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Apprenticed to Failure: Learning from the Students We Can't Help

Steve Sherwood

Most of us can recall the clients who got away, the ones who needed our help but left the writing center without getting it. Perhaps my own most glaring failure was Byron, a returning student whom I suspect suffered from a number of what we now call learning disabilities. I was a new graduate student when Byron first came to see me with a paper full of starts and stops, logical inconsistencies, and randomly chosen words. He asked if he could record our conversation, explaining that an accident had left him with an impaired short-term memory. The tape recorder sounded like a good idea. But as I commented about particular aspects of his paper, Byron frequently stopped the tape, rewound it, and replayed my earlier remarks. These unpredictable interruptions were unnerving and derailed my train of thought. I would leave out points I'd intended to mention and lose touch with insights I'd had about his essays. I probably should have seen our fragmented sessions together, which moved with the same jolting starts and stops as his prose, as a window into Byron's thinking and writing processes (and perhaps the key to solving his problems, assuming they could be solved). Instead, Byron's eccentric use of the tape recorder unsettled and frustrated me, as did his perhaps related difficulty with modulating his voice and keeping his balance (sometimes he would literally fall out of his chair). We worked for hours at a time, over most of two academic quarters, and made little detectable progress in his writing. I had no training in helping students cope with learning disabilities, much less with the effects of a severe brain injury. With good reason, I felt incapable of assisting Byron. And so he and I suffered together until one day, after plaintively wondering if he would ever "get it,"

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he simply stopped coming.

Such failures leave bitter memories. They threaten our self-concept as benevolent and capable helpers. If only for the moment before denial cuts in, we feel incompetent; and few of us enjoy acknowledging that at times we simply aren't up to the job, especially when our failures harm the people we serve. But failure—on our part and the student writers'—is an inevitable part of writing center interactions. So perhaps we would do well to approach our setbacks as learning experiences, taking from them lessons we would have missed had we always succeeded. A good failure challenges our technique, deflates our confidence in being able to help every writer (or solve every problem) we meet, and goads us into learning more about our diverse field to avoid repeating mistakes. Failure toughens us. Experiencing it ourselves, as writers and tutors, equips us to help student writers and peer tutors cope with it constructively and take steps toward success. In plainer words, just as writers must often fail many times before they succeed, failure is a key to our growth as tutors and writing center professionals.

To discuss failure and writing centers in the same breath may strike some of us as self-defeating. Writing center work is all about success, after all, especially about helping students succeed. One way of accomplishing this goal is to inspire in students the positive mental attitude that facilitates writing and makes tutoring a pleasant and viable process. It seems obvious that we cannot inspire this attitude in the students unless we feel it ourselves.

This tutor-as-cheerleader model mostly works pretty well, and the notion that we should fix our eyes on the ultimate goal is hard to dispute. In fact, I would be the first to urge that writers and tutors ought to strive for excellence. One team of psychologists cautions, however, that when dealing with clients who suffer from a fear of failure, “[a] well-intentioned, but horribly disruptive approach is to try to boost their egos with support and encouragement. In essence, this is like throwing gasoline on a fire” (Berglas and Baumeister 189). Humans cannot attain perfection, nor can they sustain perpetual success. No matter how hard they try—or how positive their emotional vibes—they will eventually suffer setbacks, if only because “it is the nature of success to be undependable” (Birney, Burdick, and Teevan 13).

Strangely, our students are often more willing than we to acknowledge the truth of this statement. Some seek help at the writing center because, for reasons ranging from poor training to severe dyslexia, success at writing has always eluded them. Others may have experienced a run of successes but find themselves up against a project they cannot handle alone. Still others, the perfectionists, may perceive even a well-composed essay as a failure because nothing they write can match the beauty of the paper they see in their minds. Meanwhile, whether students view their writing (and perhaps themselves) as a success or failure often depends on the grade a particular paper receives, which likewise depends on satisfying the sometimes vague—and to the

student, mysterious—criteria of a teacher.

With grades and self-esteem riding on the success of a paper, perhaps we can understand why tension so frequently accompanies the act of writing. Even that great motivator, deadline pressure, depends less on the hope of reward than on the fear of failure, and thus increases a student's anxieties. The best writers, armed with past successes and layers of coping mechanisms, harbor such fears. Ernest Hemingway, for one, felt so inadequate that he often turned to alcohol, which he referred to as "the 'giant killer,' the ever-helpful ally against fears" (Dardis 195). Imagine the terror, then, of writers who can't build a complete sentence, much less an argument, and whose sole motivation for writing may be to avoid a failing grade. They're certainly more prone than most to suffer from writer's block, which may only lead to the failure they dreaded (Sherwood 12). As it turns out, psychologists see close connections between the relative importance of a project and the writer's tendency to suffer anxiety, procrastination, and writer's block. They contend that

people often put off starting a task when the implications of failure are directly linked to their self-image. . . . Writers sometimes find themselves unable to make progress on a book or article they are writing, especially when there is some demand that the book or article be extremely good. Each time they sit down to write, they only come up with work that is less than the best, and the pressure to be superb becomes so daunting that they end up with an anxiety attack instead of a rough draft. (Berglas and Baumeister 106)

Ironically, the same psychologists indicate that "a primary source of misjudgment" and therefore failure "is a history of being successful" (175). This principle applies not only to writers but to writing center tutors. Consider the potential for smugness of a tutor who has never suffered a major setback as a writer (or more likely has never acknowledged suffering one). Like a thin person advising a fat one to just say no to food, this tutor might find it hard to empathize with or offer useful advice to students who feel themselves sliding toward failure.

For a time, this tutor might maintain a pretense of infallibility by embracing the predictable and relying on safe, proven tutoring techniques. Most likely, though, even if someone like Byron did not come along and shatter his or her illusions of universal effectiveness, the steady accumulation of less blatant failures would eventually erode the tutor's confidence. For as psychologist David Payne observes, life gives us ample opportunities to fail: "We fail because we have not and cannot achieve some ideal that we imagine. We fail because others will not agree with our terms for success. We fail because others, and the world, do not conform to our ideas and ideals and thus disappoint us from the success . . . we seek" (3).

For these and other reasons, writing center tutors can count on failing (in some fashion and at some stage) simply by entering the arena of the tutorial. In my own case, although I often leave the office feeling fulfilled, and even exhilarated, I also have days when I bomb. Preoccupied by my other personal or work roles (as parent, spouse, English teacher, editor of a journal, academic advisor, colleague, peer tutor trainer), I might not shift back to my tutor role quickly enough. Or, immersed in my own writing, I might greet a writer with expressions ranging from vacant to desperate. And so I sometimes fail to build rapport, to listen closely enough to people's concerns, or to detect problems I would have noticed on another day.

Fortunately, we can usually prevent such routine failures by recalling our professional obligations, but some failures are more difficult to anticipate or avoid. For instance, we may fail to strike a balance between the student writers' long-term best interest in learning to fend for themselves and their short-term interest in achieving a good grade on a particular paper. We may unknowingly let personality problems (ours or theirs) get in the way of productive work. We may misdiagnose a student's strengths and weaknesses. Or if we do correctly diagnose them, we may give inappropriate or unclear advice. Of these failures, the most worrisome involve students we simply can't help because we lack the necessary time, experience, or specialized knowledge. Like Byron, such students sometimes let us know up front if they sense we are failing them. More often, they go away apparently satisfied but leave us with a sort of crawly feeling—a suspicion that we've missed the real problem, neglected to say something that might have made a difference.

Please understand, I do not intend all this talk of failure to sound pessimistic or to fling us into depression. As psychiatrist Victor Frankl says, "keeping in mind the essential transitoriness of human existence . . . is not pessimistic but rather activist" (124). In plainer words, when we approach failure as potentially fertile, we find in it opportunities to take action to improve the situation. Indeed, I hope to show that as long as our sense of failure does not drive us out of the profession, it acts as a necessary prelude to our success as tutors. David Payne agrees: "People fail because they have plans and goals, and invest themselves in projects to attain their goals. If people did not do things, try to act upon their worlds, if they did not propose to actualize inner wishes and dreams, there could be no sense of inadequacy, misfortunes, or error" (4).

We feel anguish when we fail to help students because we invest ourselves in and care deeply about our work. If the opposite were true, if we did not care and did not strive for excellence, we would find neither safety nor satisfaction, because surrendering to our sense of inadequacy would mean failing to realize our potential and failing to help writers realize theirs. Meanwhile, if we ignore our shortcomings, we risk perpetuating them.

At one level, most of us already use our failures as writers to achieve

positive outcomes. For instance, seeking to reassure students, we might tell them of the time we suffered from debilitating writer's block or got a "D" on a freshman paper, only to stage a comeback by working hard and refusing to quit. I suppose this approach could miscarry if we were insincere or if, after noting the shabbiness of our office, the students felt unmoved by stories of our success. Told well, though, such tales illustrate how perseverance can help a writer ultimately succeed. They can also help us teach students to accept failures that come during the early stages of writing.

Learning to acknowledge and tolerate such failures is an important step toward ultimate success, novelist Anne Lamott contends, because "[a]lmost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts" (25). Echoing Donald Murray's adage that students must "write badly so they can write well" (52), Lamott adds, "In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts" (22). Although he puts it somewhat more elegantly, Frankl suggests a similar tactic. He describes a technique called "paradoxical intention," based "on the twofold fact that fear brings about that which one is afraid of, and that hyper-intention makes impossible what one wishes. . . . In this approach the phobic patient is invited to intend, even if only for a moment, precisely that which he fears" (126-127).

As twisted as this idea sounds, Frankl implies that we can help writers cope with extreme fear of failure by asking them to do their best to fail. If this request inspires laughter at instead of confidence in us, so much the better. As Frankl explains, paradoxical intention utilizes "the specifically human capacity for self-detachment inherent in a sense of humor. This basic capacity to detach one from oneself" (127) enables the laughter to create psychological distance between him or herself and the source of the fear—in this case, a writing project. Frankl adds that when the affected person "stops fighting his obsessions and instead tries to ridicule them by dealing with them in an ironical way . . . *the vicious circle is cut* . . ." (131, emphasis in original).

Another way to cut this "vicious circle" and bolster writers' willingness to embrace and learn from failure is to create what Peter Elbow calls "evaluation-free zones" (198). Elbow urges classroom teachers to lower the stakes for writing students by having them do more freewriting and unevaluated assignments that emphasize "getting rolling, getting fluent, taking risks" (198). As he says, "constant evaluation by someone in authority makes students reluctant to take the risks that are needed for good learning—to try out hunches and trust their own judgment" (197). In a real sense, writing centers already serve as evaluation-free zones. They provide students with a low-stakes environment in which to try out a new idea or approach, experience setbacks, receive feedback from someone who does not stand in direct authority over them, and try again—before submitting their work for a grade. I suspect no one, including Elbow, would seriously argue that we can (or should) permanently shield student writers from the harsh realities of

grading. Instead, for a brief time, evaluation-free zones like the writing center give student writers a safe place in which to risk, learn, and improve until they're ready to face more harsh realities.

I would hesitate to suggest that, despite the comic distance it might give us, we should deliberately set out to engage in a series of really shitty tutorials. But some of the same techniques we use in helping student writers cope with failure would appear equally useful in helping writing center professionals and peer tutors deal with theirs. Like our student writers, we must learn to acknowledge our failures in order to take from them lessons that inform our future actions.

Talking openly about our failures is a good first step in this learning process, though we often avoid such talk, even with colleagues who ought to understand, because we fear what our failures reveal. At a local writing center association meeting, for example, one member gave our assembly a look of sainted weariness and asked, "How do you know when you're doing too much for your students?" I was framing a sympathetic response when another member said irritably, "If you have to ask, then you're probably doing too much."

The remark rang true but struck me as unduly harsh, and it effectively ended what might have been a forthright discussion about a problem we all face. As writing center directors or coordinators of peer tutor training, I wonder how many of us tacitly discourage our peer tutors from expressing similar doubts. Often, they approach their work with trepidation, afraid a student will reject their advice or, worse, pose problems they can't solve. Meanwhile, in our zeal to provide the best possible service, often under pressure to justify our existence to administrators or professors, we may unwittingly give tutors the impression they must succeed every time. We can help them deal with their inability to meet such impossible expectations by encouraging them to talk about their setbacks (that is, if we can honestly assure them that exposing their weaknesses will not cost them their jobs or our high regard). In my own case, I have too often assumed my tutors were doing fine only to discover the best of them were suffering silently. For instance, after sending me upbeat e-mail messages for several months, one of my kindest, most conscientious tutors finally described a tutorial that went sour. The student's paper, she writes,

seemed to be a conglomeration of sentences without any structure or order. We got interrupted a few times by people needing help with their computers, so by the time we finally got to the end, I didn't even remember the beginning of the paper. Then he asked me if I had learned something from his paper. I just went blank. I couldn't even think of the last sentence I had read. It made me feel really bad, and like I hadn't been paying attention or didn't care. I just felt like I handled the whole tutorial wrong, and I could tell he was really disappointed. (Rundstrom)

When we talked, she confessed she'd had similar experiences many times but felt uncomfortable mentioning them. This particular incident finally convinced her to get her feelings off her chest even if it meant facing that she was a lousy tutor. Simply telling her she was, despite her doubts, a wonderful tutor would not help much, I suspected. So first I told her about Byron and some of my other, more humorous fiascos, which seemed to help her get past the worst of the despair. Whenever we talk with others, Payne says, "[m]uch of what we say reflects our personal and social histories of failure. Or our talk may be meaningful because of the potential failures in the present and future. The facts of past inadequacies and the prospects of future failures become . . . a persistent context for discovering meanings and adopting purposes" (4).

Rather than use such talk in a hit-and-miss fashion, though, perhaps we should broach the topic of failure during regular training sessions. Doing so would go a long way toward turning our writing centers into evaluation-free zones, not just for students, but for tutors, too. By letting our tutors know we'll tolerate their early setbacks, especially if they learn from them, we lower the stakes, teaching them it's okay, as Elbow says, to "try out hunches and trust their own judgment" (197).

In the process, maybe we can learn to give ourselves the same break. After all, most of us will learn from our mistakes, and seek out ways to compensate for them, if only because they shake us up. As Payne says, "Failure demands that we employ our resources to alter, mitigate, or in some way accommodate that self and the world have changed" (4). In my case, after the debacle with Byron, I spent several years dreading another encounter with a student with severe learning disabilities. Meanwhile, I read what I could find on the subject, including Shoshana Beth Konstant's 1992 article on multi-sensory learning. I found the specific techniques she mentions less useful than the following admonition. When working with students who have learning disabilities, she says, "Don't despair. Try something else. Have patience; the student is infinitely more frustrated than you are. Try every possible way you can think of to get your message across and if they all fail, then try something else" (6).

This advice proved useful when Jackie, who had a history of learning disabilities and failure in writing classes, came to me for help. She had a great desire to succeed, and in fact her ultimate goal was to teach anthropology at the university level and work as a free-lance writer. Jackie's papers would begin logically, then veer off in strange directions that had no apparent connection to the thesis. A lot of her sentences simply did not make sense. So I often functioned as her translator, going line by line and asking what she meant, checking her words against her perceptions, discovering they did not express what she had in mind, and puzzling out other possible interpretations. This agonizing process often lasted for more than two hours, leaving me drained, dizzy, and frustrated. In part because of my experience with

Byron, though, I mustered the patience to spend the necessary time and effort on her. And unlike Byron, Jackie was actually learning, showing enough improvement in both her strategic and sentence-level writing skills that eventually she went on to earn her bachelor's degree. In this sense, our work together was a shining success story. The last I heard, though, her plans for graduate school had fallen through, and she was waiting tables for a living, so it's possible that from her perspective she has failed. In any case, the help I offered her certainly proved inadequate in helping her achieve her ultimate goals.

It's unreasonable to hope that once our students leave us they're prepared to meet all future academic and professional challenges that involve writing. There's a limit to how much tutoring can accomplish, after all. And while gaining greater knowledge and experience in our field increases our chance of succeeding with most students, these gains will not always help us prevail over failure (or our sense of culpability in it). In fact, as Payne says, "Greater knowledge often brings about greater awareness of fault, keener awareness of shortcoming, and more acute senses of inadequacy" (5). Thus, the longer we tutor, the more aware we become of how little we actually help students because of the inadequacy of our knowledge, our communication skills, the students' ability to understand our advice, or the tutorial as a teaching venue.

However, our awareness of the likelihood of failure resembles that of the expert writer who, in gaining skill and insight, takes on projects of escalating depth and difficulty. Demanding excellence of ourselves increases our risk of failing, but it also increases our potential of doing work that is challenging, useful, significant, and (for the most part) successful. Meanwhile, in the writing center we will continue to meet students like Byron, who, despite our best efforts, we can't help. At such times, perhaps we should keep in mind (and convey to our peer tutors) that "[w]hen we are no longer able to change a situation . . . we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl 116).

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