

From Failure to Inquiry:  
Three Problem-Solving Strategies  
for Community Literacy Researchers

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At every meeting where we took the proposal, we got the same answer: the logistics of starting a childcare center were too complicated. To make matters worse, as I was organizing office files one day I found a file folder that contained reports from three previous attempts to “solve” the childcare issue for graduate students at my university in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. It all seemed to follow a fairly predictable pattern: send out a survey, collect responses, write a report, convene a big meeting with key administrative stakeholders, and then . . . nothing.

—Carolyn, describing her work as a leader in her graduate student assembly advocating for the creation of a campus childcare center for graduate students.

I had spent years studying rhetorical theory and teaching college composition, but I had no idea how to lead middle-school girls in a substantive and empowering discussion of the mermaid fantasy novel *Aquamarine*. I was equally perplexed when a girl brought in pictures of her family’s chickens for her digital story that had nothing to do with the animals. Did asking her to take different photos diminish her agency?

—Amanda, describing her work in a digital literacy program with Appalachian girls. Amanda oversaw a group of undergraduate interns who led the girls in reading groups and taught them to create digital stories about their lives.

Just before leaving Lucy’s apartment to do the formal interview with Diane, I remember asking Lucy how she liked living on her own. Her response, while it doesn’t show up in any of my interview transcripts, is among the most memorable moments of my dissertation work. She said: “It’s my dream come true.” Lucy’s response seemed to reinforce my already growing concern that my dissertation, by focusing on the advocacy experiences of parents of children with disabilities rather than disabled people themselves, was excluding the voices of people with disabilities, reinforcing patterns of disempowerment well-worn in the

disability community.

—Mary, reflecting on the interviews she conducted with parents of disabled children<sup>1</sup> for her dissertation research. Here, she is referring to her experience meeting Diane and her daughter Lucy, who has Down syndrome.

**T**he three brief vignettes above capture pivotal moments when we experienced the frustration, guilt, and disappointment that can occur in research and community-engaged work. They come from longer failure narratives that we each wrote to make sense of what went wrong when Carolyn “failed” to write a persuasive proposal to create an affordable childcare center, Amanda “failed” to help a group of Appalachian girls in a rural literacy program produce polished digital stories, and Mary “failed” to transform her dissertation interviews with parents of disabled children into an advocacy resource guide. We shared these experiences with one another at the Conference for College Composition and Communication in Kansas City in 2018, where we reconnected for the first time after completing graduate school. Over a cup of coffee in a crowded hotel lobby, Carolyn asked Amanda, “So how was your summer? How did your work with the literacy program in North Carolina go?” In a hushed tone, Amanda confided, “Actually, it didn’t go so well.”

In graduate school, we had completed coursework together in rhetoric and community literacy and organized community think tanks where we developed first-hand experience with the challenges of community-based research.<sup>1</sup> We had learned how literacy was not just the act of reading and writing but “a rhetorical practice for inquiry and social change” (Flower, *Community Literacy* 16). Using Flower’s Community Think Tank model, we interviewed students and facilitated roundtable discussions to conduct inquiries into meaningful campus issues, asking for example, how do students find support for mental health in a high-stress campus culture? In other words, we worked to put Flower’s definition of community literacy into action as “an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggle” (Flower, *Community Literacy* 19). We had also read extensively about the field’s early attempts at service learning and community engagement that failed because they prioritized a university agenda over community needs (Cushman; Mathieu). We had studied accounts that failed to acknowledge local context and history in their advocacy efforts (Coogan; Ryder). And we had studied examples that failed to provide the appropriate rhetorical infrastructure for making community change (Grabill). Through such readings we were aware of the common pitfalls of well-intentioned community work that does not achieve the kind of inquiry and social change that is often needed, and we were each determined not to repeat such mistakes.

But reflecting on our own sense of failure and learning from our own experiences posed both conceptual and emotional challenges for us as researchers. As organizational leadership scholar Amy Edmondson argues, “examining our failures in depth is emotionally unpleasant and can chip away at our self-esteem. Left to our own devices, most of us will speed through or avoid failure analysis altogether.” While we knew that failure can be a transformative learning experience (Mezirow), our experiences felt confusing and produced anxiety in a way that made us want to avoid doing

community-engaged research, rather than inspire us to do more. One reason why such failed attempts are difficult to analyze is because they may be characterized by what Paul Feigenbaum calls “stigmatized failure” (14). Stigmatized failure, Feigenbaum contends, is the reigning paradigm in higher education today, reinforcing “ideologies and material conditions that cultivate fear and anxiety” (16). Specifically, because stigmatized failure draws on the pitfalls of “precarious meritocracy” and a deficit model of learning, “academic and professional failures are stigmatized as deficits of personal responsibility” (Feigenbaum 17, 21). This approach to failure does not enhance learning or open up space for analysis or inquiry. Helping students or novice community researchers to approach experiences of failure as part of a process of inquiry, or as “generative failure,” requires more than just encouragement to embrace challenges—it requires challenging the stigma of failure in the first place and providing supportive ways for students to consider failures within the constraints of the material and social conditions that we experience them.

Not surprisingly, in our first attempts to understand our experiences, we attributed our disappointments to deficits of personal responsibility or systemic problems far beyond our control. Carolyn wondered whether it was her limited authority as a graduate student that could explain her failure to make the childcare center proposal more persuasive to other community stakeholders. Had Amanda simply been more charismatic and adaptable, she wondered, perhaps she could have negotiated better the questions that arose about how to best compose the digital stories. Mary voiced the concern that she had felt too emotionally invested in her research process given her personal connection to her disabled brother, and she believed that a better researcher would have had the critical distance needed to produce a useful document for the community.

One problem with our initial interpretations is that they seemed to leave little room for rhetorical agency: they left each of us feeling that there was little we could have done differently. We were stuck. Even worse, we all felt hesitant about how to approach our community-based work again. In this article, we define failure broadly as instances when we missed our own goals or missed the goals set out by others and the consequences were significant for the communities with which we worked.

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While failure is usually stigmatized, and marked by feelings of shame and disappointment, what we seek to better understand is how the experience of failure can become a stimulus for inquiry, for asking questions that lead to more nuanced understandings of the goals of community work. We also recognize that while the feeling of failure might be represented differently across stakeholders in community-

based projects, interpreting failure is always a situated rhetorical act of representation. By making space for collaborative reflection on failure, researchers can encourage alternative representations of these experiences and a more widely distributed sense of agency to account for the multiple ways

success and failure can be defined in community contexts.

This article contributes to a newly emerging scholarship that attempts to help students and novice scholars learn from failure in a generative way. Specifically, we show how we adapted problem-solving strategies from community literacy and used them to analyze our initial, stigmatizing interpretations of our failed community-based work. Our approach responds to recent work by Rebecca Rickly and Kelli Cargile Cook, who argue that “if we do not begin to value failure—and the growth it can bring—we will continue to see a lack of research in our publications, a faculty who can critique but not produce research, and a discipline that includes fewer participants in the actual making of knowledge” (128). We maintain that learning to value failure in community-based work is fundamental, especially for graduate students and novice scholars who may avoid this work given the increased challenges, risks, and possibilities for failure. However, we also acknowledge that learning from failure may require purposeful, collective reflection, an activity that is itself a literate practice.

In what follows, we first review scholarship that illustrates why defining success and failure can be difficult in the context of community engaged work, especially for novice researchers. Then, we analyze our own experiences with failure. We outline our approach to explain how we first composed narratives about our experiences and then used three problem-solving strategies from community literacy studies to help each other reflect on what went wrong—and what went well—in each case. Through our analysis of these experiences, we show how applying these problem-solving strategies helped transform our initial sense of stigmatized failure (as an end point) into generative failure as a turning point within a longer process of our work as early-career researchers. Such transformations helped us locate “unacknowledged consequences” in our community work that were previously left unseen. We offer our cases, and our problem-solving approach, as a possible model and resource for novice scholars navigating the challenges of community-engaged work, for those seeking to better support and mentor students, and, more generally, for anyone seeking to create more collaborative reflective space within university-community partnerships.

## THE CHALLENGE OF REPRESENTING SUCCESS (AND FAILURE) IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

Much of the scholarly literature on community engagement discusses the inevitability of some failure in community-based projects, as well as the key role of these failures in transformative learning experiences (Holmes). For example, in their description of their service learning course where students wrote family histories and engaged with a local history group, Suzanne Kesler Rumsey and Tanja Nihiser describe how students were confronted with a set of troubling realities: “conflicting facts, dead ends, discomfort in not knowing how to ‘do it right’ or ‘what it should look like,’ and uncertainty of [their] place within the writing [they] did” (143). These realities illustrate some of the unique challenges of community-based work, which calls on scholars to respond to a community’s needs and interests (Flower, *Community Literacy*; Long; Cella, Goldblatt, Johnson, Mathieu, Parks, and Restaino). These needs and interests are typically different from those of academic institutions

(Coogan and Ackerman; Cushman), creating more opportunities for misaligned expectations, goals, and timelines. Furthermore, the consequences for failure in a community project are somewhat different. Within traditional academic settings, we often interpret failure in terms of individual disappointments, for instance, publication rejections or low grades. In community settings, however, failure may include more widely experienced difficulties, such as an inability to secure resources or gain support to complete necessary tasks; perceived failures may also damage or end relationships with community partners (Rumsey and Nihiser). These risks may be amplified for graduate students and novice scholars who are in precarious positions themselves (McCool), who are often still defining their scholarly identities, and who might be following strict timelines to degree completion or tenure review.

Community-based work is also risky because its successes and failures are often felt but may be difficult to define (Holmes). For some, a successful community project might yield something tangible, like circulating new texts or media that publicize an issue (Deans; Mathieu and George; Cushman and Green), creating community-university partnerships (Goldblatt), or assembling a protest or community meeting (Giddens). For others, a successful community project may not yield a tangible outcome, but it does something useful for the community. Jeffrey Grabill links the goals of community work to notions of usefulness, which he connects to a “methodology of engagement” focused on helping others assemble: “to be useful as a public rhetorician or engaged researcher is to become one who understands associations and, in understanding them, becomes a creator of associations” (195). In addition to usefulness, expectations for success might be further shaped by aspirations for social transformation, which Steve Parks maintains should be the (admittedly utopian) vision of community-based work.

The difficulty with such diverse representations of success, however, is that novice researchers may be more likely to ascribe “failure” to community work that does not produce outcomes that are easily recognizable.<sup>2</sup> Scholars with less experience doing community work, in particular, may perceive their work as failing if: (1) it cannot be traced to a tangible, planned outcome; (2) it does not appear immediately “useful”; or (3) it does not produce some kind of visible “social transformation.” In our cases, Carolyn felt she had failed to achieve the planned outcome of the childcare center, Amanda was concerned that she had failed to “empower” rural girls (a type of social transformation), and Mary worried that she had failed to create a “useful” guide for parents. Our concern is that the expectations for observable “outcomes” may make community-based work particularly susceptible to logics of stigmatized failure. The anxiety, shame, and feelings of individual shortcoming associated with stigmatized failure may lead novice scholars in particular to avoid community work. Novice scholars may experience failures as roadblocks rather than as often necessary, temporary setbacks that create opportunities for generative and transformative thinking.

## HOW WE GOT UNSTUCK: THREE RHETORICAL PROBLEM-SOLVING STRATEGIES FOR FAILURE ANALYSIS

In what follows, we illustrate how we adapted three problem-solving strategies from a community literacy course to help one another get unstuck from the impasse of a failed community research experience. As Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower explain, these problem-solving strategies are integral to an approach to community literacy that involves cultivating rhetorical capacities for navigating the people, goals, values, and activities that constitute a live community. While these problem-solving strategies—adaptive problem-solving, rivaling, and critical incident interviewing (outlined below in Table 1)—are “literate practices” conventionally used in community literacy to scaffold intercultural inquiry (Higgins, Long, and Flower 10), we argue that they can also be used as strategies for helping community-based scholars create more collaborative “reflective space” (Flower, “Consequences” 64) and transform experiences of failure into opportunities for inquiry.

Table 1. Three Rhetorical Problem-Solving Strategies for Community Literacy

<b>Community Literacy Problem-Solving Strategy</b>	
<b>Adaptive Problem-solving</b>	a strategy for distinguishing “technical problems” that have fairly recognizable solutions from “adaptive challenges” that require learning to discover workable solutions. <sup>3</sup>
<b>Rivaling</b>	a strategy for helping writers to imagine alternative interpretations of a question, conflict, or problem. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Critical Incident Interviewing</b>	a strategy for eliciting the story-behind-the story or contextualized accounts of how people actually experience community problems. <sup>5</sup>

When the three of us gathered at the 2018 Conference on College Composition and Communication, we began talking about our struggles to make sense of our attempts to engage in community-based work, attempts that we each initially interpreted as failures. Inspired by an assignment we had done in our coursework on community leadership where we wrote “failure narratives,” we each composed narratives about our recent failed experiences so that we could analyze them together. We then collaboratively applied these problem-solving strategies, which each of us had learned and practiced during our graduate training in community literacy.

## FAILURE ANALYSIS: THREE CASES OF FAILURE

In what follows, we illustrate how we analyzed each of our cases: *First*, we give excerpts from our failure narratives that describe each of us at an impasse—unsure whether and how to move forward

in our community work. *Second*, we describe how a year after we first shared our failure narratives, we adapted a problem-solving strategy from community literacy theory to help each other analyze and reconsider the reasons we initially attributed to those failures. *Third*, we offer our current analysis of how those problem-solving strategies transformed our perceptions of previous failures, helping us to see those experiences not as end points, but generative turning points leading to new questions in a longer trajectory of community-engaged research.

*The Case of the Failed Childcare Center: Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge?*

As Higgins, Long, and Flower argue, rhetorical analysis in community literacy goes beyond the elements of Bitzer's rhetorical situation (exigence, audience, and constraints) to "reflecting critically on the process of problem solving itself" (12-3). We found paying attention to the *processes* of how community problems are solved and defined to be key for understanding Carolyn's "failure" to start a childcare center for graduate students at her university. From the outset, the community problem had already been framed as "a lack of childcare for graduate students," which seemed to suggest an obvious solution: create a campus childcare center. Here Carolyn describes how this initial framing of the problem activated the typical university protocols for addressing an institutional problem:

An advisory board of administrators recommended that we write a report and proposal for a childcare center that documented the number of graduate students at the university who had children and provided benchmarking information about childcare support and accommodation policies for graduate students at other peer institutions. Since there was skepticism about the number of graduate students this issue really affected, we began with a survey that asked department representatives to document how many graduate students had children and needed childcare. We collaboratively drafted a proposal and then we presented that proposal at meetings with deans, the provost, and our own general assembly. But at every meeting where we took the proposal, we got tangled in logistical barriers we couldn't overcome: a childcare center was too complicated to consider given the current real estate market in the city, the funding complications, and legal concerns about staffing. It felt like we failed at every turn. (Commer)

As the graduate student assembly president leading the initiative, Carolyn felt she had failed to meet

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the needs of her constituents when the childcare center proposal was rejected. While she was in a position of authority to advocate for graduate students with children, she did not have the authority to create a childcare center without securing the support of multiple other institutional stakeholders. Additionally, as the "English major" on the writing team for the proposal, she also felt a

strong sense of guilt that the childcare proposal did not seem to get the traction the graduate students

had hoped for.

A year later, we analyzed Carolyn's case using Ronald Heifetz's work on adaptive leadership to try to understand the nature of the problem that prompted the failure. What we call the adaptive problem-solving strategy distinguishes "technical problems" that have fairly recognizable solutions from "adaptive challenges" that require learning and inquiry to discover workable solutions (Heifetz). Whereas technical problems can be resolved through authoritative expertise or an organization's current structures, procedures, and tools, an adaptive challenge requires that people confront contradictions and tensions in values that are often more difficult to perceive. In Carolyn's case, where she had initially framed the community problem as "lack of a childcare center," her efforts seemed stalled by what she perceived to be her limited *authority* as a graduate student to sway significant university decisions or navigate logistical barriers related to funding; in other words, she assumed that the primary reason for her failure was based in a technical problem related to her *role* in the institution.

Using the adaptive problem-solving framework, however, we challenged this initial assumption about the limitations of her role by analyzing her case in terms of the values, knowledge, habits and behaviors at play, factors which generated a different set of questions for developing deeper understandings of community problems and considering the nature of failure. These questions focus on issues of values, knowledge, and habits and behaviors, as represented in Table 2.

- *Values*: what were the values guiding people in the situation, especially when conflict emerged?
- *Knowledge*: what things were not known that still needed to be discovered or learned?
- *Habits*: what habits and behaviors would need to have changed to make a real difference?

Table 2. Questions Analyzing the Childcare Case from An Adaptive Perspective

Adaptive Problem-Defining Concepts	Inquiry-Driven Questions
<b>Values</b>	What values do graduate students prioritize when it comes to caring for dependents? How do those values manifest in institutional practice?
<b>Knowledge</b>	What knowledge about care work do we still need to address this issue? What do we still need to better understand before taking any action?
<b>Habits</b>	What institutional habits support or contribute to this issue of childcare? How might we do things differently to support the needs of graduate students with children or other dependents?

Once we reframed the problem as an adaptive challenge, we could consider other reasons for the failure to establish the childcare center that were not solely about Carolyn's limited institutional authority or inability to write a persuasive enough proposal. Interviewing Carolyn more about her



experience, it became clear that not all the graduate students working on the proposal were even in agreement about defining the value of “good childcare.” For some graduate students, she explained, the value of “affordability” was most important, while for others it was most important to have “high-quality” educational experiences for their children. Others prioritized “flexibility” and the need for care whenever a research meeting popped up unexpectedly. Some graduate students reported that though they did not have children of their own, they felt unseen and unsupported as the primary caregivers for aging parents or siblings with disabilities. Such testimonials opened up questions that made clear the community needed new knowledge to address these issues, such as knowing the variety of ways that graduate students had taken on responsibility to care for dependents not included in current institutional definitions. Finally, considering the university’s institutional culture highlighted how creating a culture of care would also mean changing some deeply ingrained community habits, such as scheduling important meetings and events after work hours, a practice that often excluded those with high-need dependents.

In reframing the source of Carolyn’s failure from a technical problem to an adaptive challenge, we could locate different factors in the situation from the ones to which Carolyn initially attributed her failure. For example, instead of the key factors being Carolyn’s *lack of authority or individual effort*, we began to locate the adaptive challenge in the university community as one of competing values of stability and flexibility when it comes to care work, lack of knowledge about caregiving responsibilities, and the challenge of changing deeply ingrained institutional habits, such as sponsoring activities and schedules, that created additional strain for those with dependents. Redefining the problem as an adaptive challenge in which a community confronts these issues helped us to transform Carolyn’s initial interpretation of what went wrong, but also went *well*. Her group’s efforts to start the childcare center may not have materialized as a physical space, but they helped convene a networked group in the university that continues to work on issues of support for those with dependents. This reframing was generative in that it cast Carolyn’s role in a new light, not as a leader who could “solve” the childcare problem with one technical solution, but as a convener of a conversation that drew people into a complex community issue.

The “adaptive challenge” reframing has a wide range of potential applications in community-based work. Notably, this type of reframing can help novice researchers define and reconsider situations to recognize the values of different stakeholders. This is important because community leaders or researchers doing community work may feel pressure to produce tangible outcomes, but this pressure may lead to quick or easy solutions that may not be in the best interest of the community longer term or may even create new conflicts. The adaptive problem-solving approach offers a vocabulary for considering situations in terms of the process of problem solving itself, which means that it prioritizes asking questions *before* jumping to solutions. In other words, it prioritizes inquiry and deliberation about a situation, rather than quick or easy solutions. And it focuses on developing and activating relationships with other stakeholders, rather than coming up with top-down solutions. In this way, adaptive problem-solving can help researchers consider their positionality less in terms of individual capabilities and more in terms of activating communal and shared capabilities.

*The Case of Conflicting Stakeholders: Rival Interpretations of Empowerment in a Rural Literacy Initiative*

Amanda left North Carolina feeling she had failed to enact the mission of a rural literacy program to “empower” rural Appalachian middle-school girls. This program was designed to provide an innovative place-based experience where the girls composed digital stories, participated in reading groups to discuss books featuring female protagonists, and learned about Appalachian practices and traditions such as weaving. Amanda’s primary role was to mentor a group of undergraduate interns who helped the girls to compose their stories. At the start of the summer, two digital storytelling facilitators taught the digital composition process to Amanda and the interns so they could teach the process to the girls. A selection of the stories would be showcased in a community exhibition at the end of the summer. In her narrative, Amanda describes how she and the program interns struggled to put empowerment into action:

It became clear that we weren’t entirely sure of what we were supposed to be helping the girls to achieve with their stories. Was it okay if a girl produced a seemingly unfinished story without a linear narrative as long as she had learned to use skills of digital composition? Should we encourage the girls to include Appalachian experiences in their stories? The program was supposed to offer a place-based curriculum, but the interns and I struggled to figure out how to encourage the girls to be place-based without approaching cultural stereotypes. With so little time, these questions were never fully addressed, and the girls ended up with a hodgepodge of stories on topics ranging from experiences in foster care to relationships with best friends. Some were polished, others comically unfinished. While I was not quite sure what the program directors expected, I knew they would not be pleased. (Tennant, “Case of Conflicting Stakeholders”)

In this passage, Amanda negotiates her efforts to help the girls maintain rhetorical agency and to meet a tangible goal by producing a set of polished narratives about girls growing up in the mountains. She realized that her work as a college writing instructor had not prepared her to help these girls understand the audience in the ways she had hoped. In the college writing classroom, Amanda rarely struggled to teach students to identify and respond to audience expectations. This task was more challenging for Amanda in a setting where community stakeholders’ expectations for the stories were unclear and felt beyond her control.

When collaboratively analyzing Amanda’s case, we used the strategy of rivaling to generate some of the “hidden” perspectives of other stakeholders. As defined by Linda Flower, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins, rivaling is “an *attitude* toward inquiry . . . [that] addresses problems as genuinely open questions” and works to build new meaning by actively seeking out alternative interpretations or rival hypotheses of the problem at hand (30). Flower, Long, and Higgins explain how rivaling is appropriate when there are no clear answers to a problem and “when our current standard means of inquiry are not up to the job, when they are too limited, too myopic to anticipate the big world in which our judgments have to survive” (50). In other words, an active search for rivals is necessary when our current problem-solving strategies have failed.

The process of rivaling pushed us to identify unseen stakeholders who were not immediately

apparent to Amanda. Rivaling further led us to realize that stakeholders had different goals for the program, reflecting fundamental differences in how they interpreted the organization’s mission of empowerment. Scholars have recognized how empowerment is not an inherently altruistic goal of community-based work but is rather a contested concept characterized by conflicting definitions (Flower, *Community Literacy* 123; Hill; McLaughlin). By considering how rivaling interpretations of empowerment shaped stakeholders’ goals, Amanda began to see where some of the conflicts may have emerged. Table 3 names the stakeholders’ rival goals and allows us to identify key points of tension that can be linked to different interpretations of empowerment. The interpretations of empowerment in the table below are adapted from Linda Flower’s “scripts for empowerment” (*Community Literacy* 125–36).

Table 3. Comparison of Stakeholder Goals and Interpretations of Empowerment

Community Stakeholders	Goals for Rural Literacy Program	Interpretations of Empowerment
Appalachian Middle-School Girls	To write stories that honor relationships with parents, grandparents, and friends, to showcase unique experiences or abilities to overcome struggle, and to share personally meaningful photos or music.	Expressing a <i>Personal Voice</i>
Undergraduate Interns	To help the middle-school girls create personally meaningful stories that they were proud to share with their friends and families.	Expressing a <i>Personal Voice</i>
Program Directors	To create stories that represent unique cultural practices of Appalachia and provide the middle-school girls with opportunities to take part in and recognize the value of their home traditions and places. To publicly circulate stories that showcase the girls’ unique cultural perspectives, advertise the program, and even attract potential donors.	Expressing a <i>Cultural Voice</i>

Program Donors	To support a program that helps underserved populations and preserves and honors unique cultural traditions.	Expressing a <i>Cultural Voice</i>
Digital Storytelling Facilitators	To help the girls hone their skills in multimedia composition that would prepare them for employment or college.	Developing Communicative Competence
Amanda, Post-Doctoral Fellow	To help the girls critique the marginalization of Appalachia and engage in meaningful dialogue about Appalachian issues.	Developing Critical Consciousness

One point of tension emerged between the program directors who wanted the girls' stories to showcase Appalachian traditions and the interns who wanted to honor the girls' choices *not* to write quintessential mountain narratives. This dilemma became even more complicated when Amanda realized that the directors wanted place-based stories that would appeal to potential donors who wished to support a program that preserved local culture; though these donors were unseen, their financial contributions were crucial to the program's success. The directors' goals appeared to rely on the assumption that rural girls are empowered through opportunities to craft a sense of cultural identity expressed through dialect, local music, or cultural narratives. The interns, on the other hand, also wanted stories that allowed space for personal expression, but they felt that the expectation for place-based narratives might actually restrict the girls' efforts to express themselves by compelling them to appeal to cultural stereotypes. While the directors sought to empower the girls through the opportunity to express their *cultural* voices, the interns wanted to empower the girls to express their *personal* voices by maintaining the agency to choose their own topics, regardless of whether the topics aligned with dominant narratives of Appalachian identity.

The interns' goal of helping the girls to create personally meaningful stories also conflicted somewhat with the digital storytelling facilitators' goal of helping the girls to learn skills of multimodal composition. From the facilitators' perspective, a girl who created a collaged or disjointed narrative, even if she liked the structure, should be encouraged to revise to gain skills, for example, in ordering images and incorporating narration. The facilitators' perspective reflects the assumption that marginalized rhetors are empowered through communicative competence that will allow them to assimilate to the dominant discourse. Unlike the program directors and the interns, the facilitators were less concerned with the content of the stories and more concerned that the composing process would prepare the girls to participate in an increasingly online world. This goal, and its underlying understanding of empowerment, is particularly relevant to Appalachian girls from rural areas who may have less access to the internet and limited experience with technology.

The process of rivaling also led Amanda to consider her own goals. Having studied Paulo Freire and Ira Shor in graduate school, Amanda had expected that the program might lead the girls to

critique the societal forces that have marginalized Appalachia, for example, by addressing the dwindling economic opportunities within some rural Appalachian communities. Or perhaps the program could have created opportunities for the girls to discuss issues that impact Appalachia with other community stakeholders, to actively engage in discussions from which young people are typically excluded. None of the stakeholders seemed to prioritize these goals; even the program directors who valued place-based stories seemed to do so to honor cultural traditions, not to engage in cultural critique or action-oriented discussion. The fact that Amanda's goal did not align with those of the other community stakeholders contributed to her sense of confusion and failure. However, the rivaling process led Amanda to recognize how her goals were informed by theories of empowerment through developing a level of critical consciousness that allows for resistance and intercultural dialogue.

The strategy of rivaling can lead community initiatives to uncover competing definitions of key concepts in community-based work—including empowerment, advocacy, agency, and literacy—and to consider how these definitions inform stakeholder perspectives. Amanda's case suggests that by keeping the concept of empowerment open for inquiry, community programs can develop a collective understanding of the challenges they face and the importance of considering multiple

***“The strategy of rivaling can lead community initiatives to uncover competing definitions of key concepts in community-based work—including empowerment, advocacy, agency, and literacy—and to consider how these definitions inform stakeholder perspectives.”***

ways to empower. Amanda's case also provides further evidence for Rumsey and Nihiser's assertion that “the more stakeholders there are in a project, the more dynamic the collaboration must be to account for it” (143). In other words, Amanda's case helps us to see how community-based writing projects are accountable to networks

of stakeholders whose complexities challenge notions of audience as they are typically discussed in the composition classroom. Without fully understanding the complexities of community stakeholder perspectives, graduate students and novice scholars may be more likely to “fail” or feel as though they have failed to adequately respond to community needs, when in reality such collaborations may require multiple attempts and revisions to account for the dynamic nature of a community.

#### *The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews: The Hidden Logics of Complex Emotional Connection*

In helping each other analyze our failures using these problem-solving strategies, we began to see a common theme related to personal and emotional connection. For Mary and Amanda, it became clear that having a strong emotional and personal connection to their community work was a strong motivation for the work itself; however, this connection could also engender limiting assumptions about the community's needs, goals, and experiences. Mary's relationship with her disabled brother motivated her to focus her dissertation on disability advocacy. Her connection to her brother and her observations of her family's attempts to advocate on his behalf led her to question whether her research goals—among them, completing her dissertation and creating an advocacy resource guide for

parents—were really supporting disabled people’s autonomy and agency. While Mary was eventually able to name these potentially limiting assumptions, the experience of interviewing parents for her dissertation was emotionally difficult and disorienting to both her scholarly and personal identities. Because she did not use the dissertation interviews in her final dissertation project, nor was she able to create a useful guide for the families she interviewed, Mary felt as if she had failed a community that she was committed to supporting.

The following excerpt from Mary’s narrative shows how her interview with Diane and her adult daughter Lucy (who, like Mary’s brother, has Down syndrome), alongside her recent conversations with her brother, led her to question the goal of the interviews and whether she could see her project as a worthwhile endeavor:

Of course I was happy to see that Lucy had a dream [of having her own apartment] and was living it. But, her response also made me think about my brother and his future; it made me question the way I was envisioning and supporting his dreams (had I been?). These questions were especially difficult because I had recently asked my brother if I could write a book about him (my dissertation), and he had told me no. Did this mean I shouldn’t be writing the dissertation I was writing about disability advocacy? (Glavan, “The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews”)

Here, Mary experienced doubt about her research aims following her interaction with Lucy and a sense of guilt that even the topic of her dissertation (disability advocacy) might upset her brother. Frustrated by multiple interviews that brought up difficult memories or fears for her brother’s future and wellbeing, Mary ended up abandoning her interview transcripts and not using the data in her dissertation project. The dissertation instead became a rhetorical history of disability advocacy and special education law but did not include the perspectives of her interviewees. While disappointing, her choice seemed to make sense at the time, given her timeframe to complete her dissertation. But Mary felt she had failed her community because she had not been able to use the interview data to develop a more “useful” outcome. Initially, Mary attributed her failure to two issues she believed were her deficiencies as a scholar: “I should have been able to get past my emotions to be more objective” and “I should have managed my time better.”

But when we analyzed Mary’s case a year later using critical incident interviewing, a technique for revealing the story-behind-the-story and revealing the “hidden logic” behind what people do (Flower, “Talking Across Difference” 41), new details emerged that troubled these initial interpretations. This technique is a particular type of interview method that was developed to identify “critical incidents” where something went wrong in order to learn from the case. In conducting critical incident interviews, the interviewer prompts interviewees to name particular moments when the problem occurred and locate the complex situational factors at play (Flanagan).<sup>6</sup>

Critical incident interviewing is especially useful for getting interviewees to move beyond generalized impressions of a failed experience to describe particular details about how events unfolded. For example, Mary had initially reported that one source of her failure was that her personal connection to the issue made her feel “really emotional.” But when asked, “Can you name a time when you felt really emotional in the process? Tell us what happened,” she explained: “The interviews

were exhausting and confusing. Most stretched longer than the time I requested, three participants introduced me to their sons/daughters, and during at least half of the interviews, as with Diane, we just sat there and cried for a little while” (Glavan, “The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews”). These previously hidden details suggest that Mary’s initial attribution of failure to feeling “really emotional” did not fully account for the personal and emotional complexity of the interviews—both for the interviewees and for Mary herself. While Mary went into the interviews with the goal of better understanding the rhetorical challenges parents faced as advocates for their children, she had not expected that these challenges would be so distinctively different and emotional, nor that interacting with parents in this way would activate similar emotions related to her role as an advocate for her brother. In other words, an alternative explanation for Mary’s failure began to take shape: the affective dimensions of community-based work are highly complex and personally situated, such that we may not be prepared to negotiate these challenges without support, especially in light of expectations to follow conventional timelines and research pathways (e.g., the dissertation).

Further inquiry with the critical incident interviewing technique also revealed that while time constraints may have been one reason why Mary abandoned the interview data, another reason may have been a misalignment of expectations for what the interviews would reveal, similar to the “faulty expectations” Rumsey and Nihiser describe that they brought to their collaborative family history research projects (142–3). When Mary was prompted to describe a particular incident when she believed she had not “managed her time” well, she began to describe how she had gotten stuck trying to interpret the data she had collected:

I had expected the parents to tell stories more in line with the experiences of my own family: frustration and anger directed at school district officials. But the parents I interviewed articulated a variety of needs, goals, joys, and frustrations: some were also angry and had hired attorneys; but some were grateful for the resources available to them; one was broken-hearted, but not because the school had done anything wrong, but because, after so many years of trying, her son still didn’t have any friends. The data didn’t reveal one single rhetorical challenge they all seemed to be experiencing, nothing I could trace that was generalizable or could be ‘solved’ with a workshop or pamphlet. (Glavan, “The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews”)

Mary had expected her interviewees to offer accounts with more similarities because her participants were part of the same “community” of parents of children with disabilities. Mary had also expected that parents would articulate specific rhetorical needs and goals; with this information, Mary assumed she could identify common challenges and best practices, then develop some kind of tool or guide that could support their rhetorical work as advocates for their children. But the parents offered no such information. Instead, what these parents reported to need most—and may have, in fact, found most useful—was simply having Mary listen to their stories and acknowledge their complex yet very individual experiences as parents of children with disabilities.

In short, Mary’s reflective critical incidents suggested an alternative explanation for her sense of failure: interviewees not only had drastically different personal experiences with advocacy, but they also seemed to have different expectations for the interview and Mary’s role as an “expert.”

Representing the failure in this way raised new questions for Mary in her future community work: How do community-engaged scholars account for personal difference in public advocacy? How might we develop an approach to advocacy that better accounts for these personally situated, emotional moments rather than ignoring them? As community-engaged scholars, we often have personal connections to and emotional investments in the communities with whom we work, connections and investments that may shape our expectations for what we should be able to accomplish as researchers, as well as what the community itself might need or expect from us.

***“When we feel a strong personal and emotional connection to a community, we may expect to see our own experiences reflected in other members. Critical incident interviewing offers community researchers a tool for thinking more critically about this expectation without diminishing our emotions or discontinuing our work in the community because it feels too personal.”***

By examining critical incidents within complex community problems, researchers can better understand the diverse needs, goals, and challenges of community members. When we feel a strong personal and emotional connection to a community, we may expect to see our own experiences reflected in other members. Critical incident interviewing offers community researchers a tool for thinking more critically about this expectation without diminishing our emotions or discontinuing our work in the community because it feels too personal. Instead of interpreting misaligned expectations as individual failures, critical incident interviews can support a process of transformation that reveals options for continued work.

## IDENTIFYING UNACKNOWLEDGED CONSEQUENCES AND OPTIONS FOR INQUIRY

Using adaptive problem solving, rivaling, and critical incident interviewing to analyze our cases, we were able to transform our initial perceptions about the sources of failure and to develop generative questions for future inquiry. In addition, this collaborative analysis helped us to identify other consequences of our work that were previously unseen. For example, after analyzing her case using the adaptive problem-solving strategy, Carolyn was able to see an important outcome in her community: the creation of a vibrant local public of graduate students with children. In community debates about the childcare center, many graduate students with children voiced the concern that what they lacked was *social* support, since they often felt isolated from other graduate students who did not share the same caregiving demands; however, this concern was hard for many other stakeholders to understand when the issue was framed around the specific goal of creating a childcare center. From these debates, a support group for graduate students with children emerged, which organized regular lunches and events to discuss the experiences and needs of graduate students with caregiving responsibilities. This group helped facilitate the creation of a parent advocate position



at the university, a family support group with a more expansive definition of family, and childcare grants that continue today.

In Amanda's case, the strategy of seeking rival hypotheses helped her to recognize a turning point in her work with the literacy program. This point occurred when the intern team of college students proposed a podcast project as an alternative to the digital story for the older girls, many of whom had already created stories in previous summers. While the program directors approved the alternative podcast plan, they specified that the podcast had to incorporate Appalachian, place-based themes. This specification confused and frustrated some interns, who thought the girls should be able to create podcasts on whatever issues mattered to them like bullying and dress codes at school. During a meeting with the interns, Amanda explained how a podcast about typical middle school girl themes would not likely appeal to current and potential donors who might ask, "How are the experiences of these girls different from other girls across the country? Why would I donate money to this organization if it is not helping girls to overcome unique challenges or honor underrepresented cultures and traditions?" The interns responded to Amanda by stating, "Well that makes sense. Why didn't the directors explain it in that way?" While Amanda initially saw this meeting as a somewhat isolated incident in the summer, the strategy of rivaling led her to see the situation differently, as a key point when her role was instrumental in helping the interns see themselves as part of a community of stakeholders who may have goals and motivations different from theirs.

For Mary, the process of reconsidering the source of her failures enabled her to begin developing a "personally situated" approach to advocacy (Glavan, "Toward a Personally Situated Approach"). This process grew out of the difficulties she encountered in her interviews, as well as the intensity of emotions she experienced in her efforts to support and advocate with her brother. Initially, Mary had looked primarily for what she believed would be useful ways to support parents' efforts to advocate for and with their disabled children. But because much of this advocacy work is more private than public (i.e., protected by education privacy laws) and more individual than collective (i.e., parents have legal authority to advocate for/with their own individual child), the models of community-based work she had studied in graduate school were limited and often could not account for the kind of complex emotional needs she was discovering. This led her to question: What might an approach to community-based work look like that accounts for how people's rhetorical goals and needs are shaped by complex affective challenges? Her response was to develop an approach to advocacy more inclusive of individual experience.

Our goal in highlighting these previously unseen consequences is not to imply that we did not fail to meet the expectations we set at the outset, or to argue that we were somehow "really successful" after all; rather, we aim to show how collaborative reflection helped us uncover alternative accounts for our failure and develop new forms of inquiry. This wider view or transformed perception was significant because: (1) it re-shaped our criteria for what may count as a "success" or positive consequence; and (2) it helped us transform the impasse of failure by opening up questions and new options for action. Collective reflection on failure, we believe, is an important literate practice for faculty, students, and community stakeholders working toward personal and public inquiry within and across institutional boundaries. Since research teams, centers, and collectives are not as common

in the field of rhetoric and composition (or in the humanities more broadly), we see it as especially important to help novice scholars develop strategies for support and collective reflection on research failures.

Our efforts at collaborative reflection reveal key characteristics about community-based work that need to be considered in the development of participatory research projects and programs. The communities where we worked engaged a broader range of stakeholders than are typically considered in academic writing. As we have described, our work addressed various audiences with competing goals, values, expectations, and understandings of key concepts. This finding suggests that community literacy programs should prepare students to anticipate and engage with diverse perspectives without perceiving misaligned expectations as a sign of failure. Mary's case, in particular, suggests that because traditional pathways of scholarly production tend to individualize and conceal experiences of failure, graduate programs might explore ways to support a wider range of dissertation processes and provide space for ongoing collaborative reflection on experiences of failure throughout the process. In sum, this article suggests that collaborative reflection of successes and failures is itself a literate practice and, furthermore, that we may need better ways to support this practice at the project and program level.

***“In sum, this article suggests that collaborative reflection of successes and failures is itself a literate practice and, furthermore, that we may need better ways to support this practice at the project and program level.”***

## TRANSFORMING FAILURE INTO INQUIRY

Theories of “transformative learning” often emphasize the importance of failure as a starting point that can lead to personal transformation (Mezirow); however, we found that the experience of failure alone did not automatically lead to transformation in our cases. Instead, we found that a generative sense of inquiry only occurred *after* we collaboratively analyzed our cases using the problem-solving strategies. We believe our cases suggest three contributions to theories of failure and mentoring in community work:

- (1) Given the range of expectations about what constitutes success in community work, learning from failure in community setting may require concepts or problem-solving strategies that can help individuals account for the dynamic nature of ongoing problem definition, the rival perspectives of multiple people or stakeholders in the community, and the situated knowledge and emotions that motivate people's stakes in an issue.
- (2) Given that analyzing failure is usually emotionally difficult and runs the risk of confirming individual bias, learning from failure may best be facilitated in collaboration with others who can help offer alternative perspectives and rival interpretations. Ideally, this process of collaborative reflection should also be extended to include community stakeholders.

(3) Given that failure is often a felt feeling that is hard to describe, recorded reflection—written, spoken, or other<sup>7</sup>—is key to failure analysis. For our part, writing our individual “failure narratives” forced each of us to interpret and represent our experiences. These written narratives also helped initiate a *process of inquiry* by providing “data” that we could examine in light of the alternative interpretations generated by the three problem-solving strategies.

Adapting the problem-solving strategies and using them collaboratively, we were able to transform a stigmatized sense of failure, characterized by feelings of individual frustration, confusion, and disappointment, which could have caused us to simply turn away from community work because failure seemed discouraging. By helping each other develop new rhetorical representations of our initial failures, we were also able to reconsider our roles as community researchers, our guiding values for community-engaged work, and our research moving forward.

Most notably, these transformations have allowed us to identify important questions that remain central to our current work as scholars and teachers today. Now in a faculty position, Carolyn mentors graduate students who are learning to conduct community-engaged research, and who often encounter similar kinds of failures and challenges we have described here; she has found that drawing from these problem-solving strategies has become a key way of collaboratively supporting novice researchers. Amanda teaches and supports new writing instructors at an Appalachian university. As she advises Appalachian students, she considers how her own understandings of empowerment shape her work and how her students may bring different goals for their courses and careers after college. Amanda has also continued to research how Appalachian college students navigate the university and negotiate goals in their academic writing (Tennant, “Rhetorical (In)visibility”). In her work teaching writing, Mary has developed these problem-solving strategies into writing and reflection assignments that ask students to inquire collaboratively into moments of failed self advocacy with the goal of transforming their understanding of these failures. As she continues researching and supporting disability advocates, particularly her brother and other young adults with disabilities, she continues to question how people’s personal and emotional connection to an issue creates unique rhetorical challenges and what the role of a “useful” supporter looks like in these situations.

We hope that by offering our experiences of failure, and our process of adapting these problem-solving strategies to analyze them, we have provided a model to other community researchers—not only those new to community work but also advanced scholars seeking to offer support and mentorship—for how to transform failure into inquiry.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We use the terms “disabled people/children” and “people/children with disabilities” interchangeably because both terms are used by people in the disability community; however, both terms are imperfect and subject to critique. “Disabled person” can emphasize the disability rather than the person, and “person with a disability” can diminish the extent to which disability is a valued sociocultural identity. We employ both terms to recognize that: (1) all representational choices are political choices and (2) identity-based representational choices should be made by people who belong to the represented group.

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the work of Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tanks, see: <https://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/courses/course-webpages/community-think-tank/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See Chris Gallagher’s “The Trouble with Outcomes: Pragmatic Inquiry and Educational Aims.” In light of Gallagher’s argument about the limitations with the rhetoric of outcomes, we choose to use “consequences” to describe what happened in our cases.

<sup>4</sup> The adaptive problem-solving strategy is derived from the work of leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz, who developed the theory of Adaptive Leadership; Sharon Doloz Parks has further operationalized this theory, particularly within the context of examining failure. See *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of rivaling has been widely developed and operationalized by Linda Flower and many of her students; rivaling is particularly central to work in community literacy studies (e.g., *Community Literacy*). See also *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry* by Flower, Long, and Higgins.

<sup>6</sup> Critical incident interviewing is one among many strategies offered by Linda Flower to elicit situated knowledge. The term “situated knowledge” indexes local, partial, and experiential ways of knowing or sense making, which people can leverage as powerful interpretive resources in public dialogue. For more on the role of situated knowledge in inquiry-based problem solving see Flower, “Talking Across Difference”; and Higgins, Long, and Flower 21–3.

<sup>7</sup> For more on how to conduct critical incident interviews in community literacy studies see Flower (*Community Literacy* p. 238); for a more general approach see Chell.

<sup>8</sup> We acknowledge that different experiences of embodiment make different forms of expression more or less accessible.

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