Stories of
Hope

Reimagining
Education

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14. The other F word: Re-storying student failure in Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract

Academic failure is a complex yet common experience, often framed in research through models of prediction and prevention. However, these approaches frequently overlook the lived realities and voices of students themselves. This chapter offers a personal essay that foregrounds the student perspective, drawing on the author's experiences as both a learner and a Learning Specialist. Integrating insights from the author's doctoral research, the chapter reflects on the emotional, social, and academic dimensions of failure. It argues that while failure is often difficult to talk about, it holds critical value for understanding learning, resilience, and growth. By bringing personal narrative into dialogue with academic inquiry, the chapter invites a more compassionate and human-centred approach to addressing failure in Higher Education.

Keywords: failure; academic failure; conversation; community; personal essay

Introduction

This is a personal essay, and I chose to write in this style for several reasons. First, according to a foundational theory in learning (Bandura, 1986), humans learn through observing others and through shared experiences; it is my hope that you can learn from my experiences. Second, it is through our experiences and our informal theorising about these experiences that we begin to develop and formalise theory (Love, 2012). The application of theory in practice is important, and the role of informal theory is often overlooked (Love, 2012). As a scholar-practitioner, I am sharing this story to encourage you to reflect on your own experiences in your practices and to develop your own informal theories of life, learning, and failure. I am also a Social Worker by education and trade and maintain my status as a Registered Social Worker in Ontario, Canada. Though I don't practice social work directly in my job as a Learning Specialist, I engage in continuous professional learning related to therapeutic practices that lend a particular lens to my work. Finally, I write this for the students who don't always see themselves represented in research, those who have failed and those who have yet to fail.

An opening

Let's begin with a brief imagination activity. Take a few moments and imagine the following scenario:

> You're finishing off your semester at a local university. You really liked most of your courses, but there was one that sticks in your mind. You tried really hard during the class, but the content didn't seem to stay. You didn't really understand the material, but you didn't know what questions to ask your Teaching Assistants, let alone your Prof! You passed your tests, but just barely, and you are really worried about your final grade in the course. You tried to answer most of the questions on your final exam, but there were a few you didn't know. Ok, maybe more than a few. You really don't know if you passed the course—it could go either way.
>
> Fast forward a few days, your marks are starting to show up on your online account. You did pretty well in the courses you liked, but there it is...the failing grade. The failure on your transcript that has become real, now that you see it in writing...

I'm drawn to failure, perhaps because of the winding route that I took as a student, and the one I continue to take in my career in academia. The goal here is to open up a conversation about failure through sharing my experiences as a student and a Learning Specialist—and sharing the stories that have been gifted to me from students I've had the pleasure of working with. I hope to leave you, the reader, feeling empowered to share your own failures in whatever way feels right for you. I hope to encourage you to be the one to open up conversations about failure in your lives.

My journey

I started my journey with failure at the same place that most students do: undergrad. Admittedly, I was that high-achieving high school graduate, who didn't work hard to get good grades, never really got a bad grade,[1] and continued believing that I could do well with little to no effort. Then, I experienced my first failure in a calculus course during my second year of university. I earned a passing grade on the first midterm (60%), but I didn't care about the content and didn't attend many classes. On the final exam, I knew maybe 10 of the 40 questions, guessed the rest, and knew I was going to fail. I was not surprised to receive a failing grade of 0.[2] That resides on my transcript. As you are reading this, you might be seeing your own experiences reflected in mine, or perhaps those of your friends, your family members, or your children.

In my current job. I am incredibly lucky to work as a Learning Specialist at the university where I did my Master's degree, and I am currently doing my PhD. My main role is supporting students in their academic struggles, so, largely meeting one-to-one with students, from first years through to PhDs, providing guidance in time management, test-taking, studying, posters, and presentations. I have been in this role for over eight years, and I have met with students from many different disciplines (naturals sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities,

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1   Except for my English courses, because I really didn't care about those.
2   I went to a university that had a 0–12 grading system, so anything under a 50% appears as a 0! This makes for a great laugh when I share this grade with students in workshops, only later telling them this was me, and they say "how did this person submit literally nothing in the entire course?!"

business, and others) and from many different areas of the world. I've met with students of many ages, from those straight out of high school to those working on a second career.

Failure comes up more often than I'd ever have expected. I've had students share their stories of failing a course when we were talking about presentation skills. I've had students ask if it's ok that they share that they've failed a course and talk about what happened so that we can help them get back on track. I've had students tell me how afraid of failing they are, and how much distress it is causing them. I've had students tell me that they haven't told anyone about their failures before me, because they didn't know who they could tell. After many years of hearing these stories, I knew that something in the way we approached Higher Education needed to change and that these stories of failure needed to be shared.

Current steps

I started my PhD in 2019. The idea started as a joke when I approached my current advisor and said, "I should be Dr. Failure because I fail so much at things" and she said "actually, given what you have told me about your experiences working with students, you should go to the literature to see if it is worth studying". After a year of coursework, my Qualifying Exams, and slogging through a proposal, I landed on a narrative inquiry of students' experiences of academic failure. I interviewed twelve unique students, all of whom failed at least one course in their undergraduate studies. I am currently working through my analysis—and beginning to make sense of my data. The quotes I share in this manuscript are from my wonderful interviewees, who shared their failure stories with me.

Much of the literature on academic failure focuses on the prediction and prevention of failure; further, the research is often done from an institutional perspective, trying to determine how we can stop students from failing before it even happens. Though this might be helpful information, as someone who works directly in supporting students, I was shocked by the limited amount of research on what students were actually experiencing. The studies from the student perspective that I was able to find (for example see Ajjawi et al., 2019; 2020; 2021—some lovely articles about students' experiences with persistence through

failure) inspired me to explore the topic of failure in the same way; to raise students' voices and share their experiences, knowing that failure was a common experience.

On several occasions during my interviews, students exclaimed that they were "so happy that someone was researching failure because it was so important"[3] and so common. Throughout my interviews, I was shocked at how open students were in sharing their stories with me, providing more detail than I ever could have hoped for[4] including the good, bad, and neutral parts of their failure experiences. Yet, I feel it essential to address the stigma that remains in talking about failure, as echoed by one of my participants: "It's not something that I want to share with a lot of people and I didn't..."

The importance of failure

It might first be helpful to explore why students in general might be hesitant to publicly talk about failure before I suggest some ways in which we can begin to open the conversation. I encourage you to spend a moment thinking about the ways that failure was discussed for you in your own life: was it something to be shared widely, or was it something that, like most of us, was hidden away and experienced individually?

Failure is often positioned as the opposite of success (Cincinnato et al., 2020; Dante, Petrucci, et al., 2013; Forsyth et al., 2008; Najimi et al., 2013) and in a competitive realm such as academia, where students are fighting for scholarships, research positions, and other opportunities, it makes sense that they wouldn't want to share anything that could make them seem like less of a success. Students often hold some belief about what a good student is and does, something I have encountered in my work with students and that is echoed in focus groups with students and faculty in a paper by Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren (2004); being a failure doesn't fit with being an ideal student.

Failure is also emotional and evokes a feeling of vulnerability,[5]

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3   I am amalgamating multiple students' opinions here for brevity.
4   And leaving me with what I feel like is infinite data to work through...
5   If Brené Brown's success in exploring shame and vulnerability in a mainstream way has taught us anything, it's that we need some support in being vulnerable and sharing our shame!

which can also be a difficult feeling to grapple with and not one that
we want to share broadly. It is shameful to fail and thus something
we should avoid. Yet, despite this negativity, the consensus around the
need to talk about failure re-emerged when I asked interviewees "what
institutions can do to help support students through failure" because
failure is not always a negative event and can in fact be an event that
students can derive meaning from (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018; Rong
et al., 2020):

> It's just like, yeah, nice to like know that like there's other people that you
> can like, share your experience with … So like having other students to
> talk about and like that are willing to share their experience too. It's just
> nice that like, it's just like comfort knowing you're not alone and there's
> other people like there with you that have been through that.

What can be done

As educators we can open these conversations around failure:

> …things like resources like that but I think also like opening up an
> environment where they maybe not preach failure but they make it umm
> that it's ok if students are struggling. I feel like there's a lot of like "talking
> the talk" but no "walking the walk" if that makes sense.

Naturally, humans are social creatures and we compare ourselves to
others. Hearing that other people have gone through similar experiences
makes us feel like less of a "failure" ourselves:

> It's like I wanna say like validating but… like it's not something that you
> have to hide and like be embarrassed of like ohh I failed this course like
> I'm dumb like I'm stupid.

Not only does sharing these stories help students to understand
their experiences as being valid and normal, but they may also learn
strategies to deal with their experience. I believe that this effect is
particularly powerful when those of us in positions of power share our
own experiences of failure to help our students feel less alone. Indeed,
this occurred during one of my interviews when the student and I were
talking about what would be helpful for students in navigating their
failures:

> Every professor and grad student I admire like went through like not a route that's conventional, like even you mentioned that you've had experience with failure and you're like, doing your PhD now. So it gives me hope.

For the past several years, I have been offering workshops to students on how to manage their experiences with academic failure. Importantly, I share my own failure experiences, again relying heavily on Bandura's position that we learn from others and others' experiences; and I encourage students to share theirs. After a few awkward moments of silence, one brave student always volunteers. And then another, and another. Making a safe space for students to share their failure stories is difficult, but I have found it effective to encourage the sharing of failure.

Potential strategies

I will now share some strategies that have been of benefit to me to open conversations around failure. First, sharing my own experiences has been a helpful starting point, so I encourage you to do so, if you feel comfortable. The second strategy is explicitly reminding students that you are not judging their experiences. Third, allowing students to share a range of experiences has also been useful, for example by letting students know that they can share a small failure such as tripping while they were walking to class, or a big one such as not getting a scholarship. I will sometimes follow up on a student's disclosure and ask if there are others in the audience who have had that same failure, to further normalise the experience and show how common it actually is. Not surprisingly, verbally validating students' experiences and emotions (for example by reiterating how difficult the situation must have been for them) makes a big difference as does thanking the students for contributing. Whether you plan to engage a large group in discussing failure, or start with a one-to-one chat, I hope that these strategies can be helpful in opening the conversation.

Conclusion: A hopeful failure

Through my work with failure, I have had glimpses of what academia could be: not a place where students are afraid to fail and even more afraid to talk about it, but a place where students can experience failure and be happy to share their stories with others. A place where students can make mistakes and grow to be their whole selves, learning that failure is ok, and experiencing every day with a sense of hope. Higher Education is more than learning about courses and content. Higher Education is about learning who we are as people, and it is all of us who can help make this happen for our students. With this final quote, I hope that you will feel inspired to open the conversation around failure, to be left curious about failure and how it might not always be a bad thing, to be reminded of the growth that can happen for our students beyond the classroom, and to remain open to the possibilities of what university could be:

> …there's no certain way to define failure. It's so relative, that's different for all of us. What failure is and failure means, that became my takeaway going to university.

Steps toward hope

- Demystify academic failure and its role in successful learning.
- Open dialogue about academic failure to highlight its commonality and usefulness.
- Incorporate the student perspective into the debate on academic failure.
- Use personal experiences and professional insights to foster curiosity, reflection, and growth.

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