

Writing Spaces

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Embodying Process: A Making-Based Writing Challenge

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Embodying Process: A Making-Based Writing Challenge

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Overview

Writing classes routinely ask students to engage in a lengthy process of drafting and revising their work. As instructors, we emphasize to students the need to “fail” (Carr), call “shitty first drafts” messy yet generative (Lamott) and position these ideas as “writing thresholds” (Adler-Kassner & Wardle). At the same time, first-year students are often slow to buy into our calls to “trust the process” (Lamott, 94). After all, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle remind us that the encounter with threshold concepts routinely involves discomfort and even rejection. In fact, students often approach writing as a “one-and-done” endeavor that leaves little room for imperfection. This presents us with a mismatch regarding students’ actual writing practices and the failure-embracing process we would like them to adopt.

This activity addresses this gap through a timed making challenge in which students use basic crafting supplies to respond spur-of-the-moment to a problem in their lives, big or small. After that, they complete a reflective activity in the form of a tinkering log, in which they contextualize their experience with Anne Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts,” and Collin Brooke’s and Allison Carr’s “Failure Can be an Important Part of Writing Development.” By tasking students with making something by hand under time pressure, the activity pushes them out of their comfort zone, confronts them with possible perfectionism, and invites them to experience the generative potential of “shittiness” and “failure.” In this way, the activity engages threshold concepts of writing not only cognitively but pre-textually, as embodied knowledge that can inform future writing practices. For this reason, it is particularly suitable for lessons early in the semester

when students first encounter process pedagogy.

The preferred location for this activity is an on-campus makerspace for its broad access to different types of supplies and the makerspace's position as creative third space outside the evaluative pressure of the traditional classroom. In the absence of access to a makerspace, the activity can easily be implemented in any classroom with basic crafting materials.

Time Commitment

The activity requires two 50-minute class periods, though it could be squeezed into one 75-minute class session. Additional time should be allocated to homework assignments including preparatory readings and the completion of the reflective tinkering log post making.

Materials

Students can use all materials available in a campus makerspace. When implementing the activity in a traditional classroom, instructors should provide access to paper, cardboard, tape, scissors, glue sticks, crayons, pencils, and a stapler. Additional supplies that can elevate the activity are a hot glue gun, Velcro, fabric scraps, thread, and needles.

For the preparatory readings, I prefer hard copies that students annotate by hand using highlighters, pens, and pencils, as physical excerpts from these copies can later be incorporated into the tinkering log. However, texts may be assigned digitally depending on instructor preference.

For the reflective tinkering log, students will need a scrapbook or notebook though simple sheets of paper are sufficient, particularly in courses where final projects are otherwise completed digitally. Furthermore, digital reflection formats are an option.

Activity Process

- Students will begin the process by reading and annotating two seminal readings from writing studies. The first reading is Anne Lamott's "Shitty First Drafts." The second reading is "Failure Can be an Important Part of Writing Development" by Allison Carr and Collin Brooke from *Naming What We Know*. If a longer version of this text is preferred, students could annotate Carr's "In Support of Failure." Other texts that emphasize failure-affirmation, experimentation and risk-taking in the writing process would work equally well.
- Instructors use these texts as a basis for an in-class discussion to prime students for the later making experience. If instructors choose the two-session option, this discussion can unfold over one class period. If the one class option is preferred, the discussion should be limited to 25 minutes. Useful debriefing formats include an anonymous in-class poll that assesses students' relationship with "shittiness" in their writing through questions focused on writing in one-sitting, anxiety about getting it "right" immediately, and fear of judgment. Instructors can then pull salient quotes from the readings and ask students to dissect what these quotes give us permission to do or push back against. After working through student responses, discussion should then turn to the emotional dimension of writing, highlighting that permission to fail does not automatically eliminate the desire to avoid failure.
- Next, students move on to the making challenge. At the onset of the activity, students engage in a timed free-writing activity in which they respond to the question "What are specific concrete problems you are dealing with as a college student (these can be big or small)?" Students write for five minutes and afterwards scan their writing for their favorite problem. This problem becomes the exigence for their tinkering session. In the remaining time, they then try to

produce a solution to the problem using any crafting materials available to them. The introduction to the tinkering challenge happens right before they craft their response, ensuring the response remains provisional. In this way, the tinkering confronts students with a controlled sense of uncertainty and discomfort. Instructors should ask students to track their emotional state throughout the process.

- Finally, students complete a reflective tinkering log as part of a homework assignment. Instructors may wish to consider assigning this as a handmade project as this extends the DIY spirit of the tinkering to the genre of reflection. The elements of the tinkering log include a quick sketch or photo of students' project including a short annotation of what they made and how this project responded to their chosen problem. Additionally, students can share a material sample and explain how and why they chose their medium and reflect on the medium's constraints. This subtly primes them for later rhetorical work when they will be tasked with thinking about how and not only what a text communicates. The heart of the tinkering log is a reflective paragraph that asks students to consider their (shifting) emotional states when tinkering, and to explain how their relationship to their problem evolved when working. It further allows them to discuss which aspects of their tinkering they are satisfied with and where they see room for future growth. In fact, the tinkering log should push students to recognize that leaning into imperfection and uncertainty can lead to unexpected outcomes, and that creating "shitty first drafts" can be epistemological—even if we throw most of it out in the end, our understanding of our problem may have shifted as a result, making us better positioned to "try again" next time. If instructors prefer, they can limit the reflection to only this short paragraph. A lengthier version of the tinkering log can

task students with cutting out snippets from the course texts and gluing them into the log to put the readings into physical conversation with their tinkering experience.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Analyze the potential gap between their own writing processes and the failure-affirming principles of process pedagogy.
- Navigate and evaluate their emotional responses to uncertainty, trial, and error during a spur-of-the-moment making challenge.
- Reflect on the generative and empowering potential of making as a practice that can inform their college writing journey.

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose any materials for their tinkering challenge in alignment with their comfort level, and access needs.
- While the activity emphasizes physical making, DIY and hands-on reflection, the course readings and tinkering log can be completed digitally if preferred.
- All reflective components may be completed in multimodal formats, such as audio or video recordings to support diverse learning needs.
- To reduce stress and anxiety (without diminishing uncertainty and discomfort which are pedagogically generative), instructors should provide repeated affirmation

that students will not be graded on the quality or appearance of their project and that feeling overwhelmed and confused is a normal part of the activity. Additional support, such as guidance with idea generation, may be offered as needed.

Works Cited

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- Carr, Allison. "In Support of Failure." *Composition Forum*, 27, Spring 2013, www.compositionforum.com/issue/27/failure.php
- Lamott, Anne. "Shitty First Drafts." *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*, edited by Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rose, and Virginia Clark, 9th ed. Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2005, pp. 93-96.

Further Reading

- Gruwell, Leigh. *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics and New Materialist Rhetorics*. Utah State UP, 2022.
- Luther, Jason W., Prins, Kristin, and Farmer, Frank, "Making the Scene: The Rhetoric of DIY Composition." *College of Communication & Creative Arts Departmental Research*, 20, 2023. https://rdw.rowan.edu/ccca_facpub/20