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Article

Coming to Strange Conclusions: An Autoethnography About Failure in a First Year Graduate Level Theory Course

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Abstract

Current research addressing and predicting graduate student success tends to reduce students to a list of qualities, skills, and personality traits, and to locate the capacity for success in the individual student. Few researchers locate graduate student success in external structural, psychological, or spiritual conditions, and fewer still consider the role that different forms of failure play in shaping the identity formation and learning experiences of new graduate students. This analytic autoethnographic reflection will consider the fundamental role that failure, rather than success, has played in my own experience of, in one ethnographer's words, "be(com)ing academic" (Stanley, 2023), in a first-year graduate-level theory course. Failing to be(come) a graduate student and failing to be(come) theoretical are interrelated, because this particular context—a first-year theory course—has had the effect of conflating and confusing these experiences. Specifically, I address instances of having the wrong attitude, (un)critical thinking, procrastination, and confusion that occur in my own posts in online seminar discussion forums, within the context of larger social phenomena. I explore how failure in graduate school can alternately be understood as located in the individual student and in larger systems and conditions, using an interdisciplinary lens, without drawing decisive conclusions or relinquishing my sense of uncertainty.

Keywords: graduate school, graduate student, theory, failure, autoethnography

Introduction

A general online query, "what makes graduate students successful?", will produce seemingly endless lists, editorials, and studies describing the qualities, skills and personality traits that supposedly determine graduate student success. For instance, psychologist Tay (2021) insists that grad school success depends on having the right attitude towards learning (including being prosocial, learning-oriented, and humble), mental focus, and the ability to expend effort in effective, balanced ways (para. 1-9). The American Library Association (2024), alternatively, simply lists and cross-compares 29 "Ideal Graduate Characteristics", imagining the successful graduate student as a perfectly well-rounded "critical thinker", "analytical" and "competent", with "good reading and writing skills" and the "ability to assess his/her level of understanding of task and ask appropriate questions" (infographic). What Tay and the ALA have in common is that they locate the capacity for success in the individual student. Studies, which similarly locate the capacity for success in the individual student, have been conducted by Soares et al. (2024),Wohl and Fine (2017), Murray (2023), and Breen et al. (2023), who discuss the importance of general preparedness, reading skills, writing skills, and "epistemological, ontological, and axiological" (p. 2) self-awareness, respectively, to academic success in graduate school.

I am more interested in how failing to demonstrate idealized skills/strategies and ways of thinking troubles the notion that being in graduate school is a linear process with an 'upward' trajectory. Halberstam (2011) and Trinlé (2021) both discuss failure or mistake-making, offering queer theoretical and Buddhist insights, respectively, into both the radical and essential nature of failure to the processes of identity formation and learning. Halberstam (2011) and Trinlé (2021) offer failure, when applied to the context of graduate school, as a means to subvert the neoliberal promotion of individualistic ambition and perfectionism among new students and challenge the idea that the individual can or should make themselves impervious to structural oppression and the universality of human suffering.

Challenging neoliberal modes of progress and success in the academy, Stanley (2023) introduces the theme of "be(com)ing academic" (p. 405) in her autoethnographic reflection of working in the academy as a recent PhD graduate. The notion of "be(com)ing" serves a dual function, which I adopt here: to destabilize the categories of 'process' and 'achievement' as successive and fixed rather than part of a messy interrelation, and to question the implication that

forward momentum characterizes transformation. Stanley (2023) points out that backsliding, stasis, and active resistance to change can also characterize the experience of academic transition (p. 407-423). Stanley's (2023) nonlinear writing and inconclusiveness also demonstrates how indecisiveness and contrariety can translate from an experience to a mode of analysis for describing academic transition. Put another way, Stanley's (2023) writing exemplifies Turkle's (2022) challenge to researchers to "pursue ethnographies not only of structure but also of anti-structure, those seemingly chaotic times when new social forms emerge" (p. 486).

While I borrow from Halberstam's (2011), Stanley's (2023), and Turkle's (2022) rejection of the themes linearity, absolute intelligibility, and decisiveness, I also, in line with Anderson's (2006) proposed methods for conducting analytic autoethnographic research, identify myself as a member of a larger social group (students in a graduate level theory course, or early-career post-graduate students more broadly), and adopt a position of "analytic reflexivity" (p. 378) or attempt to situate my analysis in larger social phenomena via a "commitment to theoretical analysis" (p. 378). I have chosen to adopt Anderson's (2006) analytic methodological criteria out of a twofold desire to conduct a rigorous qualitative self-study, and to engage in a meta-analytic experiment, in which I create multiple layers of theoretical reflection, 'using theory to understand theory' and the experience of be(com)ing a student in a course about theory. Upon analysis of forum discussions during online seminars, with reference to previous literature on qualities that are thought make graduate students successful, I have identified major themes which I will use to organize my discussion.

What follows is an analytic autoethnographic reflection of failure in graduate school. I discuss adopting the wrong attitude, failing to think critically, procrastinating, and experiencing confusion, to illustrate how failure has been a key component to my own process of "be(com)ing academic" in a first year online graduate theory course. In this context, my experiences with failing to be(come) a graduate student and failing to be(come) theoretical are interwoven and thus, when I speak to one type of failure, I imply the other. I will also explore both the ways in which my failures feel personal and the ways in which these failures are couched in larger political, psychological, even spiritual structures or conditions.

The Wrong Attitude

Seminar Post: Wednesday, 16 October 2024, 5:39pm MDT

> *But…don't you think that maybe it's a little sub-gonzo? "Autistic simians" and all that pro free speech nonsense. I really felt like I was putting in too much emotional labour, like listening in on group therapy for white men with burning opinions…it felt a little…caught in a reddit thread?*

I wrote this post in response to a seminar conversation of Bageant's 2010 article "AMERICA: WHY UR PEEPS SO DUM?"—an article in which Bageant (2010) offers his idiomatically no-nonsense criticisms of the decline of American society, or the rise of "cultural stupidity" (p. 4). In discussion, many of my classmates thought Bageant's (2010) writing was edgy and brilliant, or maybe brilliant because it was edgy. I had an immediate reaction against Bageant's (2010) style, which I thought was derivative of the gonzo writing of Hunter S. Thompson and politically outdated. I realized on some level that I simply disagreed with Bageant's (2010) criticism of working-class citizens rather than the societal structures that shaped their choices, but I did not offer a theoretical critique—instead, I got stuck feeling annoyed with my classmates' creation of what I read as an atmosphere of unanimous, socially driven agreement over Bageant's (2010) transgressiveness. When I wrote this forum post, I *wanted* to be editorial and contrary and to disrupt the sense of consensus by venting my feelings.

Be(com)ing Theoretical with a Bad Attitude: Discussion

Halberstam (2011) frames having a 'negative attitude' relative to normative forms of success, arguing that "positive thinking" is a "mass delusion" that originates from "a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions" (p. 3). I had many feelings about the Bageant (2010) reading and the seminar discussion that led me to adopt a negative attitude: I was suspicious (of cliques) and feeling like an outsider, annoyed by perceived male privilege and annoyed at other people enjoying male privilege, even exhausted by the social intricacies of 'getting along' online. From Halberstam's (2011) perspective, when "the grouchy, irritable whiners who do not want to 'have a nice day'" free themselves from "the obligation to keep smiling" they give themselves the emotional space to begin noticing quotidian injustices (p. 4); while I was going off-assignment and being untheoretical, I was also rejecting normative markers of success like agreement, belonging, and the idea of 'getting ahead' in graduate school by virtue of being agreeable. Perhaps there is catharsis in non-compliance.

Reframing noncompliance, Ahmed (2021) focuses on the ways in which difficult-to-communicate ideas can be encoded into complaint, pointing out that "[w]hen you complain, your own body is turned into testimony, as revealing something about yourself as well as about the situation in which you find yourself" (p. 144). That I was feeling (and acting) socially or emotionally exhausted by the online theory-discussion forums early on in my first graduate seminar was perhaps unsurprising, given that I was struggling to adapt to post-graduate academic life with a new ADHD diagnosis. Devol and Sun (2024) point out that students with ADHD often face greater difficulty than neurotypical students with emotional self-regulation and reactivity during graduate school (p. 121). When I was complaining *about* the Bageant (2010) reading, then, rather than engaging theoretically with it, I was also ringing an alarm bell, trying to find a way to say "I don't know what to do" / "I don't feel prepared" / "I don't know how to manage my feelings" in this unfamiliar academic environment.

Trinlé (2021) addresses emotional impulsiveness from a Buddhist lens, describing our tendencies to react in ways that either alleviate or exacerbate our own and others' suffering as a cyclical behaviour:

> If I'm in the habit of reacting to any unpleasant situation with anger, this tendency will grow stronger each time I react this way. By contrast, if I become aware of the unhappiness this brings about for myself and those around me, I will be able to change my behaviour little by little and progressively lessen the strength of this tendency (p. 36).

That is, while mistakes are inherent to learning, the mistake of expressing emotions in harmful ways is rooted in a lack of mindfulness and compassion. Liberation from pain, the *Mahayana* or Great Vehicle path, is directly related to one's ability to grasp the basic Buddhist principle that suffering is universal (p. 34-35). Avoiding pain, from a Buddhist standpoint, requires acknowledging the universality of pain. My comment about Bageant's (2010) writing was indicative of my habitual cynicism, and it demonstrated that I lacked depth of perspective, particularly in that my response also implicated and undermined my classmates' emotional well-being.

(Un)Critical Thinking

Seminar Post: Wednesday, 23 October, 2024, 11:49PM MDT

> *I wonder if Fletcher is actually just terrified of being replaced by a computer…There are so many examples of writing that wants nothing to do with narrative, or causal logic. And I think, I know, that there are lots of people in the arts community who are delighted with what AI is coming up with—how many writers have been experimenting with what in the AI world is called "hallucination" since long before AI was even a thing? . . . Tristan Tzara, in "Dada Manifesto 1918," wrote: "Ideal, ideal, ideal / Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge / Boomboom, boomboom, boomboom…" … WORD SOUP IS AMAZING. I WELCOME THE WORD SOUP OF AI. SEND ME YOUR SOUPY AI POETRY AND BAD ROM-COM SCREENPLAYS.*

This is a response I wrote to a discussion on Fletcher's (2021) article "Why Computers Will Never Write Good Novels". Fletcher (2021) argues that the production of literature as we know it is rooted in humans' ability to think through causal logic, the logic of narrative production, whereas computers are programmed to think exclusively through syllogistic, binary logic, which makes them incapable of producing the kind of narrative, "this-leads to that" reasoning, present in human-created literature (para. 14, 28-31). A heated debate over whether AI was creating or could create literature or art erupted in the seminar forum, and I thought that differences in 'hardwiring' between humans and AI could lead to similar creative results. I felt inspired by my experiences with AI-made art and decided to propose that AI wasn't only potentially capable of writing and making art as well as humans, but it was already doing it.

However, after I excitedly created this post, a fellow student responded that I did not understand what Fletcher (2021) meant by "word soup" (para. 48), and asked if I was claiming that AI could understand or participate in the Dada movement.

I felt embarrassed by this exchange. I thought that I had made an unusual point—that AI and outsider artists and writers were experiencing a stylistic convergence, as evidenced by Dada writing and other literary and AI forms of 'hallucination'—a point for which I presented

several examples, including the work of Russian futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov and postmodern author Kathy Acker. I had even attempted to demonstrate my point creatively, concluding my post with an impromptu nonsense ode to word soup, written in a style that I thought mimicked that of AI. This had felt like more of a creative risk than an intellectual risk; I often received little or no response from my peers when I shared my artistic tastes during seminars. I did not expect to be accused of failing to understand the reading.

Be(com)ing a Graduate Student While Resisting Critical Thinking: Discussion

Devol and Sun (2024) find that graduate students with ADHD frequently struggle with the feeling of not "being understood by others" (p.119). I experienced this several other times during seminars when I would offer an analysis of a reading and I felt like no one understood the point I was trying to make. I got the sense several times throughout seminar discussions that 'my' form of critical thinking was not understood or that I was thinking in fundamentally unusual ways, coming to 'strange' conclusions concerning the theory we were studying.

Shirmard and Howe (2024) point out that while the notion of "critical thinking", as per Dewey's 1910 definition as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it" (p. 6), is "embedded in Canadian higher education" (Shirmard & Howe, 2024, p. 33) and students' actual approaches to and experiences of thinking in a critical way varies cross-culturally (p. 40). The authors found, for instance, that Iranian students studying in Canada associated the term "critical thinking" not with active consideration but with thinking aimed at assessing the correctness or advantages and disadvantages of particular works and ideas (p. 40). Critical thinking, therefore, is not a universal skill so much as it is an example of culturally embedded concept, jargon open to interpretation. I may have been experiencing pushback over my post due to a lack of consensus over what constitutes 'good' critical thinking, and this lack of consensus may have been rooted in some form of intra-culturally rooted bias. There may be some fundamental disagreement, for instance, regarding the role of poetry as a valid form of evidence in theoretical discourse in the social sciences. My tendency to find conceptual inspiration in art, particularly outsider art as opposed to 'capital A'-art or Fine Art, seems to have been read by some as a failure to engage seriously or shrewdly with social theory.

Procrastination

Seminar Post: Wednesday, 20 November 2024, 6:35 PM MDT

> *I am sorry to be so late to the party. The truth is that this is the first article I read as soon as the week 4 readings were posted … Interpassivity is an interesting idea, but it also really bothers me, because it feels cynical (I feel like Zizek brings cynicism to a lot of his concepts, and I know that he co-developed this idea), a bit arbitrary (does interactivity really require a negative/passive companion concept? Are we so in need of a remedy, for instance, to the problem of interactive art?), and coming from an anthropology background where I've had to study so much ritual theory, I feel like it doesn't have cross-cultural relevance, yet tries to be a universalist theory … I don't want to be a downer or just dismiss interpassivity, but I have felt a strong aversion to discussing it, or perhaps rather I just don't feel ready to discuss it yet … I'm bumping up against Pfaller and having a rough time of it.*

I waited until the seminar on Pfaller's (2003) "Little Gestures of Disappearance: Interpassivity and the Theory of Ritual" had been running for three days before making this post: when I said, "I just don't feel ready to discuss it" ("it" being Pfaller's theory of interpassivity), I was not affecting false modesty. I had read the article early, out of interest, but become increasingly skeptical of the concept of interpassivity, the deferral of consumption and pleasure to a third party or object (Pfaller, 2017, p. 1), over the course of the semester, having discussed it with several artist friends who rejected the idea of passive art consumption. I also took issue with Pfaller's and Zizek's (2017) attempts to make what I saw as claims about the cross-cultural and historical universality of the deferral of subjective religious belief. Pfaller's (2003) claim that "[the] hostility of religions toward their own rituals expresses an acknowledgement of the fact that the rituals allow the believers to avoid conscious attention to the religious meaning" (para. 26) is a clear product of Western psychoanalytic bias—a hypothesis that is untested and lacks credible, cross-cultural evidence.

Be(com)ing a Graduate Student While Resisting Change: Discussion

As someone with an anthropology background, my skepticism of psychoanalysis is not entirely unexpected: Rivera (2016) points out that "investment of cultural relativism…makes it difficult for anthropology to accept any universal claims about human psychology" (p. 757). I find that I often refer back to my anthropology education during class seminars, and I admit that I lack the knowledge to discuss psychoanalysis, beyond its universalism, with any sort of authority. The last thing I wanted to do while discussing interpassivity was get drawn into a debate in an atmosphere that was sympathetic to psychoanalysis, and unfamiliar with anthropology. However, at the same time, I did not want, in an interdisciplinary theory class, to limit myself by constantly thinking exclusively *through* anthropology. I would have preferred to read the article and discussions without saying anything and learn by observation.

Trinlé (2017) argues that from Buddhist perspective, "aversion" is one of the mental "afflictions" that leads us to misunderstand situations and make mistakes when we're attempting to learn something new (p. 34); avoidance of situations, procrastination, or feeling negatively towards the unknown leads to personal suffering but also makes us less "available for the people around us" and less "useful in our environment" (p. 8, 34-35). My aversion to the theory of interpassivity made me feel defensive, guarded, and afraid to engage—less open to participating in an intellectual collaboration.

In contrast, psychologist Keil (2019) has argued that deferral to expertise, choosing *not* to participate or contribute, is a socially adaptive response to having "partial knowledge" of "why phenomena occur or how things work" (p. 191). Keil (2019) finds that people experience their own partial knowledge particularly when pressed to verbally explain an idea because a large component of understanding is actually "nonverbal" and "tacit" (p. 196). Keil (2019) suggests that humans have evolved a strong intuitive sense of who has expertise in a given area or field, and to know when to defer to this expertise, as a socially oriented, adaptive strategy for survival (p. 205). That is, avoidance, rather than individual assertion, in a group context, can be beneficial.

Interpreting theory in seminars, at times, felt like a major risk in ways that were more than intellectual—I sometimes felt as if my confidence, my reputation, my emotional well-being,

even my identity was at risk. When I wrote in my seminar post that I did not feel "ready" to discuss interpassivity, I was, from a Keilian perspective, deferring to members of my group who had access to more accurate information. I was also tacitly linking my own well-being to that of the group. That my comments led to what I perceive as greater conversational disjuncture in the group's attempts to analyze interpassivity raises questions I cannot resolve regarding whether my complete deferral, in the form of total silence in the forum would have led to a more productive class discussion. Furthermore, had I said nothing, and avoided contributing to my own alienation, would I still have come to feel at odds with the theory of interpassivity itself?

Confusion

Seminar Post: Thursday, 21 November 2024, 1:18 PM MDT

> *. . . From what I have been reading, there are apparently quite a few disagreements on how to apply Peirce's ontological categories. I think we are trying to pin down something that is debatable and actively contested. In my experience, philosophical concepts like this are difficult to apply to real world situations, they're often bound by complex logic and language and definitions that are idiosyncratic to their author. I think we're chasing down a definitive answer when we should be asking questions and being open to multiple possibilities. That probably sounds like a cop-out, haha. But I really do think that Firstness is more complex than the brief description we've been given in these discussions, and that it's open to some interpretation.*

I wrote this post during the seminar I led on Deleuze's (1992) "Postscript on the Societies of Control", an article in which Deleuze expands upon Foucault's (1995) disciplinary society, hypothesizing what mechanisms of societal domination will look like in a future dominated by technological networks (Deleuze, 1992). Another student, my professor, and I got into a discussion about how power, domination, and free will could be understood in terms of Peirce's universal categories of *Firstness, Secondness,* and *Thirdness* (Nellhaus, 2024; Peirce, 1868), as a fundamental metaphysical framework. My professor had introduced Peirce's (1868) metaphysics through the course of previous seminars, and several students had taken to it, often trying to characterize new concepts according to his framework. In my seminar,

however, I was hoping that students would offer more pointed, specific analyses of the differences between Deleuze and Foucault with reference to structures of power.

When a particular student attempted to use Peirce's (1868) metaphysics to engage with the readings, I tried to understand their claims, but found I couldn't gain any clarity, despite doing extra research on Peirce (1868) during the course of the discussion. I felt like this student and I were talking in circles because neither of us had a grasp on Peirce (1868) beyond what little had been discussed in the forums. I felt frustrated and embarrassed to be engaging in what I felt was a superficial discussion, given our limited knowledge on the subject. I was also genuinely worried that, because this was 'my' seminar, other students would mistake my 'stabs in the dark' about Peirce's (1868) universal categories for genuine knowledge and I did not want to be the source of misinformation. I thought that telling the student that "chasing down definitive answers when we should be asking questions" was a way to reframe the whole conversation itself as a failed experiment in assuredness, an exercise in futility—it was more polite than saying "I don't think either of us knows what we're talking about".

Be(com)ing Theoretical While Disoriented: Discussion

Meyer and Land (2005) discuss students' experiences encountering "troublesome", "gateway", or "threshold" (p. 373) concepts with reference to ritual theory, and identify the phases when students feel confused or experience incomplete understanding of new ideas as a liminal stage in their overall process of academic transformation (p. 375), echoing the earlier work of Turner (1995) on rites of passage. Alexander and Norbeck (2024) point out that for Turner, liminality is a creative stage rather than simply a stage of non-belonging and social separation, because it is both "antithetical to existing social structure[s]" and "subjunctive" (para. 1) or characterized by what is hypothetical or possible. Confusion characterizes the liminal stage of transformation because rites of passage, according to Alexander and Norbeck (2024), require "participants to experiment with alternative social relations or to invent new ones" (para. 1).

If going through a required first-year graduate theory course is itself a rite of passage, the experience of entering into a liminal phase by encountering new theory poses a challenge for students, not because confusion and disorientation are unpleasant, but rather because imposing

this model on a theory course implies that resolution of the rite requires transitioning out of confusion and achieving understanding of sometimes difficult theory, because, as Turkle (2022) describes, "times of anti-structure need to be in balance with times of structure" (p. 485). I do not feel like I have mastered any theory, let alone Peirce's (1868) metaphysics, or experienced a sense of true resolution, during the course of this class. If I am in transition, I am currently 'stuck' in the liminal phase, stuck in a space of possibility, perhaps—a space where play and experimentation were not only allowed but expected of me—but also stuck with the knowledge that I am expected to overcome my confusion, because until I achieve theoretical mastery, I am incomplete, a transitional-intellectual chimera or embryo.

Halberstam (2011) argues that futility, rather than being a dead-end, is a "[mode] of unbeing and unbecoming" that "[proposes] a different relation to knowledge" (p. 23). I was resisting a general sense of pressure to claim mastery and productive success, for my part, where it didn't exist. I *wanted* to expose the conversation for its sense of unravelling, a spiralling out of control in which both this other student and I were demonstrating an ever-increasing failure to *know*. I didn't want to erase the conversation, but I did want it to be interpreted as pointless to the project of gaining knowledge, and more as a testament to the fact that one can actively *unlearn* something in an environment of supposed *active* learning. U*nbecoming*, as Halberstam (2011) describes it, or intellectual backsliding, felt unavoidable while interacting with Peirce's (1868) metaphysics, even though his universal categories refuse to admit confusion and murkiness because they make a fundamental claim on reality by rendering it articulable.

But Halberstam (2011) points out that high theory, like Peirce's (1868) metaphysics, does not make room for "detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion" (p. 15) because high theory itself reiterates the "prescriptive methods, fixed logics, and epistemes" (p. 16-17) of status quo institutional intellectualism. And the student who sustains their confusion when trying to learn something new, or worse, who comes to understand less and less in the process of studying, who admits "I didn't learn anything" (p. 13), whether by choice or by accident, positions themselves in opposition to the restrained institutional processes whereby 'high' knowledge is contained and distributed to those who agree to "submit to a whole suite of unfree practices" (p. 14), which are embedded in normative, capitalist ideals of productivity and progress.

Conclusion

"Be(com)ing", rather than being, most accurately describes my experiences in a first year graduate theory class, because failure—failure to have a positive attitude, to think critically, to be proactive at all times, and to stave off confusion—has figured prominently enough in my experiences of graduate school thus far, so as to suggest that "graduate student" as an identity is highly contingent and unstable. I can contextualize backsliding, uncertainty, and a lack of linear progress towards my intellectual goals, conceptually, in a multiplicity of personal and social factors: my own developmental pathology, a desire to engage in the politicization of and resistance towards normative markers of success and oppressive institutional academic practices, a cosmic tendency to cause my own and others' suffering, evolutionary adaptation, even ritual transformation. I prefer this multiplicity to a sense of causal certainty, if only because I find the open question and the invitation to discussion more provocative--impertinent to the project of ethnographic epiphany.

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