

# WHY STUDENTS FAIL

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## Where It All Began

All teachers during the course of their careers are faced with conflicts about what to teach, why to teach a particular lesson, or how to make classroom activities more meaningful for students. Over the past 18 years, I have attempted to engage students in my secondary English language arts classes in meaningful learning about language, yet at least twelve or more students have failed every year.

I am not sure statistically if my failure rate over the past 18 years has increased, decreased, or remained the same. What I am aware of is a growing demand for accountability of students' performances in required courses, including benchmark grade performance exams, graduation exams, and other forms of academic accountability. To demand accountability without consideration of the factors which influence student failure, however, is to carry on an empty discussion. A real discussion about why students fail in our individual classrooms as well as within our individual schools can provoke significant change and transformation. Another benefit to such examination and reflection may be that teachers will design pedagogies that lead to greater student success.

Several themes run through this narrative. There would be no narrative if I had not been given a mandate by a principal to account for the failures in my classroom. Through this demand, I learned how to teach writing to adolescents, even though theoretically I thought that my pedagogy was "teaching" writing and language arts. What started out as my angry response to a school district administrative mandate turned into a teaching and learning opportunity that transformed how and what I teach to adolescents about writing. In rhetorical terms, I found an exigency for myself as a teacher and, with it, an exigency for my

students that transformed the meaning of writing in my language arts classroom.

## **The Situation**

During the late fall in the urban public high school where I was teaching, our principal reviewed the grades for the semester. At an abruptly convened faculty meeting, he informed teachers that he saw too many failures in required classes. To what factors did this rising number of failures relate? He was worried that the grades might reveal differing standards among teachers, curricular noncompliance, and/or racial bias.

Two weeks later, each department chair passed out the statistical breakdown of failing grades for the entire school, for each content area, and for each teacher within a content area. This grade 10-12 high school had 1500 students and about 105 teachers. My statistics were: 13 failed out of a total of 121 students. Each faculty member had one month to write a report offering an explanation for every student who was receiving a failing grade. I knew that the principal was receiving pressure from school district administration to lower the number of failures and to make sure the failures were not a product of racial bias. With a predominantly Euro-American teaching staff, this large urban high school's student body contained various ethnic groups: 41% African-American, 53% Euro-American, 3% Asian American (Hmong, Vietnamese, Korean), 1% Native American, and 2% Hispanic (mostly Mexican). With a high number of students' families on welfare, many students in juvenile detention, a number of truancy violators, and many children of migrant farm workers, he rightly asked questions about possible racial bias.

## **Finding Our Way**

When I walked into my first hour English classroom the day after the meeting, I was angry. Handing each of my students a copy of the statistics, I described to my students what I had been told to do. I believed that this administrative mandate questioned

my professional integrity, judgment, and knowledge about the proper matter for a language arts classroom yet bypassed the students' responsibility to learn. The mandate exposed for me the social/political forces which have created the need for such microscopic accountability. As I remember it, the classroom became still as they listened to me.

Primarily, I wanted my students to know that their grades in my classroom were not the reason for my anger. I felt powerless in answering the report because, although I would examine my culpability in their failures, I could not-or would not-answer for students. I asked them to help me tell the principal why they failed.

At first, my students had three concerns. Was I genuine in changing what we were doing? Yes, I was serious about this, I told them. Would I penalize them for speaking with honesty and candor? No. That was the very thing I wanted them to do in their report. I wanted the principal to hear their answers about failure, not just my speculations about why they failed. Each day's curriculum would be directed by some aspect of the report writing, and what determined our course of study from there would be mutually agreed upon by the class.

We focused on one question: Why do students fail? We would seek to understand the reasons for failure based upon the stories and circumstances surrounding those who were failing or had failed a high school class. Students who had not personally failed a course would interview students who had failed. Students who were failing my class and wished to use it in their statement could rely upon a peer classmate for invention and arrangement if they felt inhibited to share a critique of our English class or my teaching.

Our audience would be the principal and assistant superintendent. Moreover, we would present our written report to the principal and the assistant superintendent during our class time.

## Writing Up the Report

Rather than impose traditional academic essay as the form, I decided that we as a class would develop our own organizational plan for our report based upon the purpose and audience. Each student's writing would identify a failure problem, explain and analyze the personal experience or research interviews, and present a solution—a call for some kind of action. In some cases, students chose to write letters; others followed the traditional essay format; others struggled to organize ideas as a story to make a point. At times, the genres mixed in a refreshing mixture of narrative and exposition.

Over a six-week period, we arranged each classroom time by assigning tasks that needed to be completed by a certain date. These included drafts, redrafts, edits, collection and organization of final drafts, preparation of the report, and the meeting with the principal and assistant superintendent. We worked and reworked drafts until every member of the class had an acceptable written statement for our report. We worked through absences, hesitations, incomplete interviews, students' work outside of school, and other problems. On the day that the report was due, however, we sent a message to both administrators and invited them to receive the report in our classroom at a later time.

## Stories from the Students

Even as my students tell their stories and offer advice, it becomes obvious that the reasons for failure are beyond the accountability factors guiding the principal's original mandate. The stories are important not only because they provide evidence and details about the broad-ranging reasons and conditions for failure, but also because they demonstrate what students accomplish in writing, in communicating, and in showing teachers a way to teach through the defense of their failures.

The following stories are taken directly from the written reports completed by the students.<sup>1</sup> The beginning, middle, and end of each story causes a new pedagogical wrinkle for a

discussion about teaching writing. The challenges facing resistant and non-college bound learners add more depth to the complexities which these written documents present and the force of voice behind them. These writings show organization, ability to sequence, problem solving, and thinking. Although the reports contain spelling and punctuation errors and some faulty sentence constructions, by comparison with other writings from these students, the pieces are genuine examples of the rhetorical skills the students do possess and are able to rally when the matter is important and purposeful.<sup>2</sup>

### **Coco's Story**

Coco participated every day, completed homework assignments on time, and shared his ideas with enthusiasm and respect for himself and his classmates. Although not failing his senior English language arts class, he possessed an empathy for his peers who were failing. Coco's story represents information from the students in the classes who participated willingly and collected information from students not directly involved in the report.

The first reason why students fail, come from a failing student. Student A told me, "I just not try as hard as I should've. I always talked to my friends during class. But when I did pay attention I just couldn't understand the work. What I mean by that is the assignments that we had to do were too hard for me to understand because I was not paying attention to the class."

Student B... said, "Well the reason I failed was because I was hanging around the wrong group of kids. They got me doing drugs. Also, I didn't have any support from my parents

Student A and Student B are very good examples of way students fail. As Student A told me, "he wasn't trying as hard as he should of been trying."... Student B wanted to try

but was being led down by his peers. Doing drugs and drinking all the time was not doing him any good, except for having an F for a grade.

Coco's investigation and analysis indicate that adolescents need to be connected with adults who value education, especially family members who can model appropriate behaviors and provide home conditions for learning. Once that responsibility is abrogated to any surrogate group, adolescents seek substitutions. Teachers are reminded that our modeling is not enough. Although teachers need to adjust and refine curricula to meet students' linguistic challenges, curricula cannot address all the social ills and problems in the students' learning environment. Coco's presentation of the reasons for student failures places limited responsibility on teachers. Can any pedagogical pattern or specific reading material affect failing students' behavior when their environment opposes respect for or purpose in being educated?

While finding out about why students fail, the students were writing, investigating, editing, planning, and revising. These activities and skills might have been part of any literary study, but students exhibited, in this assignment, less resistance and more involvement, especially those students who were the real subjects of the original directive.

## **Andy's Story**

Andy's story presents another view into failure, one that questions mandatory attendance requirements without genuine vocational alternatives. In our state, all students are required to attend high school until they are 18 years of age. For Andy, this requirement stifled a passionate energy that slowly died in his last two years of high school. Andy wanted to be a chef, to go to chef's school in New York or Paris; instead, he took the high school's program in restaurant management. For students like Andy who have a direction, the inability of the system to adapt to students' occupational goals thwarts hope of achieving those goals. Alternative programs that would accommodate Andy's passions

for cooking were not available, and Andy did not possess the financial resources to independently make them happen.

School is more a burden than anything else, It's just that I find that I'm interested in a career in cooking,(culinary school) and be a "salve" for 7 periods is'nt in my line-up. I'm ready to go to work everyday and earn some money and school is just in the way it seems like. On the other hand however school is a valuable and a intercale part of a person's life.here at my place of learning I find that most of the time I feel like a 1<sup>st</sup> grader or salve under babysitters, the only thing is at this level some "kids" still need babysitters.

So school in my perspective is a place that I loathe going to not to learn but to be placed, once again for 7 periods as an infant. It would be nice to be trated as an independent but as I have been told and seen throughout the years some always ruin it for all.

Beginning with this assignment, Andy turned his grade around and began to complete other assignments. He didn't want to fail because that would have kept him in high school one minute longer than he could tolerate. Yet, before this project, he was willing to "fail" as an act of resistance and retaliation against what he perceived as an unjust system.

The students had a rare opportunity to deal with their genuine thoughts and expressions on a subject as experts rather than the pseudo-authorship of other classroom writing tasks. It is this which gives Andy's story power and purpose; his story tells us that one high school program does not fit the needs of all the students.

### **Christie's and Angela's Stories**

Christie and Angela share an all-too-familiar story about abuse and neglect. As teacher, I often felt powerless to change these social forces or to create a meaningful learning environment which

would accommodate such situations. Students who face these situations daily have altered learning patterns, patterns which they use to compensate for their need to survive (Alvarez, unpublished dissertation 1998). In Christie's case, we had made special arrangements: because she was an emancipated minor who worked two jobs to earn enough money to support herself, she could not finish the reading or writing assignments when expected.

I believe that students fail mainly because of lack of motivation and problems with their homelife. Students don't separate their social life from school life. In August of last year, my parents were legally divorced. That came as no big shock to me. The only part I didn't like was having to live with my dad, We never really got along, It wasn't anything like constant fighting or disagreeing, we just never talked. My dad began to drink on an everyday basis.

...I went to get my stuff [Christie has a fight with her father while he's drunk and he places her clothes and furniture on the porch of the house] before it was stolen and my Dad was on the porch, swearly and yelling at the air.

Sometimes there just aren't enough hours in a day and my school work suffers. I at least know myself, I tried as hard as I could.

I believe that if I can do it anybody can. It makes me mad when I hear other students say "I have to work til 8 pm and then I was to tired." It makes me laugh. To me it seem some students fail mostly because of lack of motivation. They figure they can't go on to college cause of there grades so they just don't do any work.

I think the only solution for people with bad home lifes and no motivation is to have rewards for working harder

than the average student. For example, I wanted to go on to a college after taking a semester off. There is no way I will ever make it. I filled out the financial aid forms, but my dad makes too much money so I am not eligible. They don't understand that he wasn't paying for my college, I was. They told me to wait til next year this time and apply again. So I have to wait an extra semester to see what I can do with the rest of my life.

In conclusion, More college funds should be set away for people in my situation. Also, Teachers should teach more responsibility. There are still teachers that will chase you down for your homework and pamper you and believe me I have learned. Nobody will do that in the real world!

Angela's story is very much like Christie's—a series of stories of abuse and neglect connected with academic failure.

The first student I interviewed was physically and mentally abused by her parents. She was beaten by her parents at the age of five. Her marks were visible but no one in the school did anything to help her. She felt alone, helpless, and as no one cared for her as a human being. Her feeling of self worth was gone and she felt as if she could no longer try in school. She failed because she had no one to lift her self esteem and to tell her she was somebody.

Angela, Christie, and Andy tell us that they do not want to fail at learning, but the learning must take into account more directly the situations in which they live—survival literacies that are incorporated into academic literacies. In one of my favorite books, *Gyns At Work*, author Glenda Bissex states that “the way we teach is not always the way children learn” (). Christie, Angela, and Andy reveal in their stories learning environments beyond school that require a different set of literacy skills for survival if they are ever to make it into adulthood. What pedagogy will help

them learn given the social, mental and physical instabilities that rule their lives?

## **Tashico's Story**

Tashico states with unflinching candor that failure is related to a lack of representation in the curricula of people of color, whether Latino, Hispanic, African-American, Asian, or any combination of races or ethnic groups.

This society accepts a number of ideas, faiths, and beliefs. It is important to realize that the people of this country stand-up at the wrong time for the wrong reasons, and when they should stand-up and speak out on something, but what I want to know is why have students failed in school?

Tashico's opening paragraph is rhetorically constructed: it illuminates her ideology and then posits the issue.

First of all, I went to the bottom. I went straight to the students. I asked the student closest to me. Tryna said, "I've failed history, because I was never up or never stayed up in class, I was always in trouble." I could not believe that I heard someone this close to me tell me this none since. Her conversation with me ended with her telling me, "I felt that more should be discussed or talked about with people of significant importance to people of color like, George Washington Carter, Clara Brown, Ben Baneker and even Billy Holliday. I tired of talking about Columbus, and all that Lincoln and M.L. King has to do for this country, and no one wants to discuss the importance of the Native American, the achievements of the Hispanics, and or even the discussion of the people of colors that lived herein America with the Native American before the 'white man' came."

I asked Tryna's father the same questions I asked his daughter, Tommie said, "I flunked all my classes at one time, because everything I was taught became reparitious after the eleventh grade, so I didn't go to school," Nikkie agreed. She said, "That's true, but I failed because my parents failed and it's hereditary."

I strongly disagree with that comment, because it made me remember a saying that my grandmother says, "Just because my best friend jumps off a bridge doesn't mean I have to follow."

In these two paragraphs, Tashico struggles with the broad issues of race, yet she juxtaposes the problems of failure against the narrative evidence she gathers from people she trusts. Tashico's reasoning leads her to the irresponsibility of her friend's testimony. Then, she punctuates her analysis with her assertion about failure and non-conformity. What started out as a racial concern within the school curricula becomes a broader argument about individual responsibility.

Tashico's statement is particularly relevant because the principal's original mandate for accountability was based upon the perception that grades for students of color were disproportionately in the failure category. Tashico takes that perception and offers a clear statement for both pedagogical and administrative use.

### **Tammy's Statement**

Tammy's statement indicts teachers for failing to present material that is relevant to students. Students quickly learn in classes "how to play school." Signals from instructors about intelligence, so highly valued in school for success and achievement, often tell students that the teacher does not value them. The students will probably fail anyway.

Tammy began her letter by explaining the many problems students have with teachers. "I talked to a person who needs help,

but on a regular basis does not get it. Some of my own teachers have no time for their job. So teenagers get left to figure it out on their own. When favoritism exists, some teenagers are not helped; some teachers do try to help and some just don't care." Tammy continues by saying that "teachers can make the subject boring. When they explain work slowly it just does not interest anyone. Some kids need it in repetition and that gets boring for the smarter kids. Teachers can make the class boring or interesting."

Tammy's argument makes unsubstantiated claims about teachers and teaching, but her statements warrant consideration. She provides the reflective heuristic that careful and professional teachers must engage in regularly to ensure effective pedagogical praxis (Schoen, 1983).

## **Nate's Story**

Nate admits that the fault for failure is his—he was lazy and didn't try to complete the work on time. Several students who were failing the course testified to their willful inactivity. Nate's thoughtful presentation of ideas of students so disinterested in learning is ironic.

For years students have been failing courses. From my experience, attempt to explain why students do not succeed.

One answer I got was, "the subject is boring." A lot of students are in classes that they don't even like. The lack of interest leads to homework not being done. I have been in classes that I have found boring, but that is no excuse for being lazy.

A third response I got was, "I hate the work that he/she gives." Let's face it, kids hate homework.

All the response add up to one thing. A lot of kids are failing courses because they don't put out the effort. I have failed one course, but have come close to failing several others. The reason I had problems was because I was lazy. the best way to help the situation is to encourage the kids to make it. We need to care for them, but also to push them to do better.

Nate's and Tammy's stories reveal that they consider the presentation of repetitive content boring. These statements offered me a rare opportunity to investigate and challenge my English language arts pedagogy within the parameters described by students like Nate and Tammy.

## **The Presentation**

When we had finished this report, the students and I invited the assistant superintendent and the high school principal to the class to receive and discuss the official copies of the report. I saw healthy pride grow through each presentation and through the recognition of what the students had accomplished. Both administrators respectfully and intensely listened to the students' statements. If the students were not indicting their teachers, administrators could not when presented with dramatic evidence to the contrary. As a faculty, we were never again asked to justify our grades in a report or any other administrative memo.

## **The Authentic Extended**

In a surprise move, the principal invited the students to write his monthly newsletter which is circulated to all the parents. He asked them to tell what they had learned about student failures. This request was immediately accepted by the students, with a nod of agreement from me. Our next task in the two classes was to write the principal's newsletter, again condensing and revising what our research had taught us about failure.

The format we agreed upon as a class was a common letter. I was assigned to write the introduction with the students producing all the body paragraphs. In this single text/plural authors production, we worked with a single purpose and goal (see Ede and Lunsford 1990). Each day was a negotiation as to what we were going to write, in what order. At times, I had to provide mini lessons on paragraphing styles, sentence format, and mechanical questions. Subject content was determined by the daily exigency surrounding our goal and purpose. This was the best of all possible worlds for a writing teacher since each question, task, or need had a directed purpose and relevancy that only the authentic writing task could provide. This was the way to teach writing.

As he had said, the principal printed the students' statements without any administrative or editorial corrections in respect to their honesty and their hard work. He received a few irate and querulous phone calls from parents who challenged the remarks. Other parent calls questioned whether the principal was making a statement about all parents' responsibility for their children. He told me later that he welcomed the controversy because the students' remarks provoked some much needed awareness and discussion about failure.

After this newsletter was finished, the following day I had no lesson plan. I could not resume the previous literary study schedule because the entire classroom focus had changed. What would we do with the work we had completed? To my amazement, the students elected to share their information by writing plays about the situations and performing them for the junior high or sixth grade students—individuals they thought they might be able to influence from making the same mistakes. So, we wrote a play and performed it for the sixth graders. One group elected to sponsor a fourth grade class at the high school, working with students who were known to have problems with school. These students were selected by their fourth grade teachers, and then followed the high school students all day. At the end of each segment, I asked the students what they wanted to

learn and do next. We eventually had a meeting of our own Dead Poet's Society in the darkened area in the high school basement where we read the poetry we had written.

At the end of the year, I asked for written assessments of the class. Using any format they wished, students told me what they learned this year in English. I offer Andy's letter as a final statement about failure:

In first hour English class this year I learned more than I have in any other English class. I learned how to work with people on projects, I learned how to take criticism. Sometimes I even learned I was wrong in judging people.

I learned that there is more out there than I had realized, meaning that there was things that I should've taken advantage of earlier in high school.

When we went to M----, I learned that there was a part of me that was college bound and that I could succeed in an environment like that, all I had to do was think that I was as good as anybody. But I have a problem with thinking sometimes that I can't accomplish anything. I think that my first hour helped me to realize that I can stand for what I know is right and I did this sometimes in an argumentative way but my point was put across.

I think the people in my first hour who helped me accomplish growing up and who helped [me] to not feel as much fear when trying to express myself. Sometimes I forget that this world can be my oyster.

I do not know the final statistics of how many students actually failed that year. Andy was not one of them, nor any of the others presented here. I did not choose them because they didn't fail; I chose them because they tell remarkable stories about how

adolescents grow through difficulty and how they learn in strategic ways despite our best and worst efforts in the classroom.

## **In Conclusion**

Stories of failure aren't "normal" in any sense; they expose the raw complexities for achieving literacy. Students don't fail because they can't learn to write or express themselves; they can and do learn under conditions and exigencies which make it purposeful for them to learn. My most difficult lesson during the semester was to accept the need for dramatic and strategic change in the way I teach writing. My students showed me that my writing program was limited in its vision and scope, concentrating as it did on academic writing. I underestimated and undervalued their creative energy and personal exigencies to focus the writing lessons. I was teaching form without content, style without purpose, and a message without an author. It took me a long time to admit this, even though I had studied new theories of writing and writing pedagogy and read composition journals. The results of an administrative mandate dramatically affected my teaching more than I think the mandate affected failure within the school.

Books by William Glasser, Theodore Sizer, Gloria Ladsen-Billings, James Moffett, Jimmie Britton, and especially Paolo Freire and bell hooks took on new meaning when I reflected upon and examined what changed. I was able to conceptualize a general pedagogical sequence that would allow for more direct connection and involvement of students in the design and purpose for writing. Moreover, I was part of the critique such authors examined in their research, and the mandate allowed me to connect the theory with practice—a transforming praxis. Now, I wanted that kind of transforming writing experience for every classroom—for me and my students.

Yet, I had resisted change because I had wanted to teach writing as I had experienced it, and in some ways, I resented my students' demands for a more connected writing experience. Although the administrative mandate had angered me, it provoked

a classroom crisis which demanded action. In my desperation, I took chances which I normally would never have. I discovered teaching as transformative power to name and change a little piece of the world. Through that transformation as teacher, I could offer my students the same and involve them directly in constructing writing tasks that would teach the very lessons my canonical and literary analysis curriculum were intended to accomplish.

Although I still had students fail English language arts, my language classroom became very different indeed.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I have the complete texts of the report for anyone wishing to read more about the stories of failure.

<sup>2</sup>The student texts are reproduced here as they were presented to the principal in the final written document.

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