

Failing Forward

Dan Moore

Oregon State University

Elizabeth Price

James Madison University

Abstract: Libraries and the tenure process are hard to navigate and even harder to change. Early career academic librarians often are encouraged to play it safe in our teaching, scholarship, and service while on the tenure track. But curiosity is the driving engine of innovation and of providing new and exciting services to your users. Curiosity frequently demands taking risks, and failure is a natural byproduct of risks. Hopelessness stemming from professional failures -- or even the fear of possible failure -- can be demoralizing during our probationary periods and negatively impact our users and ourselves. Librarians need to learn how to fail forward in order to engage in creative risk-taking and become more comfortable sharing failures with others to expand our professional opportunities. In this column, the authors discuss realities of failure in the academic library setting and offer solutions for coping with the fear of failure.

Keywords: *Failure (psychology), academic librarians, failing forward, tenure systems*



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Introduction

Fortune favors the bold, the aphorism goes. This high-risk, high-reward take on life is attractive and, for many of us acculturated in a capitalist system, a guiding philosophy by which we navigate life. How many of us took a risk on that job across the country, said goodbye to friends and family, and set off on a wonderful professional opportunity? How many others went all-in on that project, investing significant chunks of time and money, knowing that the rewards would be more valuable than the work that went into it? What about those of us who chanced department funding on a pilot that would revolutionize digital publishing or information literacy instruction? How painful it must have been to discover that all the good intentions, all the background research, and all the willpower amounted to ... null data, discouraged students, and senior faculty tutting at your audacity. How prepared were you for that failure?

Failure on the tenure track

In personal and professional life we face failure almost daily. Indeed, as tenure-track faculty, we are consistently reminded that professional failure might be imminent, i.e., tenure isn't guaranteed. Real life is rarely that kind. In personal and professional life we face failure almost daily. Indeed, as tenure-track faculty, we are consistently reminded that professional failure might be imminent, i.e., tenure isn't guaranteed. The specter of that potential failure becomes a chilling companion during our early careers. We *know* we are required to do a certain degree of teaching and publishing and service that will, at the end of five short years, presumably earn us the rank of associate professor. Instead of developing new initiatives or exploring a curriculum overhaul during those years, how often do we pull back and think, "Will this support my end-goal of tenure?" Worse still, any subject of study, any teaching opportunity, any *action* suddenly becomes priceless, as we must build the dossier that will impress our colleagues enough to grant us admission into their club. Afraid of the failures that could materialize from those risks, we pull back from the chance to experiment, we toe the line when it

comes to teaching, and we do the kinds of studies we know will guarantee the right kind of data to publish in the right peer-reviewed journal.

That fear isolates us. That fear dulls our skills and tells us, “Why bother?” L.L. Stamler (1997) coined the phrase “professional failure to thrive,” describing a hopelessness in the workplace that leads inevitably to poor mental health and occupational burnout. Universities have begun to recognize that their students -- if not their junior faculty -- are at risk of being derailed by their inability to cope with failure. Smith College has a university-wide program entitled “Failing Well” that teaches resiliency in the face of failure (Bennett, 2017). Harvard University is experimenting with teaching methods that call out students’ personal failures in order to learn - and ultimately desensitize students to failure (Shaughnessy & Perez, 2017). As early career academic librarians, how can we adapt this curriculum for ourselves? While we can’t totally control the factors that lead to failure - underdeveloped skillsets, poor funding, environmental factors, organizational structure, implicit bias in others, plain rotten timing - we can *and should* try to control how we react to it.

Addressing failure

The authors met while attending a roundtable session at ACRL 2017 on the topic of failure. The group was small - only six - but we all shared stories of failure and, most importantly, how we accepted and learned from those failures. And for many of us in the academic community, honestly addressing failure, learning from it, and making peace with its emotional impact is critical.

The first step is recognizing that failure takes many shapes and can be interpreted through many lenses. Edmondson (2011) categorizes three kinds of failure that occur in the workplace:

Preventable failures in predictable operations: These occur due to deviance from a normal process, inattention, or a lack of ability. Examples in libraries might include being

unaware of a new database that would resolve a reference question, broken links on the website, or errantly deleting interlibrary loan requests. The causes are often simple to identify and solutions are developed through additional training or new workflows.

Unavoidable failures in complex systems: These types of failures are both unpredictable and inevitable. They often stem from “a particular combination of needs, people and problems that haven’t occurred before,” such as a classroom technology failure due to a recent software upgrade, improperly processed special collections that prohibit patrons from utilizing them, or deep changes to an ILS that are hard to track and even harder to predict the effects of.

Intelligent failure at the frontier: These are failures that produce new knowledge that the individual or organization can use to improve existing products or develop additional services. For example, a trial of a learning management system that ultimately is not implemented is an intelligent failure because it informs the requirements necessary in a later, successful RFP. Likewise, the fallout from accidentally circumventing the university’s Office of Sponsored Programs to provide faculty with access to a grant-funder database can reveal an existing service gap and, when handled diplomatically, engender new cross-campus collaborations.

Once we are able to categorize our failures, we can move on to the second, perhaps more critical step: accepting that fear of engaging with failure is just as damaging, if not more so, than trying your best and falling short. Failure is a powerful tool for learning. Boston and Zhao (2017) offer two methods to engage failure as a learning opportunity: failing smart - to learn everything you can from that failure - and failing forward - to apply what you’ve learned to the next steps. This requires us to commit to the unpleasant task of analyzing each failure in-depth -- without allowing our self-esteem to suffer. Of course, agency of failure should be the first thing to question: a failure caused by institutional breakdown is not our personal failure. For breakdowns within our purview, our tendency might be to track failures and successes as whole

numbers in separate ledger columns. Instead of this approach, Birkinshaw and Haas (2016) recommend measuring the “return on failure” ratio. The denominator is your resource investment: direct costs like materials or labor as well as less tangible repercussions affecting organizational reputation or staff morale. The numerator represents what you gain from the experience: information you gather about users, yourself and your staff, and your library operations. Harvard Business School Publishing (2016) has a Project Review Worksheet that guides this reflection.

As a final step, our profession needs more opportunities to talk about failure constructively. The ACRL discussion where the authors met helped us mitigate those feelings of professional hopelessness that can arise as we tread -- perhaps too cautiously -- along the tenure track. New librarian Dylan Burns, reflecting on his first time at ACRL, promoted the idea of incorporating “failed projects” into our conferences. Both LOEX and The Collective have offered sessions devoted to failure confessions that assist both presenters and attendees with failing forward. As Burns lamented, “If you’re a new person, it is often the failed projects or the work-in-progress projects [that] are all that you have to contribute.” Many of us on the tenure track can echo that struggle to launch our scholarly agenda. By not creating more spaces to talk about failures, are we suppressing the voices of early career colleagues? Does this omission uphold the status quo in our field?

Our professional literature is more unwelcoming than our conferences when it comes to failure. Searching for articles with the subject "Failure (Psychology)" in the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database yielded only 65 results as of August 2017. We suggest several options for bridging this gap:

- More blog posts and social media conversations about failed projects. Burns’ column on ACRLog is one example. Another is Society of American Archivists’ Electronic Records Section is initiating these discussions on its bloggERS community with its #digitalarchivesfail series.

- Special issues of our journals and magazines devoted to discussing failure, such as *Public Libraries'* January/February 2017 issue.
- Recurring edited columns in our trade or scholarly journals that examine failures. We need ongoing engagement and reflection on this topic.
- Monographs targeted at our profession that examine failure through multiple lenses, similar to *Understanding and Coping with Failure: A Psychoanalytic Perspective* edited by Brent Willock, Rebecca Coleman Curtis and Lori C. Bohm. Another monographic proposal is a collection of case studies inspired by failures – large and small – that could be utilized as staff development resources for those already in the field or as curriculum exercises for those pursuing LIS degrees.
- Research studies about the effectiveness of interventions designed to create more tolerance for failure in library organizations and among librarians. While this conversation needs to occur across the spectrum, we particularly challenge management-focused publications such as *Journal of Library Administration* or *in Library Leadership & Management* to create these opportunities. Administrators often set the tone for how an organization responds to failures. As individuals, our responses to failure are constrained by the cultures that surround us.
- Embracing the use of the new service LIS Scholarship Archive (LISSA), an open scholarly platform for library and information science to exchange research papers prior to undergoing peer review. By sharing preprints more readily, as other disciplines do, we could improve feedback and future directions of projects that might otherwise be viewed -- preliminarily -- as failures.

Conclusion

The fear of failure is a powerful motivator, particularly when it comes to our careers. It encourages us to walk the safe path. That sense of security, of feeling like you will never fail

again, offers a comfort that is truly attractive. However, recoiling from that fear stifles innovation and new knowledge in libraries - particularly when untenured faculty feel discouraged to gamble on projects that open them to blame if the initiative fails. Librarians must be receptive to confronting preventable and unavoidable errors. And we must be bold in cultivating intelligent failures. For us to thrive, as individuals, organizations, and as a profession, we must show empathy and forgiveness toward anyone willing to risk something new or different. Especially ourselves.

References

- Bennett, J. (2017, June 24). On campus, failure is on the syllabus. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/fashion/fear-of-failure.html>
- Birkinshaw, J., & Haas, M. (2016). Increase your return on failure. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2016/05/increase-your-return-on-failure>
- bloggERS Editors. (2017, January 10). Call for contributors – #digitalarchivesfail: A celebration of failure. Retrieved from <https://saaers.wordpress.com/2017/01/10/call-for-contributors-digitalarchivesfail-a-celebration-of-failure/>
- Boston, P. & Zhao, B. (2017). Failing to innovate. *Ivey Business Journal*. Retrieved from <http://iveybusinessjournal.com/failing-to-innovate/>
- Burns, D. (2017, June 15). Failure is an option or when things go wrong. *ACRLog*. Retrieved from <http://acrlog.org/2017/06/15/failure-is-an-option-or-when-things-go-wrong/>
- Edmondson, A. (2011). Strategies for learning from failure. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2011/04/strategies-for-learning-from-failure>
- Harvard Business School Publishing. (2016). The project review worksheet. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/resources/pdfs/hbr-articles/2016/04/Worksheet-Project-Review.pdf>

Shaughnessy, S. & Perez, E. (2017, April 5). Getting the word out on learning from experience — and failure. *The Harvard Gazette*. Retrieved from

<http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/teaching-and-learning/>

Stamler, L. L. (1997). Professional failure to thrive: A concern for members of the helping professions. *Guidance & Counseling* 12(4), 27.

Willick, B., Curtis, R.C., & Bohm, L.C. (eds.) (2014). *Understanding and coping with failure: Psychoanalytic perspectives*. London: Routledge.