

# The Role of Dialectical Tensions in Making Sense of Failures in Teaching and Learning

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## Abstract

How can our teaching failures be used to improve student learning? This question has been examined from various academic viewpoints—ranging from “productive failure” in education to “meaningful failure” in the biological sciences to “failing forward” in business management. The current article seeks to contribute to this growing body of scholarship by providing insights derived from Baxter & Montgomery’s theory of *relational dialectics* that can inform how we think and communicate about our teaching failures. Along with the goal of using dialectical tensions to reconstrue perceived teaching failures, the overall objective of this article is to create a space for intentional and transformative dialogue about the meaning that can be derived from the failures in our professional lives—in order to better prepare our students to manage their own.

## Keywords

failure; relational dialectics; dialogue; faculty development

## Introduction

At the beginning of each semester, we introduce ourselves to our students with our most significant academic accomplishments, work experiences, teaching and research awards, and successful publications. Faculty from across the academy stand in front of students, peers, and leaders to share their expertise—expertise that would not have been achieved without failures along the way. However, these failures are commonly omitted from the narrative of teaching. Why is that? If failure were to be viewed as an expected, accepted, and desirable part of teaching and learning, how should the conversation be framed? This article addresses these questions by using dialectical tensions<sup>1</sup> to inform how we both think and communicate about our teaching failures.

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<sup>1</sup> Defined here as contradictions driven by needs or struggles between competing systems; oppositions that negate one another (Baxter & Scharp, 2015).

The connection between failure and learning has been examined from various academic viewpoints, ranging from *productive failure* in education (Kapur, 2015) to *meaningful failure* in the biological sciences (Firestein, 2016) to *failing forward* in business management (Maxwell, 2000). More recently, an entire 2020 academic journal issue was devoted to failure in academic development and used its opening article to feature 10 award-winning instructors using narrative inquiry to reflect on how they define failure (Jungic et al., 2020). The current article seeks to contribute to this growing body of scholarship on failure by incorporating insights from Baxter & Montgomery's (1996) theory of relational dialectics. A basic assumption of this theory is that all relationships contain tensions and contradictions and that opposing discourses can create opportunities for emergent meanings (Baxter, 2011). One way to create new meaning from teaching failures is to examine how we construe them. As George Kelly (1963, p. 73) once said:

A person can be witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them ... he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and re-construing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experiences of his life.

This article will draw from recent relational dialectics scholarship focusing on “how meanings are constructed when discourses are in tension” (Parcell & Baker, 2018, p. 674) to potentially reconstrue perceived failures. Several tensions will be applied to competing discourses about teaching failings, to include: how failure is conceived as both *connected and separate* from our professional identities as well as the simultaneous *acceptance and denial* of the failures themselves. A dialectical tensions lens is used here to offer a different way of framing the dialogue about teaching failures among faculty. In doing so, it is my hope that the outcome of this article might (1) encourage more discussion about *how* failures can inform the teaching process and (2) create a prompt for the value of *using* failure in faculty development. It stands to reason that if seasoned faculty begin talking about it, more junior faculty could use such lessons learned from failure to inform their own professional development and perhaps feel more comfortable talking about failure themselves.

I will begin by offering a definition of failure and discuss several related constructs, and then move towards an overview of dialectical tensions “in action” to frame the reflection of my own teaching failures.

## **Meaningful Failure**

Failure has been described as simultaneously unexpected, unavoidable, and universal. For the purposes of this article, the emphasis will be on meaningful failure in an educational context, derived from two decades of my own undergraduate and graduate-level teaching. Firestein (2016, p. 11) defines meaningful failures as “those that leave a wake of interesting stuff behind: ideas, questions, paradoxes, enigmas, contradictions...” This particular way of thinking about failures in the classroom makes room for a broader and nuanced way of communicating about it with both colleagues and students. The idea is that we will have a very hard time helping our students work through their failures if we are not able to grapple productively with our own. Before using dialectical tensions to frame several of my own meaningful failures, I should note that although

there are a variety of ways to examine the impact of failure on teaching and learning, the concepts of *culture and identity* weigh heavily into the equation. For example, consider how:

1. *Our work is tied to our identities*—If our student evaluations are negative, if journal after journal rejects our article, we often perceive this not just as a professional failure, but rather that *we* are a failure. As I think back to the times when I was denied a promotion and turned down for jobs I applied for, the feeling of failure as a professor and person were absolutely inseparable. If successes are the only actions that are rewarded in academia, then it often follows that failures are topics to be avoided.
2. *Cultural expectations inform what is “professional” discourse*—or what kinds of topics are considered appropriate to be shared publicly given the fact that your failure may affect others as much as (or more than) it negatively affects you. Failure is thus tied to perceptions of self-construal, and communicating openly about personal and professional failures can have a wide range of unexpected second- and third-order effects.

It should be noted that there is some overlap with the potential beneficial outcomes of failure and other constructs, such as: grit (Duckworth, 2016), the Finnish construct *sisu* (interpreted by Lahti [2019] as determination and resoluteness in the face of adversity), and the Japanese concept of *gaman* (interpreted by Littler [2019] as perseverance in tough times). That is, there are certain kinds of adverse experiences that force us to ask new questions, challenge previously held assumptions, make new connections, and become more resourceful. For example, Chiodo’s (1989) article “Why professors who fail may be our best teachers” discusses his favorite college professor, who seemed to have this fresh, creative take on his subject matter. One day he was walking by the professor’s office and saw the professor throwing out giant stacks of paper. He said he threw out all his speaking notes and course documents every three years to force him into taking a fresh approach—he created instability for himself that prompted him to think about his classes in new and different ways. This aligns with the “earthquake” metaphor offered by Kauffman & Gregoire (2015), who maintain that when the foundation of our assumptions (about teaching, for example) are completely shaken, we are in a position to pursue new and sometimes creative options—to become more resourceful than we otherwise would have been had the earthquake (whether self-inflicted or not) not occurred.

The process of talking about such metaphorical “earthquakes” in our teaching careers and using dialectical tensions as a tool for rebuilding afterwards is a potentially useful means for tackling difficult topics and engaging in dialogue in the classroom. In fact, the very failures described here have also been the *driving forces* behind many meaningful educational changes I have employed in the classroom and the faculty development directions I have pursued. The next section provides several examples of how I’ve used dialectical tensions to frame teaching failures and inform conversations with colleagues about them.

### **Dialectical Tensions in Action: Rethinking Teaching Failures**

Firestein (2016, p. 8) reminds us that “there is a continuum of failure—not just one narrow kind.” There are failures that teach simple lessons (e.g., avoid saying anything negative about one class section to another class section) and failures that teach us much larger life lessons (e.g., the perception of what you do is often more important than what you *actually* do—especially when it comes to promotion.) Baxter & Norwood (2015) note that dialectics exist along a continuum as

well; they are a range of options that are continually negotiated. Based in interpersonal relationships, relational dialectics theory is rooted in a dialogic perspective centered on the tensions between two discourses (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In the context of teaching failures, for example, they are simultaneously conceived of as working *against* us (in terms of potentially negative student evaluations which could reduce promotion opportunities) but at the same time, the scholarship suggests that meaningful failures lead to insights that help us *advance* and innovate our teaching practices (Will, 2019). Ongoing competing tensions in the way we think and talk about failure are dynamic in nature (and often feel incompatible) but can also serve as a useful tool for framing a dialogue.

In the paragraphs to follow, I offer several instances of competing discourses surrounding teaching failures derived from experiences teaching both Conflict Management and Intercultural Communication courses in nontraditional (professional military education) classrooms.<sup>2</sup> A brief discussion of the *what* (context of the course), *why* the instance was perceived as a failure, and *how* it was re-constructed through the lens of dialectical tensions will illustrate how my understanding of the connection between failure and learning in these classes transformed over time.

### ***Failure is Both Connected to and Separate from Our Personal Identities***

Reflecting on the first Intercultural Communication graduate class I offered when I began working for the military brought to mind two distinct teaching failures. I had moved my family across the country to serve as the first Cross-Cultural Communication faculty member of a military university. At the time (and coming from a state university where communication courses were both required and valued), I did not fully appreciate the degree to which I would need to “sell” the students and faculty on my classes. When, after some time, I was able to offer a semester-long class, it was described by students as too much like “therapy” or “couples counseling.” As a female civilian faculty member who has never served in the military, these words were particularly difficult. I categorize the experience as a teaching failure because I felt I was already at a relative disadvantage having to consistently advocate for the value of teaching culture and communication in a curriculum primarily devoted to military history. I was already keenly aware that my degree and academic experiences were well outside what the military typically looked for in their faculty. I continuously advocated for the value of intercultural communication classes in the curriculum, and when I was finally able to teach them, I failed to anticipate just how far outside the norm my class was for these students (most of whom had an engineering background). I was so convinced of the value of the course material from my many years of teaching and research that I failed to take the time to think through its military relevance. In any kind of professional school, that is a major educational failing.

Additionally, after the semester was over, a student remarked that he (and most of the rest of the class) did not understand one of the core course concepts I had introduced on Day 1 and had used throughout the course. I realized I had gone on for 10 class sessions using this concept and no one

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<sup>2</sup> The following examples are drawn from the author’s experience teaching in Professional Military Education programs for the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Marine Corps.

stopped me to get clarification. This was a wasted opportunity, a lack of perceptual acuity on my part, and a realization that I was not as approachable and relatable as I thought I was. This failure was simultaneously connected to and separate from my personal identity in the sense that, like most communication educators, I not only expected myself to be able to convey course content but also expected myself to be able to *live* it. The fact that I was teaching classes on effective intercultural communication but was not effectively communicating it myself caused me to question if I was in the right line of work. This leads into the next example.

### ***Grappling with Acceptance and Denial of the Failure Itself***

I was teaching a module devoted to “apologies” as part of a larger graduate-level Systems Thinking course for military students. I began by offering up a “caution light,” urged students to be aware of our thinking processes, and introduced a version of the egocentric empathy gap (Dunning et al., 2001). That is, we tend to overestimate the similarity between what we value and what others value and often project our worldview onto others. I went on to make the point that systems thinking is often described as a metacognitive strategy that involves considering interrelationships between problems and potentially incompatible perspectives on those problems. To that end, I summarized a case study devoted to the complexity of apologizing for a Japanese war crime. I felt it would be a good example for a military classroom and a good way to bring to life the somewhat elusive skill of systems thinking for students. I had also taught a version of this class several times before and felt I had a solid handle on the content and could articulate a convincing rationale of its importance.

About halfway through class, one student announced: “I’m so sick of this squishy culture shit!” The biggest failure in my mind was not just the wildly inappropriate comment that seemingly came out of nowhere, but the fact that no one (outwardly) disagreed with him. No one made a case for the value of culture education or the importance of diverse perspectives. I was stunned, in complete denial, and could not get the class back on track after that. The entire seminar had been derailed, and I did not have the experience or the confidence to come up with an articulate and convincing rebuttal. Not only was it personally and professionally embarrassing, but it also caused me to question both the quality of my teaching and the relevance of the content of my classes.

Along with what appeared to be a lack of student interest and interaction with the subject matter, I received negative student evaluations which detailed a lack of effective connection of the “apology” component to the overall objective of the course. Looking back on it, I knew I was rushed, I could tell the students were confused and not engaged with the material, and the message about the cultural complexity of apologies was lost in the teaching failure. I had an “illusion of asymmetric insight” (Pronin et al., 2001) where I knew how hard I had worked, that my motivations were good, and the material was valuable (introspection)—whereas the students only had access to the behavior they observed: an adjunct professor with an add-on example at the end of the course that they were not primed for. I assumed they could “see” my enthusiasm and would intuitively understand the importance of this kind of relationship repair strategy. They obviously could not read my mind, and I was having difficulty making some important connections of this content to what they had just heard from a different instructor.

Even as I was teaching the class and not receiving the typical nonverbal indicators of student interest, the denial side of my brain kept shouting: “But I’m a professional! I’ve been teaching for

two decades! They don't know what they don't know!" I got too comfortable. Thinking back on that day, I accepted the fact that we are all entitled to a bad day and that you cannot please everyone, but once I saw the negative student evaluations and realized I had failed to teach this subject effectively, I was in denial both about why that class session was a failure as well as the extent to which I was to blame. I still to this day think of that moment each time I prepare to teach a new class and have shared the story with many new faculty members so that they might be able to avoid the pain that my own lack of confidence caused me.

Managing the tensions illustrated in the examples above paved the way for useful dialogue with students, colleagues, and leadership. As I struggled with the tension of whether to reveal or conceal these perceived instances of failure, I was forced to connect with a part of myself that, up until this point, I did not want to acknowledge. The requisite balancing needed to move forward and learn from these teaching failures has reminded me that the tensions are not fruitfully characterized as either/or. I have begun to come to terms with being both a "*sensitive*" (regarding the very personal and often difficult stories students share in culture, conflict, and communication classes) and a "*thick-skinned*" teaching professional, as well as managing both the *knowing* and *doing* expectations familiar to many communication educators who are expected to both master the course content and embody its effective application.

The burden of "overcoming" failure in academia can feel like a very "solitary pursuit and responsibility" (Timmermans & Sutherland, 2020, p. 44), but it doesn't have to be this way. Making time and space for dialogue about our teaching failures can create the kind of connections and teachable moments sought after by both students and junior faculty alike. In an effort to begin a dialogue with colleagues, I have begun two new initiatives. First, drawing from the work of Edmondson (2011), who consistently asks in her work "How do we learn from failure if we aren't willing to talk about it?" I piloted a faculty development session titled *Using Failure* that was comprised of several senior faculty who openly discussed their teaching and learning failures. I opened the session with an introduction to dialectical tensions as a way of framing the discussion and acknowledged the competing and often contradictory forces at work when it comes to opening up about failure in the academy. I reinforced the point that communicating about our failures begins the process of creating a shared understanding of the types of failures faculty can *expect* (Edmondson, 2011)—which could diminish the stigma.

Second, borrowing from Stefan (2010), I have also begun giving my "failure resume" before many of my university guest lectures and presentations. Since LinkedIn and a host of other platforms are readily available for faculty to showcase (and students to access) their "highlight reel" and list of accomplishments, when I get the chance to speak in front of faculty and students, I aim to provide information that isn't so readily available and one-sided. I was inspired by a short video I saw devoted to gatherings around the world that are "disrupting the fear of failure"<sup>3</sup> by transforming it as a *productive* force in future endeavors. This important conversation has to start somewhere. In the academy, why not in the form of a dialogue amongst the faculty, for the faculty, and by the faculty?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.freethink.com/videos/overcome-fear-of-failure>

## Conclusion: Difficult but Important

Regardless of their area of expertise, faculty draw from a range of purposes for engaging with difficult topics—such as failure—despite the associated challenges. Borrowing from Yeager et al.'s (2014) work on the outcomes associated with different classroom goal-setting techniques, I contend that dialogue devoted to failure in the academy often requires self-transcendent over self-oriented goals. It has been argued that, for a variety of reasons, many students today either do not know how to cope with failure or cope with it in very unproductive ways in the classroom (see, for example, May & Tenzek's [2018] work on classroom bullying)—and that such coping skills are necessary for them to be successful contributing members of society (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Students' inability to cope with difficult topics or engage in dialogue is widespread, and faculty members from across academia have devoted their careers to teaching students the communication skills needed to manage inevitable conflicts. This goal is what drives many of us to continue teaching classes devoted to difficult conversations regardless of the classroom failures we have experienced along the way.

One outcome of viewing teaching failures through the lens of dialectical tensions has been the opportunity to rework previously held "false binaries" (Baxter, 2011, p. 8) about their meaning. For example, the uncertainty about whether to *reveal or conceal* my teaching failures is what prompted me to begin examining them in the first place. The emergent meanings that were constructed from my ongoing collaborative discussions about whether our failures are *connected to or separate from* our personal identities opened a new understanding of the role of "betweenness" in my life. This certainly rings true in the realm of faculty development as many of us look for ways to get the relationship right between ourselves and our research, between ourselves and our students, between ourselves and the colleagues we choose to confide in. Despite the notion that this effort is "inherently unfinalizable" (Baxter, 2011, p. 17), making time and space for thought-work devoted to our failures will ultimately help us as we prepare our students to anticipate and manage their own.

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