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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Review of *(Embarrassment): And the Emotional Underlife of Learning* By Tom Newkirk

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Newkirk, T. (2017). *(Embarrassment) and the emotional underlife of learning*.
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

ISBN: 978-0325088778

Tom Newkirk's newest book, (*Embarrassment*), addresses how shame, embarrassment, anxiety, humiliation, fear of awkwardness, and worries of failure get in the way of learning and are the enemies "of so many other actions we could take to better ourselves" (p. 29). A work emphasizing the relationships between teachers' talk and students' agency, the text is a narrative-filled guidebook for practitioners eager to normalize and protect risk-taking and failure. Newkirk urges readers to reframe failures, normal outcomes of learning and growth, in ways that help affirm learners and reduce threats of stigma. Peter Johnston's (2004) *Choice Words* frequently came to mind as I read this book, partly because Newkirk and Johnston share a passion for helping learners tell better, kinder, more forgiving and agentive stories about themselves.

As Newkirk recognizes, most of us remember our own embarrassing situations vividly—perhaps more vividly than moments of success. He certainly seems to do so, and throughout the text, he discloses moments of embarrassment and/or shame (he differentiates these, though they are related) from his own life. In the telling of his narratives (misunderstanding a teacher's directions, failing to engage a late-day audience at a conference, and more), he makes clear that we *all* possess these stories. His candor in sharing his tales evokes hooks' (1994) urging of teachers to enact "engaged pedagogy" whereby we should not ask our learners to take risks we are unwilling to take ourselves. I've often heard my own students' stories of in-school embarrassment—a risk that made one publicly a source of ridicule or shunning, a moment of realizing one was not "expected" to go to college, forced reading aloud in front of a class—emotionally recounted as if those moments had happened just yesterday instead of decades ago. These stories present as what

Newkirk says psychologists call "flashbulb memories" (p. 4).

When I first began reading his book, I noticed others, almost daily, sharing their own painful flashbulb memories, too. Embarrassment can happen merely as a result of someone else's *perception* that we have failed, fueling self-doubt. Mica Pollock (2017) opens *Schooltalk*, a powerful text about equity work, with stories of adults who encouraged her as an author/writer, but mentions, too, "once in grad school, a professor told me that I 'probably shouldn't become a writer.' *I still hear his voice in my head* along with the others', making me doubt my abilities" (p. 3, emphasis added). In *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay (2014) recalls a graduate school classmate asserting that Gay must be "the affirmative-action student." Despite stellar academic work and publications, "[n]o matter what I did, I heard that girl, that girl who had accomplished a fraction of a fraction of what I had, telling a group of our peers that I was the one who did not deserve to be in our program. . . I have a PhD I damn well earned, and *I worry I'm not good enough*. It's insane, irrational, and exhausting" (p.13, emphasis added).

Right. Except. It's apparently *not* irrational to carry these worries once we've experienced the presence [whether real or imagined] of someone else's doubt about us, as our definition of the situation and our definitions of *who we are* have been disrupted. Perhaps a secret insecurity is somehow confirmed. In fact, it's likely a quite human evolutionary survival strategy to recognize and remember those moments when the substance of who we are, and who we want to be, are cast into doubt. Newkirk argues that we need not throw up our hands and succumb to it. He encourages us to think about social interaction as the framework for not only the *threat* of embarrassment but also as one key to *circumventing* some of its most toxic effects.

Newkirk pulls on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) in his conceptual framework for embarrassment. He's employed Goffman's metaphors for social interaction in other work (see, e.g., Newkirk, 2002), and this text reads a bit like one of Goffman's books. Newkirk's data, like Goffman's, are not limited to scholarly sources, although he does reference scholarship and conversations with researchers. He pulls from podcasts, literature, poetry, traditional sayings, letters, personal and witnessed experiences, and sources as disparate as John Keats, *The New Yorker*, and film scripts. Newkirk employs the dramaturgical metaphors in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to characterize the unwritten expectations for social interaction that participants recognize and respond to, and to explain the consequences to our identities when we find that those expectations are violated. Goffman frequently analyzed face-to-face interactions in which embarrassment ensued.

Newkirk, recognizing the power of these social dynamics, wonders why we aren't better able to simply make more rational choices for ourselves when weighing the risks of embarrassment against possible gains. He explains three principles he believes get our way, the first of which relates to the risk of failing to perform as expected: "in all social encounters, we play roles that we desire to perform competently. Embarrassment typically involves this discrediting information that undermines our performances" (p. 9). The second principle is somewhat more tenuous. He explains what he calls the "vanity principle," that "humans habitually tend to overestimate their capacities—which leads to dissonance and discomfort when we confront situations that fail to support this self-image" (p. 9). I note this principle as tenuous because I'm not certain it aligns with research addressing members of marginalized communities and their

relationships with schools. Finally, the third principle requires our willingness to be awkward and to accept that "our first attempts at a new skill will, at best, be only partial successes. Moreover, we need to allow this awkwardness to be viewed by some mentor who can offer feedback as we open ourselves up for instruction" (p. 10). These three arguments are developed throughout the text as Newkirk offers tools for helping learners address them.

The book is broken into four sections with ten chapters. The text does not move in an entirely linear style, but rather is an engaging and thoughtful compilation of reflections, conversations, explanations, and illustrations that, bit-by-bit, and quote-by-story, grow into a coherent (albeit not sequential) model of how we can engage in work that both acknowledges the power and inevitability of embarrassment and that grows learners' skills in moving beyond it. Newkirk opens his life as a text for us, earnestly and impressively, throughout the book.

The first section, "Underlife," includes Chapters 1, 2, and 3. Chapter One opens with an embarrassing episode from Newkirk's first-grade experience and sets up the purpose of the book, which Newkirk explains:

We can say that failure is healthy—just as we can say that pain is often necessary for health—but we instinctively want to avoid both. Just how we can achieve this more resilient and effective approach to difficulty and failure—the help we need, the voices we need to hear, the barriers we need to overcome—will be the subject of this book. (p. 6)

He reminds readers of what we know from Dweck's (2006) work about fixed- and growth-mindsets, and explains that we are all, always, in

the process of developing our capacity for growth-mindsets. Few, if any of us, have “arrived” at a place of being in a growth-mindset consistently and in relation to all learning challenges. In this chapter, he introduces Goffman’s *definition of situation* to explain the desire so many of us possess to avoid embarrassment.

In Chapter Two, Newkirk sets up the imperative to “do battle” (p. 30) with embarrassment, noting that engaging with the risk of embarrassment is a requirement for becoming “the novice we need to be to learn” (p. 15). For educators, then, the challenge is how to support students so that they “can fail publicly without succumbing to embarrassment” (p. 15)—and to learn how to help students maintain a sense of competence even after public embarrassment. This chapter also begins to address a theme taken up in the following chapter, namely that students from identity groups often subject to the threat of stereotype (Steele, 2011) may experience a heightened, and very real, cost in relation to the risks of failure. He explains, “when we look at risk-taking in classrooms, students come from different standpoints, different senses of their own ‘reserves,’ their accumulated or inherited capital. There is far more than self-will, or grit, at work—there can be deep social threats” (p. 23). This acknowledgement reminded me of Tyler Hallmark’s (2018) commentary: “When ‘Failure is OK’ is not OK.” Hallmark contends that failure is differentially consequential depending on the capital one already possesses. Simply praising failure as a natural outcome of learning/growth is insufficient and hollow in the presence of systems of inequality.

In Chapter Three, “Stigma,” Newkirk acknowledges the differential challenges to people whose statuses are marked (e.g., People of Color, students in special education courses,

English Language Learners, women). While other texts are better positioned to address *systemic* inequality, as this work focuses on how we engage directly with one another (and ourselves) as *individuals*, Newkirk signals that students whose identities are marked and who are often Othered in schools, offer “profiles in courage” (p. 33) to teach about resilience. In this chapter, he reviews methods teachers and researchers identify for decreasing the perceptions of threat in tasks (e.g., writing as a form of rehearsal before whole-class discussions in which all students will participate), and he draws upon the legacy of Don Graves in asking about how we can more effectively start with what learners already know and *can* do as a place from which to begin taking new risks. I remember Don Graves, when I was a first-year teacher, encouraging us to privately invite students to “try” something on a small scrap of paper—to offer writing “nudges”—a pedagogical move that made the effort to grow a new skill less risky. I’ve never forgotten it and have used it many times, but I never consciously thought of it as a tool for helping to develop resilience against embarrassment until reading this book.

The second section of the book is entitled, “Asking and Receiving,” and it includes Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter Four focuses on why we often *don’t* seek help from others, even when it is in our best interests to do so. Newkirk notices, for example, that college students rarely use professors’ office hours and speculates on reasons that might get in the way of accepting that help. Included among the reasons for resisting the availability of help are setting the threshold for needing help too high, not thinking that we are the “kinds of people” entitled to help, not wanting to show ourselves as aligned with the institution and its goals, feeling that we are burdening others with our need, and even giving into our own egos. He offers a touching account of a time when he

struggled as a college faculty member in need of help with his teaching, but was loathe to recognize this challenge or to seek help. In this chapter, Newkirk references a moving episode of *This American Life* to illustrate how the forces of stereotype threat can work against first-generation students' efforts to push through their self-doubts and access help. He also introduces readers to the work of Brown (2010), a shame-resilience researcher, whose findings have implications for teaching and learning. After sketching challenges to learners' voluntarily seeking help, he suggests how we more effectively may offer assistance and normalize its access.

The following chapter (Five) reads much like a companion to Johnston's (2004) volume *Choice Words*; Newkirk cites Johnston's work directly several times. Here, Newkirk invokes the football metaphor of "soft hands" (the chapter's title) to describe "the way great teachers make student contributions seem special and smart" (p. 75) and do so authentically as teachers offer the gifts of time and receptivity (p.79) to student efforts. In this chapter, the recommendations that grow from his stories are concrete and well-grounded in research: encouraging and normalizing "exploratory talk" (Barnes, 1992), listening more, practicing the conversational skill of "uptake," the invoking of a "hypothetical other," engaging in playful language, and strategically deploying authentic questions that position students as agent (Johnston, 2004). One would find this chapter a useful companion to the work of Lindfors (1999) or Engel (2011), both of whom encourage teachers to intentionally use the language of genuine wonder to invite inquiry. He also revisits ideas about failure and praise, offering nuance while resisting the simplification of dominant narratives about embracing failure or resisting praise. He argues, for example, that praise, in the form of genuine "liking," can help

students grow more generous attitudes toward themselves as learners and can nurture agency. It is instructive and helpful for learners to hear "do more of *this*."

The third section of the book, "Embarrassment and the Three Rs" includes three chapters, one on each of the "Rs"—math, reading, and writing. Newkirk tackles discipline-specific features of embarrassment for each content area. In Chapter Six, "Math Shame," we join him as he wrestles to solve math problems and likens feelings of math efficacy during our schooling to being learners riding in the back of a truck over bumpy roads, during which time we gradually begin to fall off the truck: "But the truck doesn't stop. It just keeps barreling along—until by the end of high school and the beginning of college, almost everyone is off the truck" (p. 105). Newkirk identifies barriers to learners' sense of competence at math (the ways we engage in math shame and disabling stories about our relationships with math) and consults with experts to discern how we can better address the shame by rethinking math to "democratize it, make it a language for all, recover a sense of wonder" (p. 118).

Chapter Seven, "Reading Guilt," focuses on the natural role of "forgetting" in reading. This chapter, perhaps more than the others, feels like a winding road of stories about how we recall "sticky information" and emotionally salient text but naturally forget much of the detail of what we read. We connect with parts or themes or stories, pieces that stick with us because they surprise us, evoke emotion, are relatable in some way. As an educator, I connected this chapter to how I prepare my students on the first day of each semester. I tell them that they will not remember *everything* from *anything* we read together. I want to disabuse them of that expectation for themselves right from the start. We remember a few ideas that are salient for

each of us, and then our own “most important” ideas become sources for sharing, discussion, and debate. If we expect to forget much of what we read, we cannot be ashamed for having done so.

Of course, closest to Newkirk’s professional experience is the craft of writing, and on this he focuses Chapter Eight. As a longtime writer and teacher of writing, he explains he is “trying to help us all tell a better, more generous story about the writing process” (p. 137). In the chapter, he offers lessons about increasing students’ (and our own) confidence and competence in the inherently vulnerable experience of writing. The lessons derive from being publicly writing-shamed by others (imagine one’s writing posted, insultingly, to the faculty room bulletin board—error circled—a true story of his), from the wisdom of the writer/teacher Don Murray, from the insights and experiences of his colleagues, from failed questioning during Senate Watergate hearings, from authors, and—as is true throughout the book—from the insights and narratives of his former students. The chapter offers specific, time-worn, and defensible advice about excellent writing pedagogy, and it’s accessible and highly readable.

The final section of the book is called “Voices” and includes two chapters. The first of these (Chapter Nine) draws on lessons from athletics. Newkirk questioned athletes and coaches about moments of public failure and their responses to it. He found that successful athletes, like academics, develop clear-headed stories about their failures. They understand how mishaps occur, process these insights calmly, and can visualize getting it right in the future. Some coaches encourage or require writing as part of this reflective process. Another insight mirrors some of what we know about the teaching of writing: Start with what the learner (or athlete)

is doing well and recognize that success instead of making the story only about the failure. Help the learner (athlete) develop skills for *processing* the feelings associated with failure. I was surprised to see a chapter about swimming, track, and other sports in this book, and as a lifelong *non-athlete* I expected to find them foreign and bewildering, but the touching stories Newkirk gathered demonstrate how to use narratives of failure to gain perspective and insight, and to advance new learning and risk.

In Chapter Ten (“What’s This About?”), Newkirk reminds readers of how Don Murray often encouraged Newkirk to figure out what his writing was “about” and then get to it straightaway instead of five pages into a piece. Chapter Ten is an effort to pull together lessons from across the book. I almost wished I had read this chapter *first* instead of *last* as I realized the intentionality of the book’s design. Here, Newkirk acknowledges the breadth of his chosen topic and, likewise, the breadth of disciplines/fields he “traversed” trying to address it. Reading this section reminded me of an observation he made earlier in the book, about how many connections writers will make with their topics as they go about their lives, suddenly seeing relevance to their topic in unexpected places; I suspect this is what happened to him. Shaker sayings, William James, poetry, old friends’ comments, coaches’ mantras, his spouse’s experience of reading about cancer care: these all are brought to life by his deep, genuine interest in embarrassment. In his acknowledgements, he notes his wife, Beth, often asked him, “So what does that have to do with embarrassment?” which served as a testament to the wide connections he made between his topic and the world around him. In the end, ever the user of tentative, exploratory language, he suggests that perhaps his point is that we might learn and practice “self-generosity” so as to accept that “we may need to

adopt a growth mindset about achieving a growth mindset” (p. 186).

This volume will find a place beside *Choice Words* in my library. I plan to revisit it regularly, as it offers an accessible, engaging, and honest reminder of the power of our language to frame situations and to support our own and our students’ well-being. It does not, and cannot, however, sufficiently address systemic issues of inequality that limit learning opportunities in schools, and if I find one shortcoming with the text, that would be the most important limitation to its application. Without broader attention to systems of inequality that make some of us legitimately risk-averse, the recommendations in this text can only make limited impact. For readers wishing to deepen understandings of how to use language in the service of educational equity more broadly, Pollock’s (2017) *Schooltalk* would be an ideal next-read. After reading Newkirk’s text, though, it would be challenging to *not* see implications for embarrassment everywhere (as he does) and to feel a renewed commitment to fostering shame resilience and nurturing courage in our youth and in ourselves.

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