**Tentative Title:** Displaying Failure in the Writer’s Journey: How New College Composition Instructors Experience Failure as Writers

**I. INTRODUCTION**

A writer climbs the Mount Everest of writing, fighting gravity as he pulls himself up rock by rock. His high distance from the ground makes him proud, but soon, his fingers slip. He lands on the ground, now feeling the aches of broken bones, darting his eyes left and right to make sure no one will see him cry. He now knows from the pain that he has just experienced failure. The fixed mindset will make him quit, but the growth mindset will make him reflect to discover his weaknesses. Now having discovered those weaknesses, the writer moves toward a new perspective on his or her literate identity, and it is the inevitability of failure that reinforces a writer’s humanity, making his or her powerful, and emotionally-charged, craft stand out among the AI-generated “writing” that is beginning to dominate the writing classroom.

In her commencement speech to the Harvard University graduating Class of 2008, J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, asserted, “It is impossible to live without failing at something unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default,” highlighting the importance of risk for growth. She also asserted that “[t]he knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive” and “[y]ou will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity.” As exemplified in the previous paragraph, writers experience the same concept. A single setback can rattle one’s confidence, but when thinking metacognitively through reflection, that writer builds resilience in the face of defeat, and my experience is no exception.

Rowling further stated in her speech that “failure taught [her] about [her]self that [she] could have learned no other way,” which reminds me of my own writerly transformation thanks to my encounter with a significant failure in high school. Having been accustomed to teachers commending me on my writing talents since seventh grade, I acquired an idea that I had been gifted with an ability to yield the power of a pen in any way that my heart desired, but when another teacher in eleventh grade believed otherwise, I replayed the voices of my past teachers in my head to regain my confidence, ignoring the criticism with which my eleventh-grade AP English teacher slapped me across the face. Thanks to my writing center experience that provided the space for reflection, I now see that it was not criticism, nor did he slap me across my face with anything. Rather, he had a sincere interest in watching me grow as a writer, and he handed me his mentorship, but I slapped it out of his hand, and I failed the AP exam. It was not until I saw myself in the student-writers who I tutored at the writing center while pursuing my Bachelor’s degree that I finally understood the biggest cause of my failure: I saw writing as a product that was either good or bad, and that descriptor subsequently defined the writer, but there is no perfect writer because writing is a continuous learning process, and as I undergo my first semester as a college composition instructor, I must dig deeper into the importance of failure for writing development so that my fellow writers, present and future, will not carry the same misunderstandings as they embark on their journeys.

While the scholarly conversation on failure in composition studies has already provided a comprehensive understanding of its effects on the learning and writing development of students in K-12 and postsecondary institutions, the effects of failure on how college composition instructors develop as writers remains under-researched. Further, the scholarly conversation on writing development has mostly regarded the journey as a whole. However, a zoomed-in approach to one particular stage may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the writer’s development. To arrive at a nuanced understanding of failure as situated within the complex writing journey of new college composition instructors, this thesis will address the following research questions:

**Research Questions**

* How do new college composition instructors experience the phenomenon of failure along their distinct journeys as writers?
* What role, if any, does failure play in the (re)shaping of new college composition instructors’ identities as writers?
* To what extent, if any, do new college composition instructors consider failure an asset to a writer’s development?

**II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Failure in Writing Studies and Education**

Collin Brooke & Allison Carr (2015) asserted that “[o]ne of the most important things students can learn is that failure is an opportunity for growth” (p. 63). They then allude to writing as a process by claiming that “successful writers aren’t those who are simply able to write brilliant first drafts” and that instead “the writing we encounter has been heavily *revised* and *edited* and is sometimes the result of a great deal of failure” (p. 62, italics added). Further, the common approach to assessment in the writing classroom—failure as a definer of the end product’s quality—has caused a widespread fear of failure among students (Brooke & Carr, 2015). Brooke & Carr (2015) later explain how teachers can ameliorate the students’ perception of failure in the writing classroom by engaging their students in the process of writing, drawing on Anne Lamott’s “shitty first drafts” to emphasize the role setbacks and reflection on such for the writer’s development.

Donald Murray (1982) argued in *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching* that failure is the most vital stage of the writing process. In fact, he wrote that “the writer tries to say something, and fails, and through failure tries to say it better, and fails, but perhaps, eventually, he says it well enough” (p. 119) and thus believed that composition courses should foster experimental writing to best illuminate the recursive nature of the writing process. That is, the composition course should be “a course in practicing, a course in trying, a course in choice, a course in craft” wherein the “student should learn to exploit his failures as he rediscovers his subject, re-searches his information, redesigns his form, rewrites and edits every sentence” (p. 119-20). Further, Murray (1982) characterized failure as a process, showing how that viewpoint creates a more sophisticated understanding of failure. This idea led him to argue that in the writing classroom, failure should not be seen as something with which a war has been waged and quickly lost; rather, it needs to be used to the full extent toward bettering oneself as a writer.

Michelle LaFrance & Steven J. Corbett (2020) asserted that enduring failure, even to the extent of an ordeal, is what strengthens writers. While describing failure, they maintain Murray’s (1982) emphasis on failure as integral to the writing process by asserting that

*failure* *offers rich opportunities for understanding the writing process and writing development for graduate student writers*—*is part and parcel of processes of socialization into professional communities and learning* *to contribute to the knowledge-making activities of the discourse communities where we seek to belong* (pp. 296-7).

LaFrance & Corbett (2020) also observe, however, that most writing studies scholarship does not reflect due appreciation of failure as a learning opportunity. In response to this neglect, LaFrance & Corbett (2020) employed the tools of autoethnography to analyze the impacts of failure on their own journeys as writers, hoping to demonstrate failure’s effectiveness on the writer’s identity. To demonstrate the effectiveness of reflection to render failure a valuable stage of writing development, both researchers wrote their own autoethnography in which they reflected on the role that failure played in their journeys as writers in graduate school. To begin, LaFrance described her story as a journey involving mentors, persistence, and a trial-and-error approach to learning, but most importantly, she uses autoethnography to explore her struggles and fear of failure, discovering that it often takes a long, painstaking process that requires guidance from peers and mentors to create effective writers. Corbett’s autoethnography, on the other hand, emphasizes the need to adapt writing for a variety of audiences while job hunting and the importance of feedback to evade failure in professional communication, for one’s unique voice matters even in academic conventions.

Allison Carr (2013) argued in “In Support of Failure” for the importance and relevance of failure as an “affect-bearing” concept in writing studies. Particularly, she advocates for failure as a multifaceted phenomenon that plays with feelings and emotion instead of a mere outcome in performance. This perspective echoes the process-based approach to failure for which Murray (1982) argued, for it emphasizes the rhizomatic nature of the writing process, meaning that the writer controls the story and thus has agency in his or her literacy practices (Williams, 2017). After examining current approaches to composition pedagogy, Carr (2013) proposed a “pedagogy of failure” which would embrace the messiness of the writing process and better display writing as a mountainous journey involving slipping, falling, and climbing instead of a straight-forward path for dog-walking. One way, according to Carr (2013), to implement this “pedagogy of failure” is to have each student compose a failure narrative, which provides a space to both explain impressions of and explore experiences with failure. Further, these narratives can engage students on both an intellectual and emotional level, making visible the aspects of failure that may spark embarrassment, fear, and/or joy but gradually transform one into a stronger writer (Carr, 2013).

**The Writer’s (Emotional) Journey**

A writer’s identity is inherently linked to his or her previous experiences with literacy (Williams, 2017), and those experiences make a story about the writer’s development (Bazerman, 2023; Williams, 2017), which can resemble a journey in which one embarks on a series of trials that will challenge him or her as a writer but shall emerge with larger writing muscles that can benefit novices through mentorship. This journey, nonetheless, plays with the writer’s emotions, as indicated by successes usually resulting in elevation and failures in demotion (Stockwell, 2019; Williams, 2017). This section will synthesize both scholarship and research on the intersections between the writer’s development as a journey and the emotional dimensions of writing processes to determine the best approach for applying the term “journey” to an analysis of new college composition instructors’ experiences with failure as they have developed as writers.

Charles Bazerman (2013) characterized the writer’s lifelong development as a journey, suggesting that it is a unique but complex and continuous process of trials that will build one into a writer who can effectively address a variety of audiences. Further, this use of “journey” implies a multidimensional nature to the writer’s development, meaning that factors even outside academia can impact a writer’s practices and that the writer’s skills evolve following challenging circumstances. Bazerman (2013) then argued that this lifespan perspective on writing development is essential for creating appropriate curricula and recognizing the value of each educational level toward the development of the writer. In addition, Bazerman (2013) challenged the research traditions that isolated the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural forces of writing development as well as the research fragmentation that favors the stages of early childhood and the higher-ends of education but disregards the middle years. Acknowledging this gap, Bazerman (2013) called writing educators and researchers to adopt a more informed curricular approach that recognizes the needs of students at each level and how factors both inside and outside school play into the writer’s journey.

While Bazerman (2013) considered the journey of writing development on a lifetime scale, another group of researchers took a more micro-view, interpreting each individual process as a journey. To show how a writer’s development can be likened to a journey, Helen Georgas et al. (2017) applied the popular narrative structure by Joseph Campbell called the hero’s journey to the experiences of new college composition students embarking on the research process. Georgas et al. (2017) revealed how the hero’s journey metaphor can turn a merely challenging experience into an exploratory process where challenges are endured to produce stronger writers and researchers. To begin, Georgas et al. (2017) turned to Campbell’s hero’s journey to create an innovative approach to teaching the research process to students in an undergraduate English composition course, which, as evidenced by the abundance of key terms and concepts associated with Campbell’s hero’s journey in the students’ reflections, enhanced their learning experience and gave meaning to seemingly meaningless and difficult stages. However, the writing journey is multifaceted, and the hero’s journey can illuminate often hidden influences, like emotions, on the writing process that influence a writer’s perseverance in times of success as well as those of struggle.

Before presenting her argument for failure as an “affect-bearing” concept in composition studies, Carr (2013) narrates her story of a personally significant failure that she endured while earning her doctorate degree, and it was through narrative that she overcame her emotional burden and began to appreciate failure for changing her as a writer. Carr (2013) considered her failure both felt and transformative. In fact, she called it “the most visceral experience of failure [she’d] ever felt” (n.p.). She began her story at the beginning of her doctoral program when her advisor asked her to read several books, write about them in a blog, and then compose a short paper on their importance, but despite having completed all the reading and receiving positive feedback on her blog, it was as if she had forgotten how to write. Specifically, she stated that she “froze,” unable to craft a cohesive sentence nor conjure a unique insight, and then once she met with her advisor, she described her experience as follows:

“I felt sick to my stomach, hot, dizzy. My mouth tasted like pennies. I tried to puke but cried instead. It was awful. . . . . I became overwhelmed by doubt, dread, and shame, muttering to myself over and over, “I don’t have a backup plan.” Here, I’d put all my eggs into this grad school basket only to discover that the basket was without bottom, that the eggs were making a terrible mess at my feet” (n.p.).

The overwhelming emotional response here showcases Carr (2013) trudging through a trial in her journey as she navigated, nonetheless eventually embraced, the unknown. In fact, her narrative humanizes failure as she makes it relatable and reveals it as a commonly experienced phenomenon among writers. Above all, she learned from this experience the importance of recognizing failure’s impact on writers for pedagogical purposes. Specifically, composition pedagogy must acknowledge failure as a commonly faced writing phenomenon to create a more empathetic learning environment where students can thrive as writers despite setbacks.

Carr’s (2013) story is only one example of how emotions pervade the writing process and amplify at the stage of failure. In fact, the writing process is often experienced among students as an emotional navigation through a series of trials (Moore, 2013). Sarah Moore (2013) emphasized that the emotional dimensions of academic writing, both positive and negative, cannot be ignored, for these emotions drive the process and can impact the quality of the final product. Moore (2013) suggested that while students can experience moments of pride during their writing processes, they more often experience negative emotions. For example, the fear of judgment, usually in the form of negative feedback, stirs anxiety, which can make writing feel even more difficult or even impossible (Moore, 2013). Moore (2013) highlighted the importance of recognizing and addressing the emotional landscape of academic writing so that faculty supervisors can effectively support their students as they embark on their processes. Moore (2013) employs Campbell’s the hero’s journey to map the writing process to illustrate how these supervisors can use this model to become mentors to their students, using supportive language in feedback and having a structure that allows for more effective navigation through their emotional labyrinth. The hero’s journey can also demystify the writing process (Moore, 2013), and if mentors, like teachers, use their personal experiences with failure to support their student-writers, they can more effectively show students that overcoming adversity in the writing process is normal and possible (Carr, 2013), which may better support them in their lifelong journeys as they continue their education (Bazerman, 2013).

Similar to Carr (2013), Bazerman (2023) explored his lifelong journey as writer, writing teacher, and writing scholar in his autoethnography, *How I Became the Kind of Writer I Became*. He examined how certain personal and social factors affected he understood these identities and their intersections, but while Carr (2013) focused her story on failure, Bazerman (2023) zoomed out, surveying his multifaceted writerly development as it occurred from his early childhood to his professional career in academia. Like LaFrance & Corbett (2020), Bazerman (2023) used autoethnography as his exploratory tool. In doing so, he did not intend to establish his journey as the standard but open doors to new areas for other writing scholars to explore. That is, Bazerman (2023) believed that by sharing his journey, he could encourage his fellow scholars to dive deeper into the idiosyncratic nature of writing development. Thus, Bazerman’s (2023) autoethnography does not merely tell a story but aims to advance the field with storytelling, providing an example to which others’ stories can be compared in search of common themes, leading to an advancement in scholars’ understanding of how writers develop.

Bernadette Stockwell (2019) also used autoethnography to explore the complexity of her own experiences as a creative writer. However, rather than focus on failure, as Carr (2013) did, or on her lifelong journey as a writer, as Bazerman (2023) did, Stockwell (2019) surveyed her creative practices and writing processes, as well as those of other creative writers, through the lens of the hero’s journey, having noticed similarities between the structure of the hero’s journey and the typical routine of a creative writer. Stockwell (2019) employed Christopher Vogler’s structure of the hero’s journey, as outlined in his book *The Writer’s Journey*, instead of Campbell’s structure because Vogler’s structure was created specifically with writers in mind. Also, Stockwell (2019) applies the framework to the writing process instead of the writer’s (lifelong) development, which allowed her to gain more significant insights into the trials and emotional responses that occur during a specific stage like invention, drafting, peer-review, or polishing. In fact, Stockwell (2019) found that she and her fellow writers experienced a similar call to action: motivation to write. They then either accepted the call by writing or resisted it by procrastinating. In addition, her research suggests that a correlation exists between a writer’s emotions and his or her writing processes. For example, her data showed that the need to modify one’s writing to reach new audiences can have either a positive or negative effect on a creative writer’s emotions, depending on the difficulty of the revision process.

**Mindset Theory in Writing Studies**

The fixed mindset will fear failure and let it govern the writer’s identity, but the growth mindset will cure the writer’s blindness to the benefits of failure. Although the scholarly conversation on mindset theory, and the controversies thereof (Yeager & Dweck, 2020), has still barely touched the surface of writing studies, writers are equally subject to failure as they embark on their journeys as any other journeying learner. Thus, more exploration into the intersections between mindset theory and writing studies is needed. This section will provide an overview of that scholarship and research to establish the relevance and validity of mindset theory as this study’s theoretical framework.

A writer’s mindset will inform his or her behavior and attitude toward failure, but before the connection between mindset and a writer’s identity can be discussed, the research surrounding mindset, and its recent controversies—including whether mindsets correlate with student outcomes, whether mindset interventions among both teachers and students succeed, and whether those interventions are effective enough to warrant further investigation (Yeager & Dweck, 2020)—must be explored. Carol Dweck (2006) coined the term “mindset” and divided it into two types—fixed and growth—in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. The fixed mindset will fear failure and thereby let it govern the writer’s identity while the growth mindset will expose the benefits of failure to the writer. Dweck (2006) described the fixed mindset as “[b]elieving that your qualities are carved in stone” (n.p.), suggesting that this mindset causes a learner to remain within the ability realm where he or she finds belonging. Thus, the fixed mindset does not allow for an expansive learning experience, for the student isolates him/herself in his or her ordinary world, fearing discomfort. On the other hand, the growth mindset “is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others” (Dweck, 2006, n.p.). Therefore, this other mindset enables students to undergo more meaningful learning experiences, interpreting challenges, and even failure, as sites for strengthening. While building onto the work of Dweck (2006), Saundra McGuire & Stephanie McGuire (2015) stated that “people with a fixed mindset tend to avoid challenges, give up easily, ignore criticism, and find the success of others threatening” while “people with a growth mindset embrace challenges, persevere, use effort to achieve mastery, benefit from criticism, and find motivational fuel in the success of others” (p. 61), suggesting that each mindset occupies a different end of the magnet, and Todd Zakrajsek (2022) gave additional support to the growth mindset by appealing to the value of constructive feedback during the learning process.

Mindset theory is underpinned by attribution theory (Heider, 1958) and achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984). To begin, Fritz Heider (1958) stated that “[a]ttribution in terms of impersonal and personal causes, and with the latter, in terms of intent, are everyday occurrences that determine much of our understanding of and reaction to our surroundings” (p. 16). To clarify, Zakrajsek (2022) provides an example of attribution theory in practice: “If you are 5 minutes late to my office hours, I could attribute your lateness to an external cause, such as finding a parking spot, or an internal cause, such as absentmindedness” (p. 100), and one’s social perception influences the attribution. Thus, attribution theory allows people to fill in gaps in their own knowledge, making sense of the unknown—like the reason for one’s tardiness—by thinking through possible causes and then matching the effect to one possibility. Applied to mindset theory, one could attribute the extent to which he can improve his writing skills to internal causes, including a disinterest for the topic, or external causes, including a lack of practice. To explain achievement goal theory, John G. Nicholls (1984) stated that one’s previous accomplishments, as well as a comparison to others’ abilities, can influence his or her perception of his or her own abilities. Thus, mindset can be described as social, for comparative thoughts can influence how one thinks of his or her ability to improve and then succeed; similar to how a higher exam score can make one student feel superior, a lower exam score can make the other feel inadequate.

To understand failure as not a dead-end to their journeys in writerhood but an opportunity for transformation, writers must develop a growth mindset. Despite the insufficiency of current quantitative data to suggest any statistically significant improvement in student learning outcomes from growth mindset interventions, current qualitative data indicates that such interventions motivate students to persevere in the midst of difficulty when in the form of encouraging feedback coupled with objective complements (Truax, 2018). Further, students of writing are more likely to develop a growth mindset when feedback demonstrates the teacher’s respect for the students’ effort (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). However, the concentration on standardized testing at the national level has hindered this development, leading to the preservation of fixed mindsets among students (Truax, 2018). It is thus the writing teachers’ responsibility, as potential mentors along their students’ journeys, to refocus their students’ attention to motivational factors. Their feedback must then concentrate on the writing process, encouraging their students as they jump over the hurdles of grammar, rethink their arguments, and climb out of pitfalls.

Feedback is how mentors establish their presence to their mentees when physically unavailable and what maintains those mentees’ motivation to write. However, feedback is not constrained to asynchronous exchanges, for Megan L. Truax’s (2018) study indicated that growth mindset feedback, in particular, during student-teacher conferences increases second- and third-grade students’ motivation to write. Additionally, her qualitative data also indicated that grammar-focused feedback decreased their participants’ writing motivation, suggesting an ineffectiveness of grammar-based interventions toward sustaining a writer’s resilience. For example, Truax (2018) found that feedback such as “What should be here instead?” (p. 143) did not result in a shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. This question does not promote critical thinking nor rethinking but rather may lead the writer to the myth that grammar constructs the heart of writing. That is, the words “should” and “instead” work together to render this feedback suggestive of a correct form of writing, and when one’s writing fails to adhere to that correctness, he or she becomes less of a writer than one who writes “correctly.” Thus, the writer maintains a fixed mindset and thus cannot understand writing as malleable. Nevertheless, the teacher may paradoxically play two roles in their students’ writing journeys: mentor and judge. The former is invested in the student’s writing development and acquisition of the writer identity, but the latter must judge his or her writing as set on display

While Truax (2018) investigated the effects of growth mindset interventions from teachers on students, Laura K. Miller (2020) examined their effects from a writing center tutor, who is also a fellow student and can thus more effectively play the mentor role in the writing journey of other students. By examining the effects of an embedded tutor from the writing center on the writing mindsets of engineering students in a university engineering class versus two classes with no tutor, Miller (2020) found that the tutored class developed growth mindsets more so than the non-tutored classes by the end of the semester. In addition, the tutored students demonstrated more improvement in their final papers, particularly in organization, mechanics, and academic style. However, the study suggested that these students can acquire a growth mindset toward writing and sharpen their skills to a significant extent without much tutoring. Thus, Miller’s (2020) study suggests that a correlation between mindset and one’s writing performance may exist.

As indicated in Miller’s (2020) study, writing mentorship became most effective through the following interventions: promotion of the growth mindset through instruction in mindset theory, one-on-one tutoring, and emphasis on higher-order concerns as well as the transferability of writing skills. While it is unclear which factor in particular made the intervention so effective for the students, Miller (2020) suggested that it was thanks to a combination of instruction in mindset theory, individualized support, concentration on the transferability of writing skills, and the training and mindset of the embedded tutor. This last possibility may have contributed the most to the intervention’s effectiveness despite its brevity, for a growth mindset in the tutor or instructor can allow him or her to empathize with students’ struggles (McGuire & McGuire, 2015), demonstrating the possibility, and benefit, of persevering beyond the trials of writing. As demonstrated by the literature, mentorship has a profound impact on a writer’s emergence from failure. In fact, there is no isolated writer (Williams, 2017). In fact, Williams (2017) asserted that not even the most respected college professors reached the top of their writing mountains by relying on their own grips; rather, these writers received support from colleagues and advisors who acted as peers and mentors by investing themselves in the growth of their allies.

**III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS**

The purpose of this thesis will be to interpret new college composition instructors’ experiences of the phenomenon of failure along their writing journeys and use that data to draw conclusions about their identities as writers. As a new college composition instructor myself, I will investigate my own writing failures, as well, to gain an insider’s perspective and perhaps empathize with the experiences of my fellow writers, as Stockwell (2019) did in her study. This insider’s perspective shall be gained through an autoethnography wherein I not only explore my own experience with failure as a writer but synthesize my memories with scholarly literature and primary research to strengthen the credibility of my narrative. Also, I will use autoethnography to place myself as equal to my participants, resisting the authority that comes from the researcher identity.

Like Stockwell (2019), this qualitative case study will employ phenomenography—a qualitative research methodology within the interpretivist paradigm that examines the multitude of perspectives of how individuals understand, perceive, interpret, and experience the world around them (Hajar, 2021)—in addition to autoethnography. Because this study will not aim to suggest an ideal or normal experience of failure among new college composition instructors but to reveal the variety of ways in which failure can transform their writer identities, phenomenography is the more appropriate methodology over phenomenology, which aims rather to dissect the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by an individual (Bhattacharya, 2017). In fact, phenomenography is distinct from phenomenology in that the former is grounded in empirical research of how individuals differently experience a particular phenomenon (Svensson, 1997). Further, phenomenography aims to explore the qualitatively distinct ways in which individual subjects perceive and experience a phenomenon but is not constrained to one particular phenomenon (Svensson, 2024). This study will then concentrate on the differences among the experiences of the participants, recognizing that each writer’s journey is unique (Bazerman, 2013; Bazerman, 2023).

As evidenced by the abundance of research on the intersections of writing studies and failure, reflection, in the form of a personal narrative, effectively illuminates the power of failure to strengthen a writer. Therefore, implementing narrative- and reflective-based writing tasks may lead to an empathetic learning environment in the college writing classroom. Nonetheless, narrative may not serve the students, nor the teachers, much benefit unless they have a framework that will elucidate failure’s complex but critical role in their development as writers. Thus, I will also employ mindset theory as my theoretical framework, for one’s response to failure stems from his or her overall understanding of its implications (Dweck, 2006). That is, to understand why a writer made a particular decision in response to failure, an instructor must first know how that writer interprets failure in relation to his or her self-efficacy. Further, this theoretical framework will enable this study to contribute a writing studies perspective to the ongoing controversies regarding mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Finally, unless college composition instructors become familiar with the impact of mindset on a writer’s perception of failure, they may not be able to empower students to persevere amid their road of trials, for these instructors may then treat the symptoms but not the sickness.

All writers embark on a journey, which spans a lifetime (Bazerman, 2013), but each journey is unique; thus, to find one story that speaks on behalf of all writer’s journeys is impossible (Bazerman, 2023). Consequently, while this case study will be grounded in qualitative methodologies, it may become important to quantify data to draw sturdier conclusions regarding commonalities among the distinct ways in which new college composition instructors experienced failure as they have developed as writers. The interview data will first be coded based on themes in mindset, emotions, and identity. A digital word cloud will then be created to determine the most commonly used words to explain the participants, and my own, experiences of failure. An additional word cloud will be created to determine the common emotions experienced among all participants, researcher included, as well.

The interviews will take a semi-structured approach to open room for interpersonal conversation between two writers, the participant and the researcher. To balance the power between these writers, the interviews shall take place in either a vacant classroom or a study room inside the university library, suggesting a writer-writer relationship. To best examine their complex experiences of failure, most questions will focus on the “how” of the experiences rather than the “what,” thereby encouraging responses beyond the yes/no binary.

Upon each interview’s completion, all participant’s responses will be transcribed for coding and thematic analysis to begin the quantifying process. These transcriptions will then be provided in appendices at the end of the thesis. I will also create a map zoomed-in on the writer’s responses. The interview protocol—steps to complete before, during, and after the interview—will also be provided in another appendix.

Because there is no “solitary writer” (Williams, 2017), other questions will focus on the “who” to examine the effects of peers and mentors on each participant’s writer identity. Also recognizing that the outcomes of all journeys depend on the decisions made therein, the last set of interview questions will ask for the “why.” The purpose of these questions will be to understand the cause-and-effect nature of the journey. In this way, these questions will be the gateway to an investigation of the reasoning for and consequence(s) of the response(s) to his or her failure.

Because emotions play a critical role in every writer’s journey (Bazerman, 2013; Bazerman, 2023; Carr, 2013; Moore, 2013; Stockwell, 2019), this study will also aim to investigate each writer’s affective response to failure and how that response contributed to his or her perception of him/herself as a writer. To capture the complex emotional landscape of their experiences with failure as writers, interview questions regarding emotion must encourage a response beyond the simple one-word answer that may come from simply asking how one writer “felt” in a situation. Rather, these questions must inquire about the influence of one’s emotions on his or her writer identity. Thanks to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, my fellow writers should be able to openly express their emotions without pre-determined questions leading them to respond a certain way as to simply satisfy me as a researcher.

Upon completion of the interviews, I will construct my autoethnography wherein I investigate my own experience with failure that transformed my identity as a writer, situating my perspective within those of my fellow writers. While I could write a failure narrative (Carr, 2013), an autoethnography will allow me to examine my experiences as both a writer and a researcher. In addition, I can gain a more nuanced understanding of my identities by synthesizing my experiences with those of my fellow writers. Further, an autoethnography allows the space for scholarly literature that can support my claims based on personal experience and ultimately strengthen the credibility of my data, which will include my memories. Through this autoethnography, I will gain an insider’s perspective so I can begin to empathize with my fellow writers. As a pre-writing exercise for my autoethnography, I will ask myself the same interview questions and then use my answers to instigate a deeper-thinking process into the impact of failure on my identity as a writer.

Once the data has been generated and interpreted, they shall be used to inform a discussion on implications for pedagogical practice, hopefully providing instructors with a model for empathizing through failure as they reflect on their experiences to instill growth mindsets in their student-writers so they may not only persevere in the midst of trials but feel supported along their journeys. Consequently, they may gain an ameliorated attitude toward writing, which may weaken any temptations to resort to AI, generating an essay of which they are the “author.”

Despite its proven effectiveness in attributing meaning to challenging situations and failures experienced therein (Georgas et al., 2017; Moore, 2013; Stockwell, 2019), this study will not engage the hero’s journey in the data analysis stage, for this framework may push an idea on these writers that their failure needs to be regarded positively. Also, while the hero’s journey framework, indeed, would place the writer at the center of the story (Georgas et al., 2017; Stockwell, 2019), female writers may reject the identity of “hero,” for this term may welcome a stereotypical image of a brawny male saving the world or possibly a “damsel in distress.” This study will, nonetheless, still regard the writer’s lifelong writerly development as a journey (Bazerman, 2013), with failure as not a dead-end but a climax in the writer’s own story.

To reinforce the notion that each writer experiences a unique journey (Bazerman, 2013; Bazerman, 2023) and to maintain phenomenography’s emphasis on the factors that make each participant’s experience qualitatively distinctive (Hajar, 2021; Svensson, 1997; Svensson, 2024), the data from each interview will be analyzed and interpreted in individual chapters titled by each participant’s respective pseudonym. These chapters will be sequenced in the same order in which they were interviewed. My autoethnography will follow and use the data presented in the participants’ chapters to best situate my perspective within theirs as I empathize with their experiences. Following my autoethnography will be a discussion of what makes our navigations through failure similar despite our distinctive experiences. Both word clouds displaying commonalities among our experiences and emotions encountered therein will be included in this section. This thesis will then end with a chapter that will discuss implications for composition pedagogy and indicate avenues for future research.

Although this study may lead to insights that will move scholarly conversations in composition theory forward, foreseeable limitations cannot be ignored. To begin, this study cannot account for all the possible experiences of failure among all new college composition instructors, nor can it pin one experience as the norm or ideal due to the rhizomatic nature of every writer’s journey. However, this thesis will not intend to start and end a conversation in one essay. Rather, it shall inspire other researchers to take the baton from my hand once I cross the finish line, as they find more ways in which new college composition instructors can experience failure along their distinct journeys as writers. Additionally, given the small sample size due to the length constraints of a thesis and an interest in rich analysis over number of participants, there will be insufficient evidence to suggest the similarities found herein among these writers’ experiences with failure reflect the majority. Therefore, further research may seek to extend this study to determine whether the similarities found among these writers remain consistent with those in another sample.

**IV: CONCLUSION**

Although this thesis will not be able to speak on behalf of all new college composition instructors, it can call more of them to reflect on their own most significant experience with failure that contributed to their overall perception of themselves as writers. Consequently, more of these instructors may better empathize with their students, or mentees, experiencing failure as they traverse the unknown. In turn, more students would receive further support as they face trials along their journeys, and postsecondary institutions may see an increase in retention rates as a result.

By filling the gap of how failure impacts the writer identities of new college composition instructors, these writers can better become mentors to their students, now holding their hands as they trudge through the muddiness of each writing process. By complicating, rather than simplifying, how failure operates in writing studies, writers can gain a richer understanding of the ways in which failure affects their identities as they look through opened windows, seeing how their emotions and tensions therein became a part of their journeys. Additionally, students learn to write by example, and with the writing journeys of their college composition instructors displayed, their students may feel more encouraged to embark on their own journeys, now understanding the complexities of the writing as not a mere product but a continuous process. Further, if they inform their mentoring approach through their own failure, new college composition instructors may more effectively implement an empathetic pedagogy that enables everyone, students and instructors alike, to thrive as writers.

This thesis shall also extend the work of Brooke & Carr (2015) to further ameliorate the concept of failure in writing studies. In addition, this thesis will hopefully encourage more writers to reflect on their experiences with failure to acquire an appreciation for the value it serves in writing development. Above all, with a closer look into how new college composition instructors experience failure, writing studies as a whole can progress against students’ temptations to employ AI as a method of “writing,” for empathy shall thrive when our failures are used for the better of our students.

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