

Teaching, Not Gatekeeping, in College Writing

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Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again.
Fail better.

—Samuel Beckett

Ever tried? Ever failed? I know I have. When I first read this Beckett quote, it resonated with me as both a writer and a teacher because, oh boy, the mistakes I have made. But without those errors, mis-takes, and failures, I would never have learned. As Beckett suggested, failure is part of growth—a lesson overlooked when writing instruction becomes gatekeeping.

Those of us in writing studies are well-aware of the deficit model of instruction. Such an approach penalizes students for knowledge they have not yet acquired. A student might lose points for incorrectly using semicolons, even though they have never been taught the rule for separating closely related independent clauses, either in their high school or college writing classroom. Similarly, a student might be marked down for writing sentences with nonstandard syntax, not knowing that academic discourse conforms to Standard American English because they have never written for a college-level audience. But when we scaffold mistake-making as part of instruction and reassure students that to try and try again is part of the process of learning a new discourse, rather than penalize them, we fully engage in the teaching of writing.

Even when a deficit model is eschewed, we expect students to have some minimal abilities upon entering the university. However, this expectation might be undermined by the range of challenges students are currently facing, as evidenced by declining literacy and post-pandemic mental health issues. When these challenges result in problems that incur penalties, such as work submitted past a due date, we participate in a form of institutional gatekeeping that can go unnoticed because these problems seem to exist outside of, or prior to, the domain of writing instruction.

Teaching writing, as opposed to gatekeeping, begins with meeting students where they are. And this may mean identifying different starting points for our students. As David Bartholomae (1986) explained in “Inventing the University”:

What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine the “what might be said” and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community. The course of instruction that would make this possible would be based on a sequence of illustrated assignments

and would allow for successive approximations of academic or "disciplinary" discourse. (p. 11)

Central to this process is the idea of "successive approximations," which allows students to fail as part of the process of learning academic discourse. But if failure includes things other than errors in writing, then we need to reimagine our pedagogical approach to avoid slipping into gatekeeping. To do this, I frequently employ a strategy called "gameplanning" to support students who might need more (time for) successive approximations than planned in my original assignment or course calendar. In practice, I meet with the student to discuss the assignment, highlighting exactly what needs to be learned and demonstrated, and the student and I negotiate parameters, such as conventions of genre and style, but also contextual elements that go beyond just writing, such as assignment length and deadlines. The student completes the writing on terms different yet comparable to the assignment. I look at opportunities to gameplan with my students not as interventions for unprepared or struggling writers, but as valuable teaching and learning moments that are part of the normal process of writing instruction.

This wider flexibility in pedagogy creates rigor in the classroom as it keeps open the gates of the university, allowing students the freedom to access opportunities of critical thinking and writing. And true rigor, as Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (1987) reminded us, is not rigidity: "Rigor lives with freedom, needs freedom. Without being free, I can only repeat what is being told to me" (p. 78). While rigor creates the needed structure for students, rigidity limits students' capacity to engage meaningfully with writing, which then limits their ability to think critically and communicate in new ways.

This co-invention of the university with our students suggests that together we can write a new story about higher education. Narrative, a cornerstone of ancient rhetoric and a perennial favorite of writing studies, can be both rigorous and flexible. Stacey Waite (2017) wrote that there exists "a tradition in composition of using the personal narrative or the materials of personal experience in or for scholarship," but today we have the chance to "stretch and push on that tradition, opening up new possibilities for what counts as scholarship—blurring the creative and the critical, the linear and the nonlinear, the personal and the public, the theoretical and the practical" (p. 16). Waite's approach allows for new possibilities in academic writing, ones we can pursue by responding to the diversity of failure through teaching, not gatekeeping.

References

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