and myself, as a model) to give a PechaKucha 20 × 20 presentation, whereby a speaker narrates a story as twenty PowerPoint slides progress sequentially every twenty seconds. After the PechaKuchas, students wrote proposals detailing their Failure Club projects, and then they assembled clubs with three to four peers. Over the final six weeks of the term, clubs met once per week in class to discuss progress and to establish goals for the following week. Prior to each meeting, club mates submitted to each other and me a weekly log detailing: 1) how much progress they had made on their weekly goals, 2) what they were excited and/or frustrated about, and 3) what new information they had learned. At the end of the term, students submitted a final portfolio that included project artifacts and an essay evaluating their progress.

Each time I taught the class, students inquired immediately about the extent of their freedom, in some cases proposing project ideas that ostensibly had little to do with writing, which caused tension between my desire to establish trust and institutional expectations about the purpose of writing courses. Should Failure Club projects focus on improving students’ writing, and if so, how narrowly or expansively should the umbrella of what constitutes writing be opened? Operating from the premise that stringent

boundaries on project “legitimacy” would impede autonomy, I erred on the side of expansiveness, allowing students to choose any goal to make progress on, with the students themselves deciding what progress looked like, as long as it involved creating some form of text(s)—in the broadest rhetorical sense of artifacts that convey meaning in culture—and did not put themselves or others in undue physical danger. In allowing this level of freedom, I assumed greater risk of messiness, but embracing messiness was part of the point. This decision also reflects the New London Group’s (1996: 64) perspective that writing teachers must reject purely language-based literacy in favor of a multiliteracies approach “in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes.” However, in making this decision, I was well aware of my privileged position as a tenured professor; I was further aware that, despite the field’s embrace of multiliteracies, many college writing teachers lack autonomy to approach literacy in such an expansive way.

Over the three courses, then, projects took a wide variety of forms. Some students chose writing-centered goals such as composing op-eds, children’s stories, poetry, song lyrics, and, in one case, a campus “disorientation guide.” Others chose projects that require writing, such as stand-up comedy, filming a documentary, and coding, while still others emphasized the mechanical act of writing, such as learning calligraphy. Other goals, however, included learning to paint or draw, becoming proficient at a musical instrument, mastering the culinary arts of one’s nationality, and designing a dress. The majority of projects focused on individual growth, although a few students chose goals such as organizing a charity run, raising awareness about human trafficking, promoting practices of restorative justice, and establishing a writing center in a local high school.

As I reflect on student engagement in the following section, I face one of the most perplexing ironies of formal education. Namely, per the controlling logic of incentives, it is rational for students to anticipate what teachers want, so when students are in fact doing what we want, we have the most reason to suspect their sincerity. It is therefore quite challenging, and perhaps impossible, to assess with confidence how much students’ behavior reflects their genuine thinking. Nevertheless, my guiding principle has been to consider where students’ actions seemed more extrinsically motivated and where more intrinsically motivated; these cautious, though fairly consistent, observations focus on moments of motivational dissonance. Furthermore, because the course could be thought of as my own Failure Club project, and

because I have less epistemologically conflicted access to my own thoughts, I will highlight my own experiences of dissonance, which I hope will be particularly useful to teachers also seeking to promote intrinsic motivation.

Frustrated, but Not Discouraged, by Failure

My Failure Club project, or meta-project, was to enable twenty-plus students in a college writing course to experience generative failure within an autonomy-supportive context, and the first time I taught this course, I was optimistic about how students would respond. By explicitly trying to displace grades as a focal point, by emphasizing the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and by allowing students considerable autonomy over their projects, I believed the course would significantly enhance their engagement with the curriculum. My optimism was bolstered by a sense that, once they understood the premise, most students were excited about the experiment. Throughout the term, class discussions were among the liveliest of my career, and students expressed considerable enthusiasm after choosing projects and assembling clubs. While sitting in on the first week of Failure Club meetings, then, I was taken aback at how many students confessed to having done very little work the previous week. As I listened, my surprise morphed into frustration, and I considered lecturing them about how, labor-wise, these projects should be understood as the equivalent of a research paper. However, this heavy-handed disincentive—essentially a threat that I might lower grades if they did not work harder—would have demonstrated a remarkable lack of resolve to fail on my own part, destroying whatever trust I had earned and negating the purpose of the experiment. After all, I had not made concrete demands about time spent working on projects as long as students submitted logs explaining what weekly goals they had or had not accomplished. If anything, their transparency indicated trust in my assurances that they themselves were responsible for assessing their progress; otherwise they would be incentivized to “inflate” their hours. So I was frustrated, but not discouraged. In the ensuing weeks, all students made some level of progress, and by the end of the term everyone had portfolio materials to submit. Some students made important breakthroughs, including an aspiring stand-up comedian who had never actually stood in front of an audience to tell jokes. By the end of the term, he had performed at multiple open mic nights, and he expressed considerable satisfaction at having overcome this hurdle. But the more consistent outcome in all three semesters was that many students did not immerse themselves in their projects as I had envisioned, and it is safe to say that a

fair number put in less work than they would have directed toward a more traditional term paper.

In reflecting on this gap between students' expressed excitement and the actual work they put into their projects, I have realized that in developing the course, I did not anticipate the motivational dissonance students would experience after being conditioned for so long to respond to coursework through the filter of incentives and then encountering a professor who wanted them to ignore this conditioning. Such dissonance closely resembles the conflicted responses to contract grading observed by Inman and Powell (2018: 40), who argue that grades are "affective carriers in our institutions and classrooms"; crucially, these affective associations persist even when the grades themselves disappear. My efforts to cultivate intrinsic motivation forced students to navigate contradictory narratives about what drives people to work hard, and it was unrealistic to expect them to shift easily from one motivational ideology to another, as if the cognitive and affective impact of their prior experiences could be erased. Instead, from reading weekly logs, observing Failure Club meetings, and facilitating discussions, I believe that, whether consciously or not, many students perceived their projects as extracurricular work. Although pursued for a class, projects felt both less urgent and more discretionary than day-to-day tasks associated with jobs, family responsibilities, graduate school applications, and other courses. Many pre-law seniors, for instance, took LSAT prep classes during the same semester, and they frequently cited study schedules as taking time from their projects.

But even if most students did not display the highly engaged effort I predicted, a majority seemed to support the idea of the course. For one, I spent very little time haggling over grades, even with students who did not submit all assignments and thus received less than a final A, which implies that students understood and trusted the assessment structure I had established. And students were consistently open about the weeks they put little (or no) time into their projects. More importantly, students did seem to experience failure as generative rather than debilitating. That is, most expressed frustration about aspects of their projects, such as the novice chefs whose recipes produced not particularly good-looking or tasty meals, and the budding musicians whose instruments produced more atonal squawks than aesthetically pleasing notes, but I did not hear students expressing discouragement. Rather, most conveyed enjoyment at having taken on a personally meaningful goal absent the pressure of having to "succeed" for their efforts to be worthwhile, especially a few older students who had been putting off such projects

for years. And if failure comes to be less a source of fear and more a source of manageable frustration, then students might benefit in long-lasting ways.

Students' motivational dissonance might also reflect Failure Club's orientation toward rigor. As discussed earlier, controlling environments sap joy from the learning process, whereas autonomy support suggests that if students pursue intrinsically motivated projects, learning will feel more like play even as students work hard. This idea challenges cultural and institutional narratives that work cannot be simultaneously rigorous and playful. But this counternarrative also presented students with another affective conflict, in that few expressed prior experiences in which work also felt joyful. In other words, because projects felt like play, students may have worked on them less. This conclusion is tentative, but I myself certainly experienced the dissonance of rigor. If obvious in hindsight, I did not foresee how supporting autonomy would create tensions with my own fear of being, or being perceived by my institution as, insufficiently "rigorous." Because low grades vouchsafe the integrity of teachers, writing programs, and universities, a course that intended for everyone to finish with an A would, by presumption, fail to safeguard the institution's "aura of excellence." In my privileged position, no one with supervisory powers oversees my classes or the grades I submit—or at least, no one has come knocking on my office door—which is often not the case for writing teachers. But I too have internalized norms about what constitutes rigor. In teaching Failure Club, I ceded considerable control over both the quantity and quality of student work, and in reflecting on this loss of control, I have struggled to overcome assumptions that any course producing nearly all As cannot be intellectually rigorous, cannot be properly assimilating students into the university, and cannot be making students toil sufficiently for their carrots. In other words, students in such a course must be playing their instructor for a fool. This is not a problem with an easy solution, but in the final section, I offer provisional ideas for how teachers can negotiate it.

To What Extent Can (and Should) Teachers Support Intrinsic Motivation?

The feedback obtained from teaching Failure Club included insights into how deeply students' orientations to learning have been shaped by incentives. Notably, the course subverted the controlling structure of formal education about as much as institutionally possible, with students choosing personally meaningful projects and enduring minimal surveillance by their teacher; yet, few students immersed themselves in the work. For some readers, these results might indicate that teachers should stick with the autonomy-restrictive

practices to which students (and we ourselves) are accustomed. Others might argue that the course was a pedagogical taunt, asking students to reflect on how poorly the education system has nurtured their interests just as they approached graduation. To be sure, it would be far preferable for students to experience autonomy support from early childhood. But since that is emphatically not the case, students deserve time, and our trust, to navigate the shift to an autonomy-supportive environment. Many of these students will pursue postgraduate education, and perhaps some will insist on greater autonomy, or even advocate for their own children's autonomy in school. Rather than surrendering to students' (and our own) preconditioning, then, I argue that teachers should guide students through the shift.

Supporting intrinsic motivation also means confronting institutional assumptions about grades and academic rigor. Teachers need not adopt Failure Club's grading policy, but I maintain that we cannot support autonomy without reducing the impact grades have on academic engagement. In any case, teaching this course has led me to reconsider whether intellectual rigor is even desirable if it is operationalized in controlling ways. We might instead cultivate a more affect-based rigor, such as the capacity to sit with the discomfort, ambivalence, and doubt that attend the messiness of learning. That is, writing courses will achieve something significant if students learn to ask and provide their own contingent answers to questions like, *Is this the right project?* and *Am I going about this the right way?* This might mean, for example, more readily acknowledging when one has reached a creative dead end, accepting with forbearance the sunk costs of having done so, and forging a different path of inquiry. In fact, this course has placed my capacity for affective rigor in the zone of proximal development, forcing me to ask and provide contingent answers to the question, *"Is this experiment in failure helping me refine my practices and fulfill my perceived obligation to my students, my institution, and my profession?"*

Admittedly, affect-based rigor might be a tough institutional sell. Then again, the broader landscape of education is evolving in ways that make institutional commitments to low grades increasingly suspect. Amid the ascent of "performance metrics," colleges are incentivized to prevent students from flunking out. At my own institution, state funding depends on improving second-year retention and four-year graduation rates, historically a challenge because our students have many other (work, family, life) obligations. The institution's push to meet these metrics has imposed further stress on students, who are goaded (primarily through financial aid) to take more credits than they can necessarily handle. Hence grading practices such

as those employed in Failure Club could both reduce student anxiety and, ironically, help the institution negotiate this latest phase of the accountability movement. My own intent was not to inflate grades but to free students from worrying so much about grades; nevertheless, depending on their circumstances, teachers might justify autonomy-supportive practices on terms that meet broader institutional needs.

Readers might also ask whether pursuing generative failure merits the opportunity costs, particularly in first-year courses. For although students wrote a lot through journals, project proposals, weekly logs, and final analysis papers, I provided feedback primarily in regard to content, paying little attention to formalistic concerns of style and mechanics. Moreover, students did not practice “writing about writing”—style activities such as grappling with threshold concepts, producing genre analyses, or other assignments explicitly designed to promote transfer (Beaufort 2007; Adler-Kassner, Majewski, and Koshnick 2012). However, if one accepts that generative failure is a vital component of learning, then detaching failure from shame, humiliation, and anxiety is a vital pedagogical goal. Part of becoming a good writer is dealing with failure and staying motivated—not despite but because of that failure. First-year writing teachers so often address problems carried over from K–12 contexts, such as students’ immersion in formulaic writing for standardized tests. Considering the impact of students’ dispositions toward failure on how they approach writing, is the system’s inability to make failure generative—or rather, its success in making failure debilitating—any less important an issue to tackle? As I have argued here, increasing students’ trust in the assessment process is a necessary step toward making failure generative; accordingly, my back-and-forth dialogues with students, via which I provided ongoing, grade-free feedback on their ideas and projects, was an important trust-building exercise. Though unconventional in terms of what students composed, and how I responded to what students composed, this was very much a writing course.

Finally, critical pedagogues might argue that, because most students’ projects focused on personal growth, the course reinforces an individualist ethos. In fact, I could have required students to choose community-oriented projects, but doing so would have also meant curtailing autonomy. In any case, Failure Club promotes a communitarian sense of students being in the process together, and most students seemed to appreciate the chance both to observe and encourage their peers’ progress. Furthermore, in recalling my original motivation for designing this course, I emphasize that students’ enculturation in controlling institutions leaves them relentlessly apprehensive about how

their GPAs will affect their capacity to obtain (and maintain) jobs that provide financial security and enable them (someday) to pay off their debts. Living amid the neoliberal anxiety agenda, “students often struggle to imagine their educational experience as anything but job preparation” (Lotier 2017: 170). Even more importantly, working to effect political change means facing setbacks and failures, and it requires taking risks that might include being suspended or expelled from school, being fired from one’s job, being arrested or beaten at a political rally, or even worse. The societal status quo is reinforced when students are too anxious to take on ambitious academic risks, which do not offer safe passage to an A-heavy transcript, let alone civic and political risks. Therefore, if we want students to change their communities for the better, we must first change how they themselves understand and experience failure. As it relates to progressive education, subverting the fear of failure can help establish the groundwork of increased political engagement over time. Failure Club was a modest, messy, and generative step in this direction.

Notes

I would like to thank Rob Cosgrove, Isis Artze-Vega, Vanessa Sohan, Veronica House, Rachael Wendler Shah, Michael Creeden, as well as the editors and anonymous reviewers at *Pedagogy*, for their invaluable feedback throughout the many revisions of this essay.

1. The terms *intrinsic motivation*, *extrinsic motivation*, and *autonomy* might raise questions in this postprocess era of rhetoric and composition. As Kristopher M. Lotier (2016: 362) explains, postprocess theorists reject cognitive “internalism,” understanding cognition as an evolving, reciprocal network of inter-relationships that shape and are shaped by an ecology of material, cultural, and psychosocial forces. Postprocess theory might lead one to question whether there is any such thing as “intrinsic” motivation, since activities people pursue for their own sake still emerge from engagement with the external world. I concede that *intrinsic motivation*, *extrinsic motivation*, and *autonomy* are imperfect terms, but they are useful for understanding student engagement (and disengagement), in that a learning environment’s ideology of motivation significantly influences the distributed processes—that is, selves—of the individuals who constitute, and are constituted by, that environment.
2. I use *trust* in the sense conveyed by psychologists Geoffrey L. Cohen, Claude M. Steele, and Lee D. Ross (1999: 1314), who argue that in matters of assessment, students must trust the motives of the people evaluating them to “safely invest their effort, and even their identity, in the task before them.” That is, motivation and trust are directly connected. According to Cohen, Steele, and Ross, trust is particularly important for students of color, who often have good reason to doubt whether educational institutions, and the people who represent these institutions, want them to thrive.

3. Arguments about critical pedagogy are not generally conceptualized in terms of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation. However, one of the most commonly lodged charges against critical pedagogy is that its practitioners impose political agendas on students, who feign support to avoid jeopardizing their grades (Villanueva 1991; Gale 1996; Miller 1998; Lynch 2009). Reframed in terms of motivation, this critique indicates that the project of raising critical consciousness relies on, and exploits, students' extrinsic motivation to obtain high grades even as critical pedagogues decry the system that induces such behavior. For skeptics, then, the goal of supporting student autonomy is contradicted by the actual pedagogical practices critical teachers employ.
4. In some circumstances, motivation emerges from an interplay of extrinsic and intrinsic factors, as with athletes who enjoy—and find creatively invigorating—the competition for trophies and titles, but who also find deeply satisfying the process of mastering the craft of their sport (Bronson and Merryman 2013: 18–19).

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