



THE ROLE OF FAILURE IN RESEARCH

*failure:
lack of success
a falling short
one that has failed
a fracturing or giving way
under stress¹*

Five years ago, I had just finished my dissertation study. For an entire school year, I had worked with six early career art teachers, visiting them in their schools and offering workshops. By the spring, I had begun to see that my study was not producing the anticipated results. When the study ended in April, I was at a loss for how to move forward. With the hindsight afforded me now, I can look back on the summer of 2015 and recognize that the sense of failure that had seeped into my research was, in fact, an essential and pivotal part of it. It was **failure** that forced me to engage with my research from a place of unknowing—a place of humility in which I recognized that I didn't actually know what I thought I knew about the experiences of beginning art teachers. It was only from this place of unknowing that I became vulnerable to my participants, seeing both them and their schools differently.

It turns out that failure is productive.

Earlier this year, I gave a faculty research talk in the school of art where I work, and I addressed the role that failure played in catalyzing what was to come in my research. After my talk, one of our doctoral students thanked me for talking about the way failure functioned in my experiences. She admitted that she too was experiencing feelings of failure in her work, but that my talk helped her see the potential in experiences that, at first, feel insurmountable. I then wondered how often doctoral students hear faculty acknowledge failure as a part of research, as something they personally have experienced. I also wondered how the other doctoral students in our program were thinking through potential feelings of failure in their research.

These questions motivated me to contact some of our current doctoral students, explain that I was putting together this newsletter about the role of failure in research, and ask for their candid thoughts on their own experiences with failure. What follows are their eloquent thoughts, far more mature than my own at the same stage of doctoral studies:

I am not sure that anyone really gets used to experiencing failure, but over the past 4 years, I have become more comfortable with failure than ever before. I have started over or changed directions more times than I can count; but each of those failures, while devastating at the time, offered me a new understanding and direction to begin again. (Mallory Lind, personal communication, January 2020)

When I was implementing my research study with young children, I tried so hard to stick to what I had planned so that my research would unfold smoothly, but it didn't work. I thought my data collection was ruined—the research had failed. However, what I saw as a failure the participants saw as a success—they no longer had to follow my plan! When I ceded control and let the children guide the direction of their own artmaking, they relished the autonomy and were better able to integrate their own ideas.

Because of what I initially saw as a failure, something new and unexpected happened. I learned the importance of respecting the children's ideas, even at their young age. If I had ignored their ideas, I don't know what the result would have been; but because I was forced to let go of my research plans, the children's own stories came through in more powerful ways. (Nara Kim, personal communication, January 2020)

Failures are lessons, and they always have been part of my research. If I didn't fail, I wouldn't learn and enrich my knowledge. (Sahar Aghasafari, personal communication, January 2020)

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I feel that success in some areas, such as my academic career, comes with a sense of failure in other areas of my life. For example, at the moment I feel like my roles as a mother and friend are suffering as a result of my focus on work. But I also realize this internal struggle will be present no matter what I am doing, and I need to work on balance. (Amber Pitt, personal communication, January 2020)

Perhaps *NAEA News* will reach other doctoral students who might benefit from hearing these affirmations that experiences of failure are not only common, but often a critical, catalytic force in research.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/failure>

Correction to Oct./Nov. 2019 SRAE column: The author was Christina Hanawalt, not Mallory Lind.

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