

Not writing and unbecoming: Queering doctoral ‘success’.

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The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being - Jack Halberstam, 2011, p. 88

‘Failure’ is one of doctoral education’s favourite f-words. The field is awash with conversations about drop-outs and slow-completes, supervisors who founder or fall short, and a qualification that all too often appears to disappoint, leaving too many graduates in debt and unemployed. Of all aspects of doctoral education, writing represents arguably the richest site for exploring failure. Even a quick glance across doctoral writing blogs reveals a rich pattern of talk about failure and writing the doctorate. And it is into this complex territory that this paper enters, with an examination of failure and doctoral writing in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Yet, in choosing failure as my object of inquiry, I am seeking to consider it otherwise. Rather than viewing failure as something to avoid or address, as it is conventionally imagined, I am interested in the counterintuitive possibility that failure might offer researchers important tools for reexamining success. That is to say, failure might reveal alternative logics of knowing doctoral education, and practices of being a doctoral writer.

In order to advance this proposition I have drawn on the queer theorizing of Jack Halberstam. His book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) examines how failure may be viewed outside of the frame of ‘falling short’. Halberstam examines a ‘silly archive’ including popular animation and ‘dude’ movies to provoke us to think about the critical energy that failure, not winning, not doing, and not knowing might possess. According to Halberstam, failure can be ‘artful’ – potentially opening up a politics of refusing to consent to dominant logics of power and discipline. This is something that feminists have long explored, ‘where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures’ (Halberstam, 2011, p. 4). According to Halberstam, then, failure can offer other ways of being in the world, as well as a platform for organizing social critique.

What might this deconstructive, queer reading of failure offered by Halberstam contribute to the study of doctoral writing? In order to explore this question I have closely read material generated out of a larger empirical study of doctoral writing in Aotearoa-New Zealand. The primary purpose of my wider project has been to explore the ‘affective politics’ of contemporary doctoral writing practice. My study involved ten participants, all of whom were doctoral students in faculties of arts and education. There were three phases of data collection, beginning with reflections in a writing diary, followed by a three-day residential writing retreat involving multiple group and individual data collection methods, and a final semi-structured interview. Reading across this data I became attentive to moments where participants appeared to negotiate their constitution as ‘failed’ doctoral writers. In order to flesh out these thoughts further, I selected one case

which I interpreted as a refusal to become a ‘good’ ([Grant, 1997](#)) doctoral writer.

The case I selected was taken from an interview account of a participant in the provisional year of her doctorate. This student had not produced a significant amount of writing at the time of our interview, despite being required to do so before the end of her provisional year in order to meet the requirements for full doctoral candidature. Within the culture of audit, which is threaded across the contemporary university, this student’s ‘failure’ to write would be commonly seen as a cause for concern, and possible intervention. However, when she was interviewed the student explained that her ‘failure’ to write was an investment in an alternative strategy of learning, as well as an act of resistance. Rather than being unaware of the expectation that students should write ‘from the beginning’, this student chose an alternative pathway, seeing value in spending an extended period of reading (and not writing). She explained her (not-writing) practice was valuable for her personal and academic development, it was pleasurable, and it represented a political stance in defiance of institutional expectations, and public academic pressure that she should, in fact be writing. Aware of her possible implication in social discourses of guilt and shame about her ‘failure’ to write, this student outlined alternative affects such as joy and excitement, which sustained her not-writing practice. By not writing this student was able to carve out moments where she could constitute herself as a resistant subject, despite ultimately complying with institutional norms, and writing her first year thesis proposal.

This case study opens up multiple angles of inquiry. I am interested in inspecting the ideological baggage that surrounds writing, especially ‘good’ and ‘productive’ practices like ‘writing from the beginning’ – which is a focus of debate across advice texts and the doctoral writing blogosphere. How might this focus on writing – a quantifiable, and metricized practice – connect with the increasing presence of performativity regimes throughout higher education? What alternative ways of being might taking up the subject position of the ‘not writer’ open? And, might the very act of asking questions about the pleasures and possibilities of *not* writing be a queer turn in a research field preoccupied with finding ways of assisting students to write and publish *more*?

Alongside foregrounding the possibilities of failure in the context of doctoral education, this paper makes a broader contribution to the project of queer theorizing in higher education. Taking on Rasmussen & Allen’s (2014) challenge, this paper illustrates what queer theory can do, without focusing on queer identified bodies as its object. My expanded usage of queer theory enables it to be applied to the project of interrogating ‘borders of intelligibility’ ([Gowlett, 2014, p. 408](#)) wherever they arise in higher education. In this case, it allows us to question whether categories of doctoral success and failure are as solid as they seem.

References

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