Editorial: Reframing fail(lure): Failure to See? Failure to Connect? Failure to Be?

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Several years ago, I took on the additional responsibility of supervising a large group of student teachers. According to protocol, university supervisors are expected to conduct 1 orientation meeting, 3 official observations and 1 exit interview for each student teaching placement (2 placements per student teacher). I braced myself for an intense semester of teaching with frequent trips to more than a dozen schools throughout the region. However, I relished in the idea that I would forge new relationships with area teachers and have an opportunity to survey the landscape of K-12 art education in central New York.

After three introductory meetings in one morning, I made time for one additional meeting with Teresa[i] - a well-respected veteran art teacher and regular host teacher - shortly before I was expected to pick up my children from school. Needless to say, I was exhausted and not quite my usual cheerful-self but I was too busy trying to finish my "To-do-list" to realize it. I entered the classroom, shook hands with Teresa, sat down and quickly went over procedures, rules, and expectations. I one-sidedly rushed through the motions and didn't leave much room for kindnesses or discussion. I took Teresa and her hospitality for granted. After 15 minutes or so of "laying down the law", I finally took notice to Teresa's disapproving body language. I paused, the she softy but sternly stated, "Dr. Bey, under the circumstances, I am not sure I am interested in hosting a student teaching this semester." Teresa then described her philosophy and procedures for hosting student teachers. I back peddled to avoid freaking out our student teacher as she sat quietly across the table. I also wanted to avoid later alarming our university placement coordinator with the possibility that she may have to scramble around to locate a new host teacher at the last minute. I tried to apologize and empathize with Teresa in an effort to salvage our relationship but it was seemingly too late.

I returned to my laptop later that evening to find an email from Teresa addressed to her supervisor and copied to select school district and university administrators. She described the nature of our exchange, and her reluctance to host; it was mortifying. In retrospect, I realize that I was authoritative and a bit rude in our meeting. In my haste and exhaustion, I **failed** to make a connection with Teresa. I **failed** to thank her for welcoming us (the student teacher, the university, and me) into "her home" (classroom). I **failed** to acknowledge that we were working together for the benefit of art teachers in-training. I **failed** to acknowledge that we were working as a team to better art education. I **failed** to recognize her as a resource and give her the respect that she deserved. I **failed** to solicit Teresa's input or suggestion for improving the university supervisor/host teacher/student teacher dynamic. I **failed** to open a platform for us to candidly and critically reflect on our assessment instruments. I **failed** as a University Supervisor.

The following day I contacted Teresa and she thankfully accepted my invitation to coffee. I explained some of the professional circumstances and unrelated personal challenges leading up to our introductory meeting and extended my most sincere apology. Fortunately, I was able to smooth things over and to this day Teresa continues to be one of the most diligent and nurturing of all of our host teachers. She taught me a valuable lesson. Teresa reminded me of the

importance of being present, thoughtful, and gracious in the face of any meeting or potential collaboration especially those involving area art teachers.

My reflections on my failed connection with Teresa became the impetus for seeking new and exciting ways to include, honor, and respect our area art teachers. My relationship with these teachers continues to evolve throughout the years. What started out as a series of obligatory meetings, progressed into casual lunches and coffee gatherings, art supply giveaways, an "Art Teacher in Residence Program", and a few dear friendships. . I am thankful for the graciousness and sacrifices host teachers make in support of our students each semester. Practicum is not possible without their support,

This short anecdote represents how an utter **failure** can contribute to new insights, recourse or positive change. We have much to gain from reframing and critically reflecting on our attitudes, positions, stances and losses. Perhaps through our reflectivity and discourse these so-called failures are redeemed, transformed, and cease to be failures. According to Lewis (2014) once failures become a part of a reflective discourse they cannot remain static. Lewis (2014) stated:

> Once we begin to transform it [failure], it ceases to be that any longer. The term is always slipping off the edges of our vision, not simply because it's hard to see without wincing, but because once we are ready to talk about it, we often call the event something else—a learning experience, a trail, a reinvention—no longer the static concept of failure (11-12)

Seemingly, our culture tends to view failure pejoratively but one cannot hone important problem solving skills if one is in denial about his or her faults, challenges or imperfections. Instead of masking our so-called failures, feeling shame or reflecting privately, we can share our respective trials in such a way that might benefit others or those who experience related hurdles. Lewis (2014) suggests that, "It is the creative process—what drives invention, discovery, and culture—that reminds us of how to nimbly convert so-called failure into an irreplaceable advantage" (p. 13). So what is the advantage of failure? Surely some of us fall (or fail) more gracefully than others and certainly some are more equipped, or better at getting up. However some of us fail to reflect and essentially stay on the ground and allow our failures to remain static.

While serving as a university supervisor, my personal and professional preoccupations blinded me. My resulting behavior disallowed me from seeing or connecting with Teresa and disallowed her from connecting with me. My failure to see [Teresa] could have cost me a potential friend or collaborator and could have also cost me opportunities to make discoveries or gain important insights. When we fail to see and connect we fail to be fully active in the world. Are we as Artists/ Researchers/Teachers failing to use our art, research, and teaching to see or challenge our own ignorance? What is the impact of this lack of reflectivity/criticality on our positions in the classroom and those of our students? Are we as a society failing to see and hear those who have been historically marginalized and oppressed? Are we failing to see? Are we failing to connect? Are we failing to be?

The articles herein volume 35 of *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* discuss so-called 'failures' from a range of perspectives. They speak to failed connections, failed systems, failed relationships, failed reflections, and of course, "failed failures". Many of the authors discuss voicelessness and invisibility. They critique the blinders and earplugs some accept when they fail to challenge the status quo, or question their own assumptions and biases. Teaching should be denoted by openness and reflection, and reflection should give way to change or evolution. This awareness is much needed if we are to recognize the inevitable

changes around us so that we might adapt accordingly to avoid static failure. Although I am not surprised, it is indicative of our current social and political climate that many of the articles in this volume address issues of race/culture, representation and/or political marginalization. This is clearly a testament to the challenges we have ahead of us despite continued struggle and protest.

In **Beth Balliro's** article "Access and Failure" the narrative of her former art student informs her insights and reflections on the impact of art accessibility on students of color. She notes that students of color experienced an alarming 49% decrease in childhood art education in the last 25 years. However, increasing access to arts without revamping art education and considering the purpose it serves in the lives of students of color may not provide the solution. Balliro shares what she describes as "a nuanced failure" by tackling one facet of this broad issue while also providing a platform for the voice of a next-generation artist.

In "Failure to Be a "Real American"? → Challenging Failure: An Impetus to Shape Scholarship and Teaching", **Christina Chin** describes a culture that fails to accept her as a Jamaican-born Chinese American. While the hegemonic United States fails to see Chin and marginalizes her as a cultural Other, and "Perpetual Foreigner", her ongoing struggles, constantly enduring and combating the blows of prejudice and racism, fuel her continuous self-reflection and passion as an educator, scholar, and agent of change. She now aims "toward the transformation of students understandings and dispositions regarding art and art education to embrace more liberatory perspectives." Chin urges us to empathize with and be emotionally provoked by her experiences, in order to critically contemplate our own beliefs.

Joni Acuff also speaks to the need to include the critique of the "complex power structures that create oppressive systems of marginalization and educational disparity" in multicultural art education. In her article, "Failure to Operationalize: Investing in Critical Multicultural Art Education" Acuff contends that despite its longstanding existence, many art educators fail to revise liberal multiculturalism, or note its deficits. Acuff calls for the need for *Critical Multiculturalism*. She explains, "Enacting critical multiculturalism requires a heightened level of consciousness regarding the society we live in and the power structures that influence and maintain educational inequity". Acuff suggests that critical examinations of subjugating and stereotypical racial imagery could assist all teachers in understanding misinformed societal perceptions, and the influence they have on the self-image and the educational values of children of color.

Kevin Slivka reexamines a failed connection that took place during an ethnographic study he conducted during his doctoral studies. He focuses on his shortcomings when meeting to interview, Terry Kemper, an Ojibwe artist, on the White Earth reservation. As Acuff articulates, we make progress by continually reflecting on our behaviors, assumptions, and the signification of our presence as we navigate ethical and cultural considerations while teaching and conducting research. In "My Failure With An Ojibwe Artist: Reflections On Initial Intercultural Relationships", Slivka describes his process as "Self-decolonization", a reflective process of revisiting and deconstructing his actions, methodology, ethics, thoughts, and assumptions. Failing to decenter our own cultural framework when entering into new relationships can contribute to further division between groups of people who are already historically strained. Diverse issues stemming from an increasingly global society along with constantly changing paradigms in art, scholarship, theory, and teaching compels many of us art educators (especially those with hybrid identities) to continually negotiate these divides in the studio, in scholarship, and in the classroom. Refusing to step out of our comfort-zones to negotiate this complexity is refusing to accept the transformative power failures can evoke.

While Slivka revisits his challenges in the context of field research, **Sunny Spillane's** personal narrative "The Failure of Whiteness in Art Education: A Personal Narrative Informed by Critical Race Theory"discusses the fragmentation of her identity that took place throughout various stages of her career. She employees Critical Race theory as a lens to revisit a series of professional failures that took place during her years as an elementary art teacher, doctoral student, and an evolving white pre-service teacher trainer who advocates for social justice within a racially diverse climate. By reflecting and articulating her personal failures, Spillane grows exponentially as a professional.

Christina Hanawalt takes a broader look at art teacher identity and the social, political forces surrounding them during their formative years. In "Reframing New Art Teacher Support: From Failure to Freedom" she asks that we reconsider the structures in place (or lack thereof) designed to prepare and support entry-level art teachers. Hanawalt urges pre-service teacher trainers to envision "ways to move beyond comfortable methods of supporting beginning art teachers". She presents seven perspectives relevant to the new art teacher experience in order to articulate the need for creative solutions to the complex social, cultural and emotional challenges they face.

In "Reflective Communities: Mentoring Teacher Candidates During the (In)Between Spaces of the Practicum", **Joana Hyatt** also examines fieldwork designed to prepare art teachers. She suggests that many programs fail to examine the social conditions between the space of becoming [Emerging Professionals] and the place of being [Students/Pre-service teachers] during practicum fieldwork. Hyatt critiques the lack of negotiable spaces during this transitional period and recommends increased use of arts-based inquiry as one way of encouraging supplemental communal spaces to negotiate the liminal space between student and professional teacher.

Some of the authors in this volume take other perspectives and approaches in tackling the theme. **Adam Greteman** reframes failure by focusing on the life and impact of Quentin Crisp (1908-1999) an author, actor, artist's model, and outspokenly homosexual man. Crisp challenged social norms through his flamboyance and style in the early 20th century. After publishing his witty autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant*, in 1968 Crisp became a 1970s gay icon. In "On Being Naïve: A Queer Aesthete in Art Education" Greteman reflects on the life of Crisp who he describes as a queer aesthete. Greteman explains that Crisp can be read as "naïve", and clarifies, "To be called "naïve" is a form of failure; a failure to be worldly or knowledgeable in one's doing and becoming. To be a naïf is to be a failed scholar and a failed artist-teacher". Greteman also uses his article to problematize failure. If one finds redeeming aspects of an experience, do we fail at failure, or do we disallow these failures from remaining static?

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In "(Re)Constructing Erased Narratives: Unearthing Strange Fruit" **Maria Leake** discusses how artist Vincent Valdez uses his work to critique historical omissions. According to Leake, "when the cultural heritage of one group is prioritized over another groups' heritage, this too is an intentional act of controlling history." By privleging one group and erasing the narratives of Mexican-Americans, these historical re-tellings fail to empower and further marginalize. Like the narratives of Christina Chin, Valdez uses these omissions as points of departure for critical dialogue. In reflecting on the impact of these works, Leake also invests in deep personal reflection.

In **Laura Lee McCartney's** article**,** "Toward a Poor Exhibition: The Fail(lure) of *Curare* and *Currere"*, she offers "a look at a/r/tographic inquiry designed to interrogate curator failures in *Dress Stories,* an exhibition of 150 personal clothing objects". Employing notions of curriculum made popular by reconceptualists Pinar & Grumet (1976), and "allowing for uncertainty in curating the curriculum of her lived experiences" McCartney "curates" her lived-curriculum in this deeply personal account.

The articles in this volume of JSTAE articulate failures or reclaim failures, in such a way that they are then reframed, redeemed or remediated giving light to compassions, insights, visions, vulnerabilities that allow us to then see, hear, self-actualize or re-discover our own agency. I am confident to leave the fate of JSTAE in the capable hands of our incoming editor, Melanie Buffington, and the new Associate Editor, John Derby. I would like to thank Melanie Buffington who served as Associate Editor for Volume 34 and 35, Senior Editor, Kryssi Staikidis for her continued support and guidance and my editorial assistant, Alexandra (Sascha) Kollisch, for assisting me with copyediting and designing the layout for the last two volumes. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the JSTAE editorial review board with a special thanks to my old friend, Steven Carpenter, for taking the time out of his busy schedule to support us in my efforts to pull this volume together. I grew tremendously as a teacher, writer and scholar while serving as the editor of JSTAE for the past two years. I am honored to have had the opportunity to share my voice and contextualize the voice and theories of so many brilliant scholars in our field.

References

Lewis, S. (2015). *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*. Simon and Schuster. New York; NY.

*Jorge Lucero is also a contributing author to JSTAE volume 35

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[i] Teresa is a pseudonym used in place of the aforementioned host teacher's actual name.