GETTING TO THE ROOT OF THE MATTER: TALKING THROUGH OUR FAILURES TO FOSTER INNOVATION

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BACKGROUND

Failure is important as the basis for the scientific method, and for educational activities at all levels. According to Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel (2014) in their book Make It Stick:

people who are taught that learning is a struggle that often involves making errors will go on to exhibit a greater propensity to tackle tough challenges and will tend to see mistakes not as failures but as lessons and turning points along the path to mastery. (p. 91)

But what about those of us who are teachers? Are we able to see teaching as a “work in progress”? As we explore “the path to mastery,” do we allow ourselves the space for struggle and for errors? Do we, in the moment, make honest attempts to learn from our mistakes? In her TED Talk, author Kathryn Schulz (2011) describes failure simply: “We think this one thing is going to happen, and something else happens instead.” However, this simple mistake can have bold consequences. Admittedly, the feeling of being wrong is uncomfortable, but being wrong is also the basis for growth and innovation. How, then, can we transform the embarrassed feelings of our instructional failures into innovation?

We planned this LOEX workshop as an opportunity to meet fellow instruction librarians and form a learning community to explore our teaching failures using a variety of active learning strategies. The idea grew out of a few recent interactions with colleagues at our institution, Hunter College - CUNY. Several semesters ago, we began asking our library instruction colleagues to submit one new thing they tried in their instruction during the semester, encouraging people to think about how they are teaching, not simply what they are teaching. Since the ideas were posted in a shared document, others benefitted from seeing colleagues’ classroom experiments. “One new thing” spurred discussions of what worked and what didn’t at our twice yearly Instruction Days, which are half-day, participant-led, in-house library instruction professional development workshops. We also learned, at a lunchtime seminar hosted by the Academic Center for Excellence in Research and Teaching (ACERT) at our institution, about the “Teaching Fails” column in the Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy, which sparked our interest in exploring our own experiences with failure in the classroom (https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/category/teaching-fails/). Subsequently, we developed and piloted a prototype workshop at a later ACERT lunchtime seminar. This interactive, participant-driven event included colleagues from all over the college who participated gamely in discussing their failures with each other and with us. We also got very comfortable with the notion that if the workshop failed, we would have that much more fodder for our work in the future.

WHAT HAPPENED?

We designed this workshop to be extremely interactive by utilizing individual reflection and writing, pairing with colleagues, and group discussion. At the start of the workshop, participants received a small workbook (Figure 1) in which they could take notes on recent failures and the lessons and innovations generated by them. We began with the following prompt: Think about a recent lesson or activity with an unexpected or unintended results (a “failure”), but where you want to keep the basic lesson.
Then write down what your original goal was, what didn’t work and why you think it didn’t work. Our group thought, wrote and worked quietly for about 5-7 minutes.

Figure 1: Front cover, middle pages, back cover of workshop workbook
Next, we presented the frame: literature in a variety of fields, from parenting to business, casts failure as important to our personal development and as the driver of innovation. Yet, in our work lives, there is very little space for us to consider or present our failures. Failures are hidden or glossed over in department reports, public presentations, and publications, where we report almost exclusively on our successes, “best practices” and what works. Rarely at conferences or in publications does one read about failures and how they are part of the learning process. We noted how frequently failure was mentioned in various LOEX presentations and workshops we attended prior to ours, yet so few explicitly stated this outright in the abstracts, or aligned themselves with the failure part of the “Failures & Innovations” track. If there is a connection between failure and innovation, as suggested by the conference theme, then why are we not more comfortable talking about failure in a professional setting? We used this frame to introduce the topic, but also immediately engaged participants in conversation and encouraged them to contribute to this large group discussion.

Throughout the workshop, we contextualized our exploration of participants’ failures with discussion of contemporary social science research about the benefits of failure and adopting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2014; Firestein, 2016). Thinking differently about failure can re-frame how we think about our work. As an example from our own experiences, we shared feelings of liberation that came from opening ourselves up to failure and discussing it with each other as well as colleagues at our institution. As we began thinking more deeply about failure, leading workshops and discussions on the topic, we became gentler with ourselves and others in our professional work. While we certainly aren’t seeking out failure, we are more comfortable with its inevitable appearance in our work, knowing that it would feed into our “failure work,” thus giving us additional freedom to innovate.

Reflecting on failure, particularly in a semi-structured way, can be an effective and inexpensive form of professional development. We learned this from our own home-grown discussions at our institution and from our conversations with each other. Our LOEX workshop was an attempt to bring that reflection to a broader community. However, when communities are not readily available there is ample reading to be done across various fields that encourages self-reflection on the topic of failure (e.g., Carr, 2013; Lahey, 2015; Stoller, 2013; Straehler-Pohl & Pais, 2014).

Recommended Readings
Teaching Fails column, Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy
https://jipt.commons.gc.cuny.edu/category/teaching-fails/
As a group, we talked about the steps to processing failure, and the need for an empathetic community, as well as some specific care-giving friends. Prompted to think about how we can make failure more explicit in our work, participants’ responses included:

- Taking an analytic approach to what went wrong.
- Using humor, and use your failure for scholarship.
- Considering the addition of opportunities for failure to lesson plans, so that our students understand how crucial failure is to the research process.

After our group discussion, participants chose partners who were sitting nearby and shared their failure stories with each other. Each partner had five minutes to tell their story. We asked them to consider their initial goal as they discussed the lesson with the unintended result, as stated in their response to our initial prompt.

After each person took a turn telling their story, their final interaction was a discussion of how they might make an incremental improvement, based on their respective failures. Some pairs had already begun thinking about next steps and improvements in their earlier discussions, so we cut the time short for the pairs’ discussion in favor of a full-group discussion so all participants could benefit from the collective wisdom. We had a fifteen minute discussion, documented in the next section.

In the final two minutes, before our session was completed, we asked each participant to jot down one “takeaway” in their workbook, and to share the takeaway on a private Padlet space (https://padlet.com/smmargolin/failure). While it appears that all participants did complete the takeaway, we received only one comment on the Padlet site, so we cannot confirm what participants’ takeaways were.

**WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?**

Participants volunteered what they had learned from the workshop for the final group discussion. The quote that best sets the stage is “It’s not just me,” which was echoed with relief by a number of people in the room. They appreciated the support of our improvised community. In order to encourage the readers of this article, too, to benefit from our community of practice, we’ve compiled a list of the themes discussed in the group share. Many of these themes are pervasive in the experiences of instruction librarians and in reading them, we hope that you will reflect upon your own failures in a more positive way and understand that it really isn’t just you—we’ve all been through something similar.

Working with students, we often feel a sense of failure when:

- Student expectations of a particular lesson are in conflict with our own. This is essentially a conflict between our ideas of what students should be learning versus what the students themselves think they need to learn. Particularly among those of us who strive to present student-centered lessons, this conflict can feel like a personal failing rather than something from which to learn, especially when standing in front of a classroom of disappointed students. Since we tend to only see them once or twice in a given semester, it’s a feeling of throwing away one’s shot that is hard to come to terms with.

- We expect students to “get it” (whatever “it” we’re teaching), because we prepared carefully. This is the experience of well-intentioned and often innovative lessons that fall flat with students. Sometimes, the lesson fails with all students; in other cases, it fails only with a particular section of students.

There are any number of ways that we feel failure in our interactions with faculty as well. Some examples include:

- Communication with faculty members. Similar to our work with students, we can be in conflict with classroom faculty about what “their” students need to know when they come into “our” classrooms. There can be many sources for this conflict, often working in concert. On the one hand, classroom faculty may not know what we can teach, or may not have a good sense of what their students do and do not know, vis-a-vis research.

- We can fail with classroom faculty as we navigate “ownership” of the classroom. Is the librarian completely in charge? Does the classroom faculty member attend the library sessions? Where is the comfortable middle ground?

- A related theme here is a classroom faculty member who is making decisions (choosing the meeting space, for example) that fly in the face of the lesson that the librarian is trying to teach. For instance, you want to teach a low-tech, interactive workshop with movement and the classroom faculty insists on meeting in a technology lab.

- It can be tricky to make innovations or pilot new ideas in someone else’s classroom (e.g., the space where librarians often
teach), particularly when you want to make sure that the classroom faculty member will call upon you to teach again in the future. How can one risk failure when in doing so one might lose the opportunity to work with that faculty member in the future?

- Failures that come with insufficient time to prepare, or inadequate information with which to prepare. Consider last minute requests, and cases where the students have not yet prepared the materials that you believe, or were led to believe, they have.

Other failings can be more universal, likely shared by all teachers. Examples here include:

- Slow-moving institutional culture, where a necessary solution will require culture change, and the change itself will take time. LOEX participants bemoaned the fact that this could be up to a decade, depending on the change.

- In other cases, the much-needed solution might be discouraging, such as giving up on a relationship with a particularly intransigent faculty member, or cutting down on the volume of face-to-face instruction to focus on the quality of one’s offerings.

- Frustration/fear that there is no safe space to admit failure within one’s institution, yet there is an expectation (either self-imposed or requiredinstitutionally) to conduct authentic self-assessment.

Finally, there are the personal failures, such as:

- For some of us, the moniker of “recovering perfectionist” resonates. It is difficult to reconcile our need to be perfect with our understanding of the importance of failure.

- Other times, ours is a failure of omission; a resistance to trying something new (even when innovation is needed). This could be due to lack of time, lack of interest, or many other factors.

Wherever possible, we try to make good or build something positive from our failings. However, one participant recalled bell hooks’ Teaching to Transgress (1994), reminding the group that sometimes the chemistry is just off between a teacher and their students. In those rare cases, the path to success (or at least acceptance) might be to give up on a particular class, or a particular lesson, on a particular day.

**Presentation Failures: Our Lessons Learned**

A workshop on failure would not be complete without us reflecting on some unexpected outcomes of our own work. First, while our participants were enthusiastic, participatory, and very willing to share, only twenty-one people attended our workshop. We were both surprised and disappointed by this low turnout. One might attribute this to a general reluctance to actively participate at conferences, a discomfort in discussing personal failure with strangers, or more interesting competing sessions at the same time. Despite “Innovations and Failures” being one of the tracks of LOEX 2017, it seems that there is a reluctance to talk about failure, particularly in an interactive workshop (as opposed to a more traditional presentation).

Our final activity, where we invited participants to share their “lesson learned” via Padlet, was also a failure. Participation was negligible. Again, in a conference setting, it’s difficult to determine if the failure is related to public sharing, or if it is just due to conference overload and a desire to get to the next session.

As we consider pursuing this failure-centric work in the future, we are taking to heart the lessons we are learning through these workshops and discussions. Through reflection and conversation, we provided the time and space to critically examine our work as instruction librarians while sharing with and receiving feedback from colleagues. In this supportive environment, participants engaged in reflection about their successes and failures, conferred and collaborated with each other, and together developed proactive strategies for reframing these failures and transforming them into fruitful learning experiences for themselves and their students. We learned a lot from our colleagues, and we hope that they, in turn, learned a lot from each other. We hope to see more candid discussions of failure in future.

**References**


