Failure Freedom©

A guide to supporting researchers through developing a failure freedom culture

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University of Salford MANCHESTER | DOCTORAL SCHOOL

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Welcome & introduction

A word about failure…..

As we work towards better mental health across the researcher community, failure freedom – the ability to feel comfortable with failure – is a critical element to supporting and enabling resilience and positive mental wellness.

Fear of failure is embedded in the life experience of many people. Carolyn Jackson (2003) argues that a fear of failure can lead directly to poor behaviour and disengagement by young men in schools. In "Creative" practices however, failure is a necessary part of the creative process. It is embraced and explored rather than avoided (see Naray-Davey & Hurley, 2014). A "fail fast" approach is also typical among entrepreneurs, particularly in the US (Babineaux and Krumboltz 2013, Hall 2007). Here the mantra helps identify which products or services are likely to succeed in the long term and avoids wasting time.

'Failure Friday – Helping Postgraduate Researchers to recognise, it's OK to fail!'

The Failure Friday Campaign is about forming, framing and fulfilling the needs of the researcher community. It provides a platform to openly discuss failure rather than to hide it. In the Higher Education Sector and within Research in particular, failure is often hidden (see the current debates around replicability in scientific research). We rarely hear about the research that didn't work, the fails and lessons learnt do not emerge but knowing this information and talking about it openly could be a real game changer! Not only would it save the research community from repeating mistakes, wasting time, money and resource but an openness about failure could support better mental health within the researcher community. Openly failing and talking about failure and the lessons learnt is not only an inherent part of research but helps to remove the pressures of perfectionism and anxiety around performance.

'Failure Friday' is a University and Community-wide campaign developed by The University of Salford as a co-created intervention to support researchers' mental wellness. The emphasis of the campaign is to create an open environment where researchers feel able and confident to discuss all aspects of mental health, pressures of the doctorate or research environment and get involved in dialogue connecting with others. Various 'Beta' models of the support campaign have been developed such as PGR wellbeing workshops, 're-gain your lunch hour' and online resources such as the 'Healthy Mind Platter': https://youtu.be/GK2AxrSgQK8. Building on the success of these models, a larger community-based initiative has been developed to involve the broader academic and student community, local communities and groups in Salford and other partners as an agency for change. Involving the wider university community and local city community is important in breaking down barriers to access to support and to recognise that mental wellness goes beyond just the academic aspect of university life. The consultation work undertaken involved listening to and working with our PGR community, the wider University community and local Salford City community through Salford City Council, 3rd and 4th sector partners including voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. 'Failure Friday' provides a fun, creative and open space (either physical or virtual) to explore self-care approaches, active failing, discuss failure and be open to failing as part of a self-help approach and strategic pathway to success.

What's your Fail?

Openly failing begins with you! If we all talked about our failures, we would be collectively encouraging an open dialogue about resilience. Failure also begins at the top; the University of Salford Vice Chancellor, Prof Helen Marshall, openly talks about Failure and frames the word 'Fail' as an acronym that stands for 'First Attempt In Learning'. This is a powerful and positive message that 'gives permission' to fail and the empowering part of this message is that failure is part of a process. This is just one of the themes and benefits of failure explored in this booklet and through the Failure Freedom Movement.

A note on these resources: our Failure Freedom materials have been developed over a number of workshops and presentations at various conferences. They are still a work in progress, but we want to share what we have so far with others in our sector. For this reason, we've licensed the materials under a Creative Commons "share-alike" license - feel free to use our materials in your own setting, but please attribute us, and do of course let us know what you're doing – we'd love to hear from you. We are currently developing some "fail live" workshops. If you'd like to get involved, please get in touch.

We hope that you find the resources in this booklet useful and would like to wish you every success in failing in the future and your onward failure freedom journey!

Best wishes,

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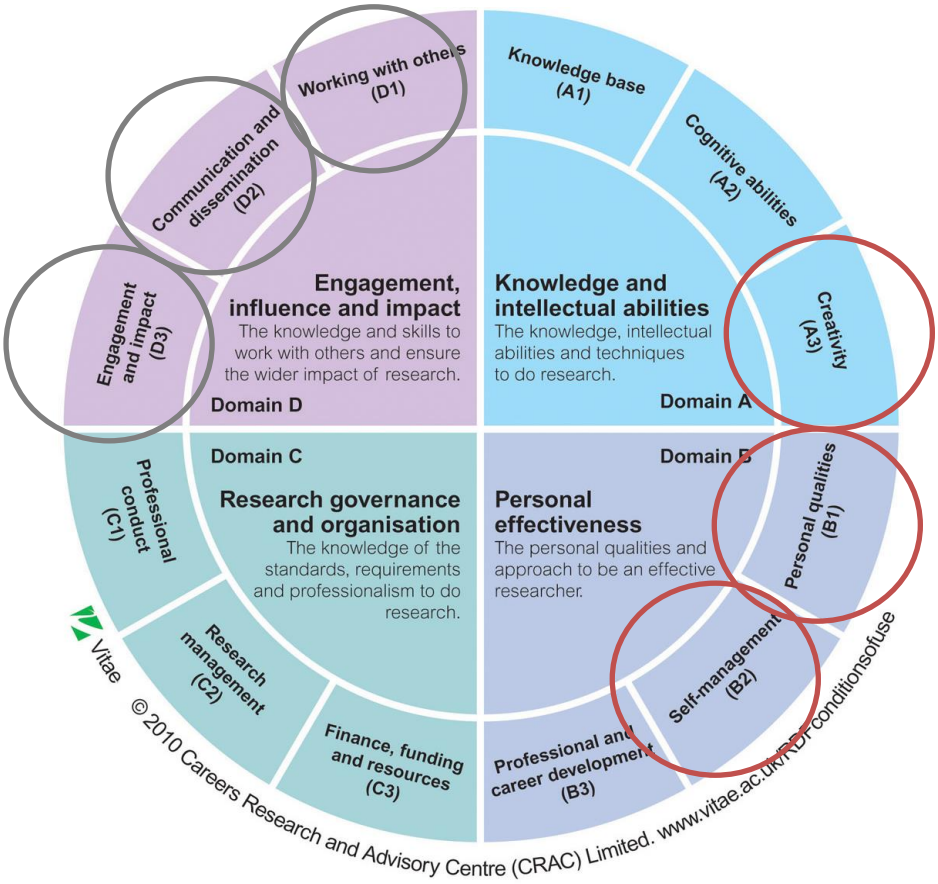
Over to you! Consider your last fail or most memorable fail. What happened, how did you feel and how did this turn into success or something more positive in the end?

Researcher resources

This resource is designed to help support researcher developers and those with pastoral responsibilities to help early career researchers build resilience, creativity and to support their development. We have mapped the areas covered in this booklet to the Researcher Development Framework (RDF), which sets out the knowledge, behaviours and skills of successful researchers.

The red highlighted areas identify the primary areas addressed in this resource and the grey highlighted areas identify the secondary areas addressed.



Fail Better theories

Embedding a culture of “failing better" encourages activities that foster habits and behaviours designed to embed and nurture the researcher’s desire to learn from the “creative mess” of the research process. This will eventually lead the researcher to motivate themselves to excel and self-evaluate. We are talking about perseverance and teaching the researcher that not giving up when it is “messy” and difficult is essential. The resilient researcher has the confidence to experiment, to fail and to try again.

We propose that engaging with failure as a positive process:

1. encourages deep learning
2. offers tools for research students to learn safely how to consciously manage and successfully reproduce processes leading to creative products
3. reflect the process-led nature of research
4. accommodate the 'unfinished' nature of the discovery environment
5. mirrors real world experience where dialogue with the funder or industry partner is required

Here we have collated some academic material which offers some conceptual framings of failure (there are many more!). We hope that engaging with research on failure as a process shows how closely connected failing is to research in practice. The research process can generate a wide range of experiences and emotions, including the unexpected, mysterious, organic, exploratory, frustrating and difficult. Do we share these narratives frequently or honestly enough?

After all, mkaing mtsiakes cna be a pwoerful tolo for maknig dicosveries adn ganiing incites tht maye ohterwsie hvae reminaed hidedn.

Some sources and references to help frame the discussion:

“Trial and error should be part of an organic and experiential learning process.” (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014)

“Criteria that focus on what is known, which do not recognize the process of learning and how people come to know, or recognize emergent unanticipated outcomes, inhibit creativity.” (Jackson 2005: 7)

“Educational paradigms will tend to encourage and reinforce replication and formulation rather than innovation and origination.” (Kleiman 2005: 14)

“There needs to be a cultural shift which acknowledges and tackles self-perceptions of failure. We approach the issue of lack of confidence and self-belief by directly addressing anxieties about failure. The impact of these perceptions of failure cuts across communities and affects how people make sense of the world around them. Anthropologist Gillian Evans (2007) observes that such disadvantage is perpetuated through ideas about failure that are built in to how people engage with each other. She argues that the educational system is structured to reinforce failure.” (Symons and Hurley, 2018)

“Traditional academic structures do not value mistakes and do not allow time for trial and error as they find it difficult to accommodate this unpredictable process.” (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014)

“Error is the permanent contingency [alea] around which the history of life and the development of human beings are coiled.” (Foucault 1998, 477)

“In the creative industries, failure is a necessary part of the creative process. It is embraced and explored rather than avoided.” (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014)

“A ‘fail fast’ approach is also typical among entrepreneurs, particularly in the US (Babineaux and Krumboltz 2013; Hall 2007). Here the mantra helps identify which products or services are likely to succeed in the long term and avoids wasting time.” (Symons and Hurley, 2018)

"[personal creativity is a] process of becoming sensitive to or aware of problems, deficiencies, and gaps in knowledge for which there is no learned solution; bringing together existing information from the memory storage or external; defining the difficulty or identifying the missing elements; searching for solutions, making guesses, producing alternatives to solve the problem…" (Torrance and Rockenstein in Kleiman 2005: 3)

O'Donovan, Price and Rust talk about a "shared understanding of standards" (2008: 210) in academic endeavour. This shared understanding of standards could be seen as a very useful way of introducing research students not only to our expectations of them but also a common approach and vocabulary which, once established, can provide the key to successful engagement with assessments and evaluations at more advanced stages of the research programme.

"The discovery of a resilient self via positive engagement with failure leads to the acquisition of wider life and transferable skills such as self-understanding and confidence. Other important life skills that this approach would help the researcher to acquire are the ability to be resourceful, the ability to cope with stress and the ability to be persistent despite setbacks, as well as the skills to build relationships." (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2013)

"Perceptions of risk and failure are re-positioned as part of a playful process in which we can 'mess about' without consequence. As Jackson (2003, 7) puts it, to 'recognize emergent unanticipated outcomes' with calm curiosity rather than dismay at a plan going awry." (Symons and Hurley 2018)

Our "fail better" manifesto:

- To situate failure within the academic research environment
- To address the fear of failing
- To tolerate mess and to see it as productive
- To support the acquisition of processes that will support life-long learning
- To understand that the process of failing is a productive outcome in its own right

References

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Naray-Davey, S., and U. Hurley. 2014. "Fail Again, Fail Better: The Case for Formative Assessment in First-Year Undergraduate Creative Practice-Based Modules." *The International Journal of the Arts in Education* 8(3): 1–13. Pre-print version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/29197/

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Symons J. and U. Hurley (2018) "Strategies for connecting low income communities to the creative economy through play: two case studies in Northern England." *Creative Industries Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/17510694.2018.1453770

A case for failure

The politics of failure

Western industrialized nations generally reproduce paradigms of educational and employment histories which teach citizens that failure is something to be avoided. Failing an exam or a test can have disastrous consequences for future success. It affects people's ability to get into their preferred school, university or career. Fear of failure is embedded in the life experience of many people.

In their psychological study of university students and their parents, Elliot and Thrash argue that "by transferring fear of failure to their children, parents saddle their children with a dispositional burden that they must carry with them into each new achievement situation and that affects the goals they choose to pursue" (Elliot and Thrash 2004, 968). By the time students become postgraduate researchers, they have spent years in an educational paradigm which requires "success" at every stage. It is very difficult to unlearn the fear of failing once we enter the discovery environment. These issues may also relate to widening participation in PGR qualifications, leading potentially strong candidates to deselect themselves from progressing because of this "dispositional burden".

On thinking of yourself as creative (this possibly also translates to thinking of yourself as a capable PhD researcher)

A body of psychological research supports "the generally accepted belief that self-confidence and creativity are positively related" (Goldsmith and Matherly 1988, 57). The core traits identified by psychologists as being associated with creativity are "independence, self-confidence and a view of oneself as creative" (Goldsmith and Matherly 1988, 47). The characteristics of the creative person are described by Stein as "self-assertive, dominant, aggressive, self-sufficient ... [he or she] leads or possesses initiative" (cited by Goldsmith and Matherly 1988, 48). Such qualities are likely to be less common in people experiencing marginalization, and/or disabling circumstances. As a route to fostering the development of creative individuals, our pilot projects have found that people can be equipped with techniques which "give permission" to be creative and see themselves as cultural producers by supporting them to overcome anxieties about creative production. This approach however, requires reimagining creativity as something accessible to all rather than innate to particular individuals: "any activity can be done in novel ways with creative intentions" (Silvia et al. 2014, 187). Activities which were framed as "Creative" with a capital "C" were counterproductive, with the weight of expectation deterring people from engaging for fear of failure.

Reconceptualizing creativity can help encourage people outside so-called "Creative" identities (such as owning "talent" or naming oneself as an "artist") to consider themselves as having creative potential. Symons argues for perceiving creativity as "an adaptive and productive process working towards a tangible goal" (Symons 2016, 3). In an earlier piece of research that we conducted with our colleague, drama practitioner Dr Szilvia Naray-Davey, we framed creativity as a procedure that individuals can learn to "consciously manage and successfully reproduce" (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014, 4). If people see themselves as creative in their day-to-day lives, then they are more likely to imagine themselves as having the potential to produce creative work. There is a considerable body of research emphasizing everyday creativity (see for example Richards 2007, Su 2009, Barron 1969, Ingold and Hallam 2007, Leach 2002). They focus on everyday activity as creative – "with our everyday creativity, we adapt flexibly, we improvise, and we try different options, whether we are raising our child, counselling a friend, fixing our home, or planning a fundraising event" (Richards 2007, 26). Developed mainly by psychologists and anthropologists, these texts argue for recognition of oneself and others as inherently creative individuals. This self-recognition builds resilience and belief in one's own ability to overcome setbacks, bringing a confident and open approach to failures as learning opportunities, which invite creative solutions.

Failure Articles & Resources

Psychology Today: facts about failure — https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201501/10-surprising-facts-about-failure

Forbes: learn more from failure than success — https://www.forbes.com/sites/petekrasspiersonkrass/2018/08/23/do-you-learn-more-from-failure-or-success/#4d0a2a557de6

Fail forward — https://www.fridayfwd.com/learning-from-failure/

Famous fails — https://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/10-famous-failures-that-will-inspire-you-success.html

Embracing failure — In her TEDxBarnardCollege talk, Barbara Corcoran kicks off the day with her personal, first-hand experience of embracing failure and re-imagining what it has meant for her own path to success. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kU1DI8HsYAg

Positive vocabulary https://positivewordsresearch.com/list-of-positive-words/

Inspiring articles and insights

Article Interview: 2012 Nobel Prize Winner (Physiology/Medicine) Shinya Yamanaka "I can see any failure as a chance"
https://www.nobelprize.org/i-can-see-any-failure-as-a-chance/

Video Interview: The benefits of frequent failure - with Roger Kornberg, 2006 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry
https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/chemistry/2006/kornberg/interview/

Case Study:

The science of getting it… wrong: comic principles in induced-error learning

Anthony Teis &Ian Wilkie

Pages 41-51 | Published online: 23 Jun 2014

Abstract

In this article we argue that the comic conceit of ‘getting it wrong’ equates to two of the major ‘principles’ of comedy. Just as apperceptions of ‘incongruity’ and ‘superiority’ impel comic understanding, we suggest that these same principles also pertain in the promotion of ‘deeper’ learning. We contend that ‘getting it wrong’ as a manifestation of the comic principles could also be applied and utilised, strategically, within teachers’ practice to prompt effective learning. We offer a proposal of how these features might be employed within teaching and learning in one context – that of the teaching and learning of science – suggesting how the concept of ‘getting it wrong’ in the form of ‘induced-error learning’ could usefully be introduced into the curriculum. This article aims to build upon the idea that learning by your ‘mistakes’ can be an enjoyable active learning experience that is beneficial to learners. We hope to illustrate James Joyce's dictum that ‘errors are… the portals of discovery’.

1. Ulysses (1922Joyce, J. 1922. Ulysses. London: Bodley Head.

Keywords: getting it wrong, learning from mistakes, incongruity, superiority, science teaching, induced-error learning

Read the full paper here:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2040610X.2014.905095

Silence your inner critic by consciously adopting positive vocabulary:

ABLE, ACCEPT, ADD, ADVANTAGE
BENEFICIAL, BENEVOLENT, BETTER, BALANCE, BOLD, BRAVE, BRILLIANT
CARE, CALM, CREATE, CAPABLE, CELEBRATE
DETERMINATION, DILIGENCE, DISCOVERY, DISCRETION, DIVERSITY, DRIVE
EMPATHY, EDUCATE, EFFICIENT, ENABLE, ENERGETIC, ENGAGING
FAIR, FIDELITY, FLEXIBILITY, FOCUS
GENEROSITY, GENERATE, GENUINE, GIVE, GRATITUDE, GROWTH
HOPE, HARMONIOUS, HEALTHY, HELPFUL, HONEST, HUMAN
IMAGINATION, INSPIRATION, IDEA, INNOVATION, IMPROVEMENT
JOYFUL, JUST
KINDNESS, KNOWLEDGE, KEEN
LEARNING, LONGEVITY, LIBERTY, LOGIC, LEADERSHIP, LUCK
MEANINGFUL, MERIT, MOTIVATE
NURTURING, NEW, NOURISHED
OPTIMISTIC, ONWARDS, OPEN-MINDED, OPPORTUNITY, ORIGINAL
POSITIVE, PASSIONATE, PERCEPTIVENESS, PERSEVERANCE, PERSISTENCE
QUALITY
RESPECT, READY, REASON, RECOMMEND, REFRESH, RELIEF, RECOGNITION
SECURE, SUSTAIN, SAVE, SIMPLIFY, SELF-ESTEEM, SINCERITY, SKILL
TRUST, TACT, TEAM, THANKFUL, TEAMWORK, TIMELINESS, TOLERANCE
UNIQUE, USEFUL, UNDERSTANDING
VALUES, VALID, VERIFY, VIABLE, VARIETY, VIBRANT, VIGOUR, VERSATILITY
WILLINGNESS, WISDOM, WELL-BEING
X-FACTOR
YES
ZEST

Find more online at https://positivewordsresearch.com/list-of-positive-words/

5 Minutes to develop your research failure strategy

Consider the Impact of failure through these three broad questions:

- How does/might your research/work change the world, society, economy etc.?
- What would we learn from this research failing? What are the lessons learnt?
- How will can this be used to positively to progress your research/work?

Confidence Development of Failure

There are times when we need to focus on confidence development rather than research development. Sometimes we just need the confidence to fail; please take a moment to reflect on this:

Use this space to consider your confidence development – what type of things will help and enhance your confidence to fail?

Identifying Failure Training Needs

A skills matrix is useful in identifying where you are now against where you hope to be. The first column ‘competencies’ can be used to list the areas, behaviours that you aspire to. The second column ‘rating’ can be used to give your current skills or competency a level. This is a good place to start to build and develop skills. In each area, consider if you are 1 = low level of knowledge or confidence, to 5 = highly competent or high confidence. The last column ‘activity’ is used to list your next actions to enhance skills and competency in this area.

Competencies	Rating	Activity

GROW

The GROW model is a good way to brainstorm ideas about your failure development and stands for: Goal, Reality or Risks, Options or Opportunities, & Will or Way forward. By systematically working through your failure development goal, you can identify any potential barriers, define your goal and plot a series of actions to take forward. A GROW template has been provided below:

Goal	**Reality or Risks**
Options and Opportunities	**Will or Way forward**

Notes:

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To tell us about your experiences of failure or if you would like to join the failure freedom movement, collaborate and discuss the different possibilities of failure in more detail, please get in touch with Davina Whitnall d.c.whitnall@salford.ac.uk

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