

## A Gap in the Place Where a Teacher Should Be

Alys Longley and Ralph Buck

### Abstract

Embodied experiences and collaborative negotiations are at the centre of dance education. Creative pedagogies aim to enable diverse students to give idiosyncratic responses to shared tasks, allowing different processes of knowing to contribute to the richness of learning. Yet maintaining spaces that enable democratic exchange and genuine inclusion is an art-form in itself, rife with contradictions and complexities. This chapter, *A Gap In the Place Where a Teacher Should Be*, explores two narratives that engage with tensions and contradictions in creating inclusive spaces for creative-arts education.

Research in dance education involves careful attendance to the feelings produced by different modes of interaction. Working through narrative and metaphor can enable dance researchers to write into the moving spaces of practice, to engage space, emotion and sensory experience in the process of writing. Narrative methodology is a vital tool in communicating the dynamic process of meaning construction occurring through specific dance pedagogies. It can enable the affects and effects of dance education to be meaningful beyond the site of the classroom. Through narrative, dance researchers can move between evocative, multi-perspectival accounts of specific moments, contextual analysis and critical discussion.

This chapter presents two narratives from two dance education settings. Ralph Buck's narrative *Do it Or I Will Punish You* evokes issues around how dance lecturers mediate student expectations of what it means to 'control' a classroom, and questions methods for enabling shifts of power and agency between teacher and student in creative working environments. Alys Longley's *Neurological Outliers* is a fictitious story drawn from the authors' curiosity in overlaps between pedagogies for neurodiverse students and practice-led researchers. It maintains that multi-modal teaching can facilitate democracy. Together, these two narratives employ specific writing strategies and modes of address to evoke how creative education can engage issues of power, cultural expectation, politics and agency.

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## **Introduction**

We are two dance academics who value democracy as central to our teaching practices. Over the last ten years we have taught in the Dance Studies Department of the University of Auckland, Ralph continuously teaching dance education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and Alys teaching interdisciplinary practice, improvisation, contextual studies and dance writing. Through this time, we have mostly found that our values as educators have been mirrored in the teaching settings of our own classes and in the spaces of educational research in which we've been involved. Recently, we both had experiences that fractured our taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of democracy in education.

This chapter is organized around two narratives – one of them auto-ethnographic, the other ficto-critical. In both narratives, the structure of the story provides a framework to understand complex issues of power in terms of felt experiences – the first narrative from the point-of-view of the teacher, the second from the point-of-view of the student. Both stories highlight the complexity and near-impossibility of consistently creating teaching and learning environments that welcome diverse values, diverse practices and safety for diverse students. Each story explores relationships between teachers and learners where pedagogical situations stray far from the intentions of either the teacher or the learner – with difficult results. The narratives we present reflect on those moments when a kind of failure turns to a space of reflection, opening new possibilities for understanding practice.

## **Failure-narratives**

This chapter was always going to be a failure in some way. One chapter in a book can say so little in terms of the size of the feelings and the complexities of the relationships occurring in a teaching situation – in the constant balance of feelings and desires, constraints and possibilities. Both of the narratives core to this article engage with moments of failure in creative education. In both cases, failure is positioned as a productive, necessary element of practice, which enables space for counter-narratives and questioning of assumed values, positing that allowing failure and trusting through confusion and mess is of great importance. We draw on cultural theorist Judith Halberstams' book *The Queer Art of Failure* in considering “ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success” (p.2) to posit that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). It holds that working with the intention of articulating states of not knowing, instability and discomfort can allow unconventional knowledges to unfold.

We are considering the examination of failure as a way of thinking around the edges of function, into the chaotic, processual nature of ideas that don't fit, that lead to discomfort or catastrophe.

The style through which we write this chapter is anything but neutral. In this chapter we are employing narrative in order to analyse some moments in which failure forms a key element of a story's signature. These stories use language actively in order to convey, through the affect of style, character and plot – particular educational spaces with a focus on how small actions create momentum pathways, invoking surges of feeling and force.

## **Narrative research**

The field of narrative research offers a methodological framework for practicing writing as a means of understanding and analyzing creative spaces within education, attending to the characters, agendas and dynamics acting within them. A central challenge of this chapter is to open a space in

writing that provides insight into the micro-politics and processual events that define shifts in the power relationships of educational spaces. In this, we are influenced by discussions of narrative as means to explore complex and layered meanings of arts practice within communities, in a way that integrates multiple voices and perspectives. Music researcher Wayne Bowman (2006) discusses how:

Narrative work can show us the multiplicity and diversity behind apparent uniformity; it can highlight the temporality of musical engagement; it can give us vivid accounts of the processes of rupture and change that are music's life blood; it can help recover the processual and ethical qualities in musical action that theory so often neglects or obscures. (Bowman, 2006, p.11)

Bowman also emphasizes narrative inquiry's inherent "plurality and complexity" (Bowman, 2006, p.11) as a methodology which demands some understanding of and ability to meld multiple modes of address within a single text: academic, philosophical, evocative, poetic, storied and situated voices are often interwoven to provide detailed insight into complex interactions. We find this to be the case when narrative research is engaged in relation to dance and education – the structure of the story can enable vivid accounts of embodied learning in collaborative, creative spaces where students are often negotiating power in terms of leading and following, problem solving on multiple levels.

It is common for narrative and ethnographic methodologies to be interwoven. Laurel Richardson's (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005) methodology of *Writing as a Method of Inquiry*, is distinctive in its development of practices and methodologies for articulating research using creative writing techniques including poetry and storytelling. Her discussion of writing as a method through which qualitative researchers come to better understand themselves, their work, and what it is they know "displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production or the method of knowing" (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005, p.962). Narrative research proposes that in order to discover new pathways and sites within the terrain of a study, writing must explore a diversity of approaches, to allow researchers to question and work outside of the strict parameters of an academic model, as well as confidently making use of it.

The short narratives that form the heart of this chapter highlight moments where the politics of the classroom are embedded in daily labour and human exchanges. We are particularly influenced by Peter Clough's *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research* (2002), a book which both demonstrates and critically considers how narrative can provide deep insight into specific educational settings and issues. Clough discusses "the virtue of the 'self- consciously fictional story as a form which can hold together the experiences of the researcher and of the 'subject'" (p.62) via "the capacity of narrative methods to report human experience" (p.62). Clough's use of the narrative method enables educational issues to be understood within complex webs of politics, policy, management, community and family struggle, curriculum limitation and possibility, the personal issues between teachers and students and the impact of chance moments of translation and mistranslation. Through portraying very specific situations and characters, Clough makes it clear that to simplify educational issues into statistical tables or qualitative forms of research that serve to neutralise the human picture can lead to deep gaps between the abstraction of theory/policy and the living complexity of practice.

In setting out to write a story, the primary work is in the interaction of ideas; in the act of thinking, tuning in, decision making and focusing on the primary content of the work. And of course, writing a story – like constructing a building – is not carried out outside of a need, a community, a context. These are actually the primary ingredients (Clough, 2002, p.8).

Clough describes his method as creating ‘amalgam characters’ which “maintain the reality, while concealing the identity, of real people” (2002, p.74). Through this methodology, “the story is an amalgam of raw transcribed observation, interview events, notes of conversations, my own research journal and imports of my own knowing and belief” (66). The characters driving Clough’s narrative research are drawn from a range of narrative processes, from specific research participants and data that can be traced to specific taped interviews and research journals, to characters that represent the “mutual construction of self and story” (p.62). The author’s own experience contributes to specific characters in the story, which might bring in imaginative, remembered and fictional elements that punctuate the data-driven material, to characters who represent many people in a distillation of sources. Such characters distil specific human responses to a situation; “separate characters whose lives are collapsed into one for the moral and political purposes of my story” (Clough, 2002, p.74).

Clough’s narrative methodology has elements in common with the discipline of ficto-criticism, which has its disciplinary roots closer to literary theory, cultural theory and writing studies, than to social science. Ficto-critical authors such as Kathleen Stewart (2007) and Stephen Muecke (2002) are influential in this chapter, through their use of non-linear literary conventions, allowing abstract qualities of language to generate challenging and ambiguous texts. This post-modern writing space enables fiction, criticism and ethnography to blur, presenting readers with the agency to construct heterogenous versions of truth and sense from texts. We are interested in democracy in dance education, and democracy is both challenging and ambiguous, perhaps as ambiguous and questionably-constructed as truth.

### **Democracy in education**

Curriculum documents reflect social meanings of what matters in classrooms and in societies (Clapp, Ross, O’Ryan & Tishman, 2017; Eisner, 1998). They are inventions that rest upon value systems. As Dewey (1961) stated, “Any education given by a group tends to socialise its members, but the quality and value of the socialisation depends upon the habits and aims of the group” (p.83). Policies, curriculum and pedagogies are all made up in complex tangles of history, society, the experience of educators, our hope for the future. John Dewey notes that:

In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences...lack of free and equitable intercourse which springs from a variety of shared interests makes intellectual stimulation unbalanced. (1961, p. 84-85)

Narrative research in dance education can provide access to understanding of diverse values that influence teaching habits and aims, through enabling reflection on how behaviours, contexts, emotions, actions interact, as we construct the artificial frames of beginnings, middles and endings. Through such reflection, we recognize that reconciling diverse views is sometimes impossible – so the task becomes one of providing space for diverse views to be articulated, shared and considered in safe learning environments.

If citizens are better off in sharing some form of common life together, they need to be able to communicate with one another. If they are to communicate with one another, they need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the conceptual distinctions at play within different communities and the various interests suggested by those conceptual distinctions. (English et.al., 2016, p.11)

Democracy, as Dewey (1961) saw it means providing opportunity for sharing and recognising points of common interest; fostering freer interaction between diverse social groups; and allowing for constant readjustments of habits and ideas through continuous interaction. Free and safe dialogue in diverse forms is therefore a precursor to democracy, and in our minds education. “In a democratic community we become increasingly open to new possibilities as we come up with new and inventive ways to deal with the world and our social and political problems” (English et.al., 2016, p.10). Fostering dialogue is vitally important in fostering relationships. Dialogue (including conflicting dialogue) can enable people to learn from each other and expand horizons. Education is influenced by the ideals by which a community or society aspires to and is willing to change for. Dance is one way for expressing those aspirations and changes.

Educational theorists such as Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene and Elliot Eisner advocate for dialogue and informed debate-engagement in the process of making choices. As Jorgensen (1995) stated;

Dewey, Freire and Greene are united in their passion for the values of justice, freedom, caring and carefulness and dialogue in education. The community cannot exist without ideals. They are embodied in the values the community embraces. They are the stuff of its stories, its rituals, its songs, paintings and other artistic creations, interwoven with precepts and prohibitions and touching every aspect of life of its members. (p. 79)

This chapter is also informed by constructivist epistemology (Eisner, 1993) which champions interaction, meaning making and interaction of diverse perspectives. What are the implications of choice? When there are limited resources of space, time or energy, do we really value choice? When efficiency and clarity come into tension with democracy, are we aware that our values are shifting? Is the classroom merely a Darwinian space for evolution to play out and the fittest to survive? Is it true that the ideas that are most resilient and effective in solving a problem are the best, and that they will survive and others will be forgotten? Educational researcher Welby Ings book *Disobedient Teaching* (2017) engages a series of narratives to explore how genuine creative thinking can be enabled in education. Ings’ narratives translate the ways that different teaching styles can enable or suppress creativity. He argues that too often schools repress dynamic learners, through over-emphasis on standardized testing. This reductive approach to student capability tends to come at the cost of relationships based on co-creation and respect. Ings (2017) argues that in order to nurture genuine creativity in schools, teachers need to come to terms with the nature of creativity -

“and strategically grow it. It demands that we question and take risks and trade beyond experience. Perhaps more than this, it requires courage, and unrelenting courage, a belief in possibility, and a preparedness to fail and to work with the failure of others. All of this in schools that often fear deeper

levels of disruption. To achieve such a change relies on the transformative power of productive disobedience”. (46)

Ings (2017) posits that in the current schooling system in New Zealand, creating democratic pedagogies that enable genuine creativity, requires teachers be ‘disobedient’ – willing to resist convention and follow the idiosyncratic flows of curiosity. Yet, there are always those teaching /learning situations when convention is required, and times when democracy doesn't work, or is not possible or appropriate. By fostering educational environments where respect, critical thinking, creative risk-taking and safety is valued, teachers may be able to better accept the role of authoritarianism when it occurs and to realise how the needs of diverse students are being regarded and disregarded in learning institutions.

### **Narrative one: Do it or I will punish you**

There are these rare moments when the things that are foundational to your world turn upside down. The cutlery rains from the table. The rain falls upward. You genuinely ask yourself whether a long-held stance against corporeal punishment is anti-democratic. Or whether teaching from a position of social justice is a local veneer and not a universal human right. Practices, values, philosophies, expectations are brought into question.

This story begins as I am on my way to teach my Post Graduate Dance Education class. The students are a diverse bunch – from many nationalities, many first languages, many different education backgrounds. We have Tongan, Samoan, African-American, German, Chinese, New Zealand (European and Māori), South African and Australian cultural perspectives. This creates a rich opportunity to share diverse meanings of teaching and learning dance. I am thinking about politics – with a new government in New Zealand assumptions about education are being questioned and unpicked, old systems are being abolished, and there seems to be space for new approaches.

Every postgrad is to teach a one hour dance class – something they are comfortable with. It is Samantha's turn to teach. Samantha is a less than attentive student, but nonetheless she is there and she is ready. With eight prior lessons behind us everyone in the room understands the aim of the class: reflect on how we teach; reflect on values driving our practice; reflect on the realities of the lesson in the context of New Zealand.

Samantha speaks clearly and loudly “line up, facing the mirror”. She then demonstrates a standing squat. Feet in parallel, bent knees, lowered hips into a semi-sitting position, with arms out in front parallel to floor. “Do this.”

We do as asked. Samantha quickly explains this is a Tai chi exercise for secondary school students.

We all nod, understanding the context and the task: Tai chi for high school kids.

Samantha instructs us to the squat position. “Now you will hold this for 40 minutes”. In my role as a 16 year-old boy, I begin. As a 56 year old man, this is not a good task. I stand there with slightly shaking legs, a series of questions playing through my mind;

What am I learning?  
How would I teach this lesson differently?  
What will happen if I can't do it?

Samantha does not speak or mingle. She stands silently at the side of the room. In 5 minutes it feels unbearable. In role as a secondary school boy I begin to rotate my hands, trying to distract myself from pain and boredom. As a lecturer in charge of the wellbeing of the class I wonder where the lesson is going. I have on two hats, as lesson participant and as lecturer, responsible for holding the learning of the class. I was not getting any tips or insights on how to improve or develop my squat. One more minute and I cannot go on. I stand up and began to shake my sore legs and arms. I know if I felt like this then others in the class must feel the same.

A blunt voice ricochets through the room, “Get down. Do it. Do it now”.  
“I’m sorry I cannot continue the exercise, it is too difficult for me”.  
“Do it or I will hit you”.

I gape at her. She snaps. “You are not respecting me as the teacher”.  
Remaining in role as the student, I attempt to bring us into conversation, “Can you help me do it better?”.

“You know what to do, do it, it is a Tai chi lesson, why do you not know Tai chi?”.  
“I know Tai chi, I have done Tai chi lessons before”.  
“This is Tai chi from my Dance Academy. This is how we learn Tai chi”.  
“I don’t know what I’m learning.”

At this point the fiction of the role-play evaporates. Samantha is no longer my secondary school teacher. I am no longer a 16 year old boy. Her voice is hurt and direct. “Why are you ruining my lesson, why do you not respect my teaching? This is a stupid, in this boring country”.

The atmosphere in the room is taut, caught in this strange dynamic where our roles – and the power that we held in them – wavers and shifts. So I take the lead, attempting to establish a reflective space. “Samantha ok, let’s stop the lesson and talk about the task, the aims of the lesson and how it is or is not working”.

We negotiate our way into a circle and a discussion of pedagogy, of teaching styles, of punishment, of corporeal punishment. Samantha sits still, taking the weight of every word as an accusation of her failure. Eventually she stands up and looks me directly in the eye, “You are unfair, a bad teacher, you have always picked on me, I do not like you and this stupid country”. Samantha leaves the room, leaving a room roiling with emotion, a gap where the teacher should be.

This class transformed me from my usual role, comfortably leading a class I have been leading for twenty years, learning from the students and them from me. In this lesson I felt alone, vulnerable and in pain - physical, social, cultural and pedagogical pain. I entered this space where pain turns to shame, shame turns to humiliation. Where you long for someone to come and recognize your state and fish you from a situation and I thought of those times for all those students, where there is a gap in the place where a teacher should be. I hadn’t felt that feeling, or that intensity of empathy, for years.

Samantha’s class transformed me to feeling like a ‘loser’ who wants to misbehave. I wanted the teacher to see me struggling and find me a solution. I wanted the roles to play out from action to reflection, power moving in waves through the room, a space of mutual respect. In this case, it was beyond my ability to facilitate this space. I negotiated (albeit with great

difficulty) an end to the lesson and facilitated a discussion amongst the group of postgraduate students. Amongst the critical discussion many points were raised, including:

- Do students from different cultural backgrounds feel lost and angry when I teach from a transformative/constructivist perspective as opposed to an authoritarian/conservative perspective?
- Which pedagogical traditions continue to rely on authoritarianism and hierarchy? In such classes, is the authority of the teacher ever questioned?
- To what extent was role play as a teaching and learning device confusing for Samantha?
- How to undo the assumption that if there is no pain in a dance lesson you are not learning anything?
- To what extent were different languages a barrier in this class? What other barriers to dialogue and mutual respect were present in the room? These could be seen in terms of different and misunderstood intent, values and motivations.

In threshold concept theory, crossing thresholds is akin to moving through “a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (Meyer and Land, 2005, p. 1). Crossing the threshold is regarded as a transformative or ‘aha’ moment where ‘you get it’ and understanding and knowledge shifts permanently. As a dance teacher I came away from my specific lesson deep in thought. In my drive for democratic dance education I walked out of the room thinking: who am I including and excluding in my lessons?

Schools, communities and cities are constantly evolving. Connected to this evolution are evolving pedagogies. I firmly believe that dance education has a role in shaping and transforming how young people think and behave. Can I take it for granted that democracy does also? Maybe teachers and learners want to be told what to do and accept that punishment is integral to education. Maybe my desire to create a democratic, inclusive and reflective learning environment was preventing Samantha’s success? Failure ricocheted through this room. I felt it in my own body’s inability to hold the task, in Samantha’s inability to hold me, in my inability to maintain a peaceful, respectful pedagogical space. For a moment, I was overwhelmed with resentment toward my own student – despite it being my responsibility to foster her learning. Shame quickly followed resentment as I attempted to align concrete practice and embodied feelings with the abstractions of practice. In *The Queer Art of Failure* Judith Halberstam discusses failure as having the capacity to produce a “grammar of possibility” (2011, p.2). Samantha’s anger and frustration, her antagonistic refusal to play along in a situation that she found unbearable, has enabled me to ask important questions of my teaching practice, to have a deeper sense of empathy with my students, to feel the stakes at play in the game of education in new ways.

### **Narrative two: *Neurological outliers***

I processed the queer art of failure from an early age. There is such a grace to it – the expectation of failure, the reach toward the muted, so-soft colours of not-being-recognised. The subtle and gentle refusal to discuss attempts or experiences, drenched as they are with

the kaleidoscope patterns of shame. When I began school, it was a place where endless spaces of failure were brought together, day after day. Being ambidextrous, I was slow to figure out my coordination – my brain overloaded with neuro-muscular possibility, faltered at the point of choice, that .2 of a second that makes the difference between catching or dropping a ball, between getting out of the way of the school yard tackle in time. My report cards recorded that I was ‘developing’ (read: not achieving or excelling) in maths and reading and writing and confidence and small ball skills and large ball skills, in team sports. I lived in a constant state of ‘development’, never reaching the standard, never excelling, always having teachers highlight how great I was doing at attempting (read failing), as they tried to divert attention from my glaring failures. These were the days of New Zealand’s National Standards, an exercise in spotlighting failure with penetrating light. I wasn’t achieving the standards at all, and as such, was pulling down the schools’ statistics, making my teachers look bad, mucking up the league tables. Teachers recorded my micro-progressions against a narrow horizon line of achievement that pretty much excluded any of my skills. Looking back, after publishing a book of poetry and having had some success as a song-writer, after finishing degrees in music and drama and gaining a scholarship to do my PhD in arts-led education, I’m realizing just how much I knew back then, and how capable I was, and just how invisible it was to my poor teachers. I think of the poverty of standardization, which squeezes the agency and ability of students out of the classroom like a flannel squeezing the water out from either end. All this talent just draining out the door. All these beautifully gifted students stunted and limited by perceptions of achievement that refuse to include such gifts, and so the gifts become invisible, the children assume they have none and learning becomes torture.

I think of one day in particular. It was the school cross country and I was seven years old. I didn’t want to run. I knew the shame of public failure. I knew the vast differential between my best friend’s speed and my own. But there was my mother, there was her surrounding me with this loving and uncomfortable weight of hope and care. She offered to run with me and I, reluctant, agreed. We weren’t alone. There were a couple of other spectrummy kids, a kid from Zimbabwe who didn’t fit the slender, sinewy body-type of most of our classmates. A clapper board sounded off for us to go, and the kids shot out in front of us. It felt like they lapped us in a moment. I remember my Mum cheerleading and singing for us, the other kids shameless team spirit as we moved aching slowly, my own despair. By the time we did the preordained two laps of the field, our classmates were gone, our teachers were gone, the last teacher was packing up the equipment. Unsurprised, I felt mum’s heart sinking, her fury rising. She couldn’t help herself; “This isn’t exactly what you’d call inclusive, is it? Poor Mrs Dyson is a picture of confusion. “Sorry?”

“I thought the teachers would wait for the last kids before they went inside? What happened to cheering on your classmates?”

“Oh, right. Oh. I’m very sorry. I didn’t even think about it.”

Failure is a queer art. My mum was not so familiar with it and she didn’t take mine well. I didn’t know how to teach her. I spent my childhood wishing she’d just stop seeing my abilities and let me just camouflage myself into that elegant nearly-nothingness that I’ve since learnt to spin inside my poems. Mainstream schooling for me was so much like that, in every way. There are always these kids that don’t move at the expected speed – and the easiest thing for a busy teacher to do is move on. The easiest thing is to turn your back and assume they’ll be fine and have great intentions but to make the labour and miniscule achievements of us outliers invisible. When the moment of achievement comes no one is looking, no matter how much harder you had to work for it, and the colour palette of life gets muted.

It wasn't so long after that race day that my dyslexia became an official thing, and my parents moved me to a school for dyslexic kids. There, my teacher taught with a guitar round her neck and we could articulate our literacy through song writing. Everyone worked with the assumption that there are endless ways to communicate what you know – through songs, through art, through modelling, through mapping, through drama, through dance, through conversation. Words come to life in speech as well as on paper, and it's possible to assess kids by listening to them talk about what they know. So there, I could thrive in my happy dyslexic ghetto where the idea of one mainstream way of doing anything was a laughable fiction. We were the neurological outliers and we figured out what we knew by doing, making stuff, materializing ideas so we could touch them and breathe them. The mainstream school I'd been at seemed utterly blind to multi-modal, arts-based teaching. There, the endless reams of worksheets seemed to be the only way that anything was taught, the only method anyone seemed to have to find out what I couldn't say, rendering my capability invisible.

I became a song writer, poet, artist and teacher, and eventually was coaxed back into a kind of 'mainstream school' of the university. However, my PhD is in creative-practice, which to me feels re-finding the school-for-dyslexics on campus. Artistic researchers tend toward multi-modal kinds of knowing. Practice-led research provides a methodology that resists the logocentric ontology of much university learning, recognizing that new knowledge can be produced through creative forms and processes, and that things such as artworks, performances or musical compositions play a vital role in knowledge creation and exchange (Nelson, 2013). I still think of my creative-practice PhD cohort as neurological outliers, as we research in heterogenous ways, darting back and forth between:

high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing... to think about ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success. (Halberstam, 2011, p.2)

Nowadays, in my teaching I purposefully leave a gap in the place where a teacher should be, in order to make space for students to step up to that role of educating themselves and each other. What I am interested in instead is considering atmospheres of emergence (Ruka, 2017), where the space is safe enough for the students to share their failures with each other, to engage with a 'grammar of possibility' (Halberstam 2011) where it is okay to feel like a loser, it is okay to *be* a loser, it is okay to feel shame, it is expected that we'll fall over in front of each other. But from there, with the gross taste of the floor at our lips, we can feel gravity in new ways, we can sense how we all are at the mercy of momentum, and we can make spaces to resist predetermined methods. We can help each other take rogue paths that lead to genuine creativity and idiosyncratic knowledges.

## Conclusion

Performance maker and theorist Matthew Goulish writes that "failure produces transparency" (Goulish, 2002, para. 9), allowing insight into processes of cause and effect, and into the kinds of variables that will irrevocably and unpredictably throw the compass of expectation into new cartographies. In these two narratives, perceptions of failure develop new perspectives and insights, through storying situations where democracy is threatened despite the best intentions of teachers. Narrative one; *Do it Or I Will Punish You*, is an auto-ethnographic narrative which evokes an attempt to find a middle-ground between contradictory epistemological positions when the roles of teacher and student become strangely confused. Narrative Two, *Neurological Outliers*

tells a fictitious story drawn from the authors' curiosity in overlaps between pedagogies for neurodiverse students and practice-led researchers. Dyslexic students and creative-arts researchers require pedagogical environments that recognize material, multi-modal forms of knowledge— and committed advocacy at an institutional level for non-traditional forms of education (Pino and Mortari, 2014; Nelson, 2013). Narrative two concludes with the idea that multi-modal teaching can facilitate pedagogical democracy – potentially enabling Dewey's vision of open exchange between diverse students to occur. Implicit in both of these narratives is the spectre of classrooms that “squash rather than promote quirky and original thought” (Halberstam, date, p. 7). Teaching creative arts involves opening spaces where meanings of specific art-forms are co-created in momentary dialogues, wherein:

as thinkers , we operate outside of the realms of familiarity. We function beyond expectations and assumptions, and beyond the known territory of teachers, schools, managers or organisations. We journey into foreign landscapes, and in so doing we ask those who seek to guide us to trust in what they can't define or imagine. (Ings, 2017, p.30)

Such spaces necessarily involve vulnerability and risk. Democracy involves attending to the voices that don't fit. And attending to the voices that don't fit is hard. Making space for difference – differences in how we articulate knowledge, differences in how we learn, differences in our politics, differences in pedagogy and culture and language – is an art-form. A humble and open attitude to our failures has something to teach us in learning this art-form. Like the narratives at the heart of this chapter, our democratic classrooms are destined for failure – all we are really left with is attempts, and optimism, and the desire to make space for each other to thrive. As authors, it is our belief that the terrain of narrative research provides a vital space for considering the complexity of classroom interactions as we make space for future students who can shine in their difference.

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