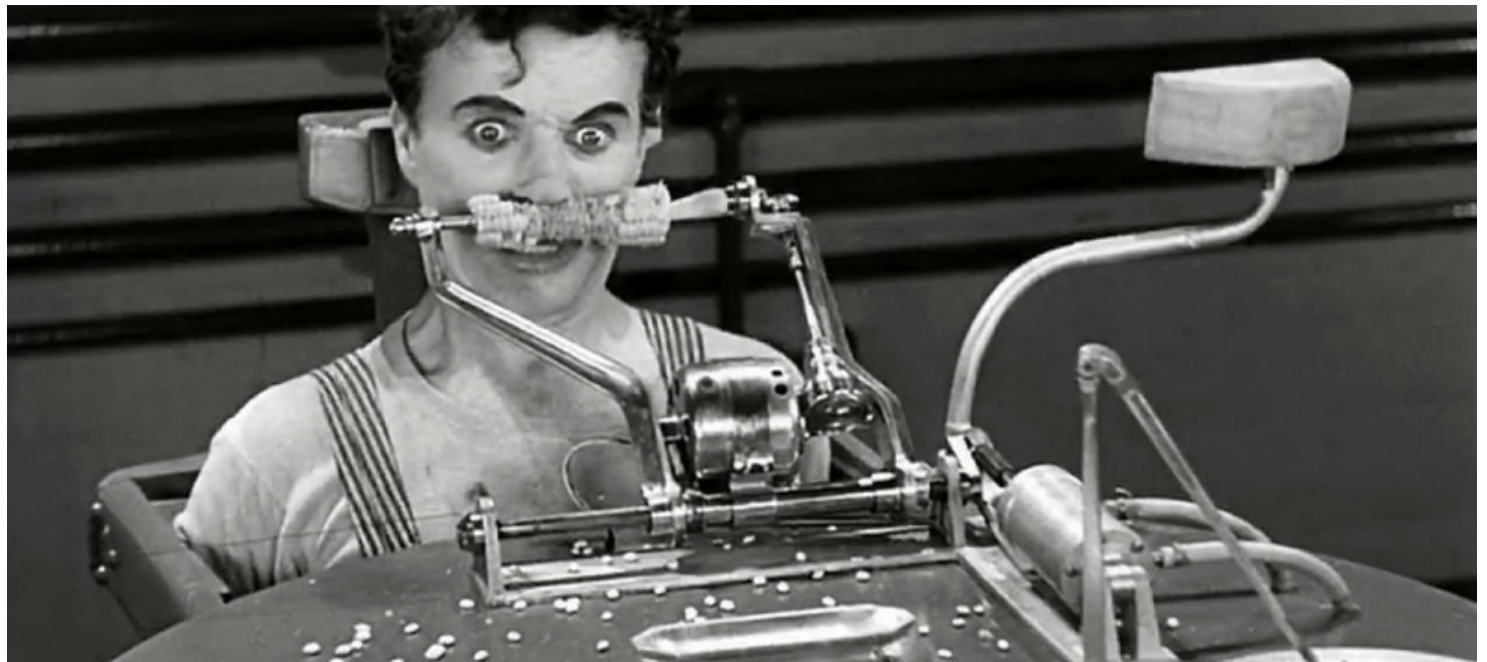# Giving Faculty the Freedom to Fail

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A few weeks ago, I had a good experience using a new educational-technology tool. I also had a bad experience using a new educational-technology tool. Actually, they were the same experience and the same tool.

Anybody who has spent any time experimenting with educational-technology knows exactly why that is not a contradiction in terms.

The tool in question was the online annotating program Hypothes.is. Most historians I've heard talk about Hypothes.is seem to use it only as a way for students to annotate primary sources, but I had my students use it as a means to critique each other's papers. First I asked students to post their research paper prospectus on a blog or on Scalar (another really interesting educational technology that I've been using). I set up a common Scalar page to serve as the class syllabus, and put links on it to all the students' papers. They each had five prospectuses to read and comment on over the course of a single class period.

The best thing about this approach was that we could meet remotely for class that day. We don't have the greatest Wi-Fi in the building where I teach so it was always unlikely that 15 history majors could get online at the same time in my classroom. Instead, everyone participate from wherever they found good Internet access. If they didn't have a laptop (always a possibility even in this wired age), they could use a campus computer to complete the assignment.

Another advantage: Online discussions can break out right on the Hypothes.is page, much like the comments section of a blog. Don't understand someone's critique? You can ask for an explanation, even after class has ended.

I also love the fact that the students who did leave comments tended to focus on the kinds of things that I usually have to correct over and over again — like passive voice or confusing "there" with "their." That meant I had more time to offer substantive comments that might improve the quality of a student's argument.

While I have been using peer review as a teaching tool for many years now, I had never employed that particular teaching strategy quite so efficiently before. Had I done this exercise with pencil and paper, the students would have been lucky to get through two or three prospectuses in 50 minutes, let alone five. And students wouldn't have been able to learn from their peers quite as easily since they wouldn't have had access to other students' papers afterward, the way they do when those papers are posted online.

Despite that success, there were still a large number of hiccups. For example, helping students to post their prospectuses onlinetook a lot of time out of class before the commentary session could begin. Even though I had explained how Hypothes.is works back at the beginning of the semester, a few students needed me to explain it again once the period had started because learning by doing is often the only way new technological tools make sense to people. I also had to spend a lot of time emailing students during the class period because many of them hadaccidentally changed the URLs for where they posted their papers between the time when I set up the list of links on the syllabus and when the class actually started. As a result of those problems, I needed another hour or two longer than the regular class period to get through everyone's prospectus.

Do the advantages of this particular tool outweigh all the problems I encountered?

Absolutely. More important, I now know how to explain the instructions better so that many of the problems will (I hope) disappear the next time we do this with their draft papers later in the semester, and in subsequent semesters when I require similar assignments.

Any professors who claim they introduced a new digital tool in the classroom without some kind of friction are probably lying. What makes me luckier than some other faculty members across higher education is that I've been given the freedom to fail. My recent department chairs, my dean, and especially the upper administration at my university have created an environment that not only tolerates but actively rewards pedagogical experimentation.

Like so many other universities, we have a Center for Teaching and Learning and it is populated by faculty just like me. (Actually, it's populated by me since I'm serving as a faculty fellow there this school year.) We do our best to introduce faculty to new resources while simultaneously respecting every professor's prerogatives and expertise.

To me, the greatest thing about the relatively new scholarship of teaching and learning in a digital setting is the willingness of so many faculty to share what works for them in the classroom. One technological solution does not fit all, and any administrators or IT staff who think it does risk negating the many positive effects of this kind of information exchange.

Faculty need the freedom to fail on their way toward pedagogical creativity. Otherwise we end up with dull courses that bore not just students, but all the people who are trying to teach them.

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