Sitting With Failure

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Last year, a student of mine asked if I would share some of my experiences of the PhD at the NewMac Postgraduate Humanities Symposium. Thinking back to my time as a student, I realised that among the most formative and character-building moments of the dissertation process were those that involved some form of failure. For me, the periods when the research and writing progressed smoothly didn't stand out as much as points when things weren't going to plan and the process felt out of my control.

Failure is an important topic in the university context, especially for those new to the crafts of research and writing. However, it is rarely formally discussed as an important aspect of the research experience. This is because it is typically understood as being the opposite of, or an obstacle to, success. University culture – especially research culture – tends to emphasise achievement and outcomes. Young researchers are encouraged to focus on their successes and think of their careers and themselves in terms of quantifiable milestones on their CVs. Publications, grants, scholarships and citations are counted and organised into track records that offer a shorthand representation of our experience and worth as researchers. A lot of institutional energy and money goes into training scholars in 'successful self-representation': every university offers workshops and seminars on how to prepare job applications, how to behave and network at conferences, and how to market one's research to win

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grants. While necessary in today's job climate, these spaces affirm that the need to succeed in measurable ways is an integral and ongoing part of academic life.

In this context, it's not surprising that honest conversations about failure are commonly quarantined to the counsellor's office. Here, students can find workshops on stress management, the impostor syndrome, and other topics that address the variety of challenging emotions and experiences that are an inescapable part of dissertation writing. However, this compartmentalisation of failure from success assumes that an individual's well-being or sense of self can be (or ought to be) cleanly separated from the stuff of intellectual work. The underbelly of achievement, then, is a tendency to pathologise failure along with its associated feelings of being stuck, frustrated or unhappy.

My experiences as both a student and a staff member have taught me that this emphasis on achievement often assumes, or produces, a fear or aversion to failure. If we demand success from ourselves, it can mean that we don't tolerate failure well. Even when we make mistakes, the tendency is to focus on the positive outcomes that we hope these mistakes will lead to. This is because it's more comfortable to focus on feelings of success, and there are, of course, good reasons for doing this.

While failure is uncomfortable, it is a necessary part of learning (and indeed, of life). We cannot learn without making mistakes. Yet no one likes to fail or even to admit they have. This attitude toward failure, which is one of dislike, resistance, avoidance, fear or pretension (masking), can be seen in the way failure usually gets discussed in the context of education, even – or especially – when the virtues of failure are being celebrated.

In preparation for my talk I googled failure and learning. My search yielded endless blog posts, websites and videos (especially relating to education and business) about the connection between failure and success. For instance, I found eight TED talks exclusively about learning from failure, and diligently

watched them all. They had titles like: 'Success is a continuous journey', 'Don't regret regret', 'The fringe benefits of failure', and 'Why you need to fail to have a good career'. One of these was a valedictorian speech delivered by J.K. Rowling at a Harvard graduation ceremony. I realised that this is typically the genre where failure gets discussed: successful people talking to other successful people.

After watching these videos and reading many articles and blogs, it struck me that regardless of context, one message emerged repeatedly: 'Failure is a stepping-stone to success, so embrace it.' At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with this idea. But something about it, and the force with which it was reiterated, bothered me. Offered in hindsight, these accounts recuperate the negativity and discomfort of failure by presenting mistakes as part of the narrative of a success story. They seem to suggest that we can only openly acknowledge our mistakes or face our failings in the flattering light of success.

But if we relate to failure as something that always leads to success then the potency of this experience is lost. We rarely hear stories of failure that aren't about overcoming adversity, stories of failure *as* failure and what that actually *feels* like. In only allowing ourselves as individuals, and as a culture, to understand failure in the context of achievement, we shield ourselves from its potential to hurt and distress us. And in doing so, we deny the very nature of failure and miss out on this experience and what it can teach us.

The assumption that underpins these stories is that failure and success are opposites. By definition, to fail means to fall short of success or achievement in something expected, attempted or desired, or to be deficient or lacking, whereas to succeed is to accomplish what is attempted or intended. Yet if failure is inevitable on the path to achievement, then these two experiences must not be as polarised as we think. In light of this, I think we need a different

approach to understanding success and failure as ways of experiencing and relating to our work.

This is especially so given the role that error inevitably plays in the research process. In the most basic sense, research is a process whose outcome cannot be known in advance. Conducting research means pursuing a question that you want to know the answer to by trying different approaches or methods. Importantly, it is not a process the researcher can control: studies often produce findings that contradict the investigator's original assumptions, methods fail, and accidents produce unforeseen questions and problems. Research is essentially experimental – it is characterised by trial and error, uncertainty and learning lessons. It's something of a paradox then that academics are among some of society's greatest perfectionists, and yet an academic who is not open to error is arguably not open to the research process.

So what makes failure such a frightening experience? How often do we really let ourselves experience it? And what can we learn from suffering (allowing) our mistakes?

A personal experience of failure

One of the most difficult experiences of my PhD occurred during my third year. I was working on my third chapter and really struggling with it. Five months into that year, I had 10,000 words that I suspected weren't very good and was feeling stuck. Reluctantly, I contacted my supervisor to ask for help. When we met, her feedback confirmed my worst fears. The writing, she said, was obviously confused, and lacking a strong question or sense of direction. She advised that I needed to stop, rethink the whole piece, and start again.

This was one of the most important mistakes and difficult periods of my PhD. Like many doctoral students, I had always been a high achiever and was used to having my work praised. This was the first time I experienced strong rejection of my work, and what I perceived to be disappointment from my

supervisor, who I greatly respected. Not only had I failed to write a passable first draft of that chapter, I had failed to ask for help early on when I needed it most. Over the next six months I undertook the grueling task of re-conceptualising and re-writing the much-hated chapter from scratch.

Producing a good draft of this chapter took 11 months. It was a steep and slow learning curve. There was no moment of revelation, no easy solution that would shortcut the process – just a six month grind of pouring over my notes, readings, drafts and plans. In truth, most of that year was spent painfully sitting with the discomfort of a mistake that I didn't feel confident I could fix.

For me, what made this experience so important wasn't that fact that I eventually managed to finish the chapter. The real value of this time was in having to sit with, and be present to, my failed chapter – and in turn, my own emotional and psychological responses to this event. Each day I was confronted with my own fear of failure and anxieties about getting the work finished. I could feel how closely my sense of self-worth was connected to the quality of my writing, and consequently, this whole period was overshadowed by a feeling of intense vulnerability. Above all, I feared would be exposed as an impostor.

In hindsight, there was something essentially humbling about this experience. From the Latin *humilis* literally meaning 'on the ground', humility refers to the state of being 'conscious of one's failings, unpretentious, or lowly in status'. I think that the word unpretentious touches on something essential about the PhD process. One of the things that makes a PhD such a difficult task is that it unmasks its author: if you're writing a thesis, there is nowhere to hide from your mistakes or from yourself, and no one but yourself to fix any problems that arise. While there are always others around to offer help or advice, the actual labour of thinking, writing and rewriting remains fairly solitary. For this reason, writing requires courage, attention and honesty – it demands a capacity

for reflexivity about how things are going, how you're feeling and what needs to happen next.

There was something about the state of being conscious of my mistakes – and the necessity of being *present* to the problem at hand – that was crucial to finding a way through the difficulties of my chapter. While it wasn't a comfortable process, it became easier once I was able to accept, and sit with, the problems in front of me. Over time, my initial sense of humiliation at 'not getting it right' slowly shifted to an experience of humility, characterised by an openness to the issues that needed my care and attention.

I think this shift speaks to the different ways we can experience authorship. It is common for young writers to relate to their work as something created through disciplined, organised commitment. Time management plans, chapter outlines, and regimented note-taking systems offer researchers the comfort that there is order and predictability in the writing process. In other words, these structures support the view that writing is a task that can be mastered by an individual. This experience of authorship as *authority* provides safety from the unknown, from the messiness of drafting ideas, and thus from the possibility of making mistakes.

But more experienced writers know that there is no shelter from the ups and downs of the writing process. Writing is never as simple as 'writing up' (a phrase I hear routinely from research students who, often through fear, put off the task of writing). Authority does not belong to an individual but to the process itself, in which the writer participates, and from which she and her ideas emerge. I experienced this changed relation with my work when my sense of control was rattled loose – when I allowed feelings of defeat and uncertainty.

Lessons from failure

As I see it, there are two important lessons that we can learn from failure: how to fix the mistake or problem (which is the one people typically focus on), and how to sit with or attend the experience of failure itself and our aversion to it. Both are crucial to having a balanced experience of the writing process. For instance, if we are scared of failing and move immediately to problem-solve, we only feed our anxieties about 'getting it right' and then cannot give our attention to the problem itself. Attending failure means *allowing* that experience. In the words of a dear friend and colleague:

> To give attention and to attend: to be present (to who you are now, not who you want to be in some imagined future). And being present, that is, attending, involves a particular form of attention. Attend, tend, tenderness. To tend to a wound. To tend a garden. I have always loved that word, for it implies a loving cultivation, a sense of care. (Marlin 2015)

The PhD is an opportunity to learn to sit with the discomfort of your mistakes, and more generally, to be present to a challenging process that cannot be rushed. Importantly, there is no easy way to short-cut the challenges that writing a book-length piece of research presents: within the bounds of reason, the PhD takes as long as it takes. Thus the practice of sitting *with* your writing – regardless of whether things are going well or badly – itself teaches patience and acceptance. These are important skills, not only for being an academic or a writer, but in life more generally. In their book about relationships, sociologists Ann Game and Andrew Metcalfe write:

> …whether I'm writing, cooking, gardening or considering a problem, my responsibility is not to fix the text, the food or the garden, but to *be* with them, listen to them, respond to them spontaneously. As Annie Dillard says, "I do not so much write a book as sit up with it…I enter its

room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better." (Metcalfe and Game 2002, 29, emphasis in original)

Sitting with your mistakes means finding a way of relating other than the 'success or failure' model. It is, as Game and Metcalfe argue, a matter of *being present* to the needs of your work. On the other side, failure and success are evaluative ways of experiencing, or relating to, one's work. And while it is certainly important to receive good judgment of your writing – such as feedback from supervisors, colleagues and friends – if we view our work through this lens too often, it can make us self-conscious, overly precious and perfectionistic about our performance.

Most research students can relate to this experience. Students often exceed chapter deadlines because they don't feel ready to give work to their supervisors. They spend longer than is necessary working on journal articles before submitting them for peer review. And when teaching, too much time is spent preparing lectures and tutorials at the expense of writing. All of these are examples of perfectionism and self-judgment at work.

Rather than thinking in terms of success and failure, I encourage you to relate to your work as a *practice* – that is, an ongoing process of carefully attending to the needs of the text or issues before you. If we see ourselves as practicing the crafts of research and writing, then there aren't straightforwardly times when we're 'getting it right' or 'getting it wrong'. Instead of standing at a distance and judging our work, we are the *doing* or activity that a PhD requires. Each time we practice the skill of writing, we are learning how to do it, and in each iteration, we *are* doing it. In this sense, there is no point of arrival or ultimate goal outside the experience you are currently presented with, and present to. From here, it easier to accept mistakes as something to be with, rather than something to overcome.

References

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