

Translating Failure into Success

Deana Brown, Boise State University, Albertsons Library

Elizabeth Ramsey, Boise State University, Albertsons Library

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Failure plays a key part in our professional and personal development, but traditionally many of us have been inclined to sweep our failures under the rug. Librarian and blogger Steven Bell posits that perhaps we are embarrassed at our failures, instead of recognizing that sharing our blunders can be an opportunity to celebrate our creativity (2010). Some brave souls are doing just that, such as the librarians who are sharing their failures through Twitter, using the hashtag #libraryfail. An enormously popular website has grown through shared failures, CakeWrecks (<http://www.cakewrecks.com/>). And a meme has been making the rounds on the internet for some time, titled "Nailed It," in which people contrast their failed attempts at craft or baking projects with the original perfect creation.

It would seem that although many of us attempt to hide our own failures, generally everyone loves failure stories from others, as long as there's some sort of redemption or success at the end. Michael Schrage of the Harvard Business Review notes that the best kind of failure for learning and innovation is some sort of partial failure where "you fail enough to have things go wrong but not so destructively that there's nothing to learn from at all" (2010). Think of the first Rocky story, where, even though Rocky doesn't win the fight, he manages to stay on his feet, prevailing on his terms, and leading to endless sequels.

Rocky's experience-- winning on his own terms, and learning in the process, is a good example of constructive learning theory, which is built on the idea of actively constructing knowledge through personal experiences. This idea of learning from hands-on experiences has been the foundation for the creation of many a maker space in libraries in that it provides a way to learn through our mistakes and come to our own conclusions. "Constructionism... is the application of constructivist learning principles to a hands-on learning environment. Thus maker education is a branch of constructivist philosophy that views learning as a highly personal endeavor requiring the student, rather than the teacher, to initiate the learning process" (Kurti, Kurti, & Fleming, 2014). The development of Albertsons Library's MakerLab at Boise State University has provided numerous opportunities for failing, and learning, to the creators of the lab as well as those using it.

The MakerLab developed not in a public space, but in a librarian's office that housed a 3D printer. This afforded developers Amy Vecchione and Deana Brown the chance to fail in private as they learned how to use the printer. Then, as the two librarians felt more comfortable with the equipment and attendant processes, it became easier to use their failures as opportunities to explain 3D operations to a growing number of users. Experimenting privately has helped foster an attitude of playful inquisition when prints failed. The relatively low cost of printing materials has also helped these librarians treat 3D experiments as low stakes adventures. This adventuresome spirit has served Amy and Deana well when pursuing other opportunities related to the MakerLab. When the duo missed a challenge grant deadline, they were able to reuse the information in a more thoughtful way for later applications. Ultimately, these MakerLab pioneers believe that any amount of time and energy isn't wasted if something can be learned from failures.



Of course failure is an important aspect of teaching as well as learning. How we navigate failure in front of a classroom or at the reference desk sets an important example for learners to follow. Pinsky and Irby (1997) assert that failure in instruction can stem from a lack of preparation, too much or too little content, technical difficulties, or, as in Elizabeth's case, misjudging learners. Elizabeth regularly taught a basic research instruction session as part of a kind of extended orientation class for international students. After teaching this course a number of times, a regular routine evolved that usually engendered student engagement in the topic. However, last spring, the usual engagement was replaced by a generally glazed look of indifference. By stopping the class, and quizzing the students on their research experiences, Elizabeth found that the majority of the students were in the final semesters of their time at the university, and had taken the one-credit class as a move to save their grade point averages. By turning the class into a free-form discussion of research frustrations and how to move past them, Elizabeth managed to provide the students with more appropriate strategies, while modeling how to reverse engineer a learning experience.

Modeling failure in a classroom setting or during reference interviews demonstrates the iterative process of research and methods for getting past roadblocks. Also, in modeling our own fallibility, we can inspire others in their attempts to deal with other challenges to attaining their goals. For years, Deana hid her dyslexia, but when she inadvertently shared it in front of a class, she became a role model to those students in how they, too, might overcome their own learning "failures."

Deana had hidden her dyslexia for some time after becoming a librarian because she felt she didn't deserve the degree she had completed. She often thought, "There's no way someone who is dyslexic and terrible at reading has any right becoming a librarian. Someone must have messed up. I hope they don't find out!" This fear of being found out persisted until the day Deana misspelled a word during a database demonstration for a remedial reading class. The error was spotlighted when the demonstrated search returned no results. Upon realizing what she'd done, Deana apologized to the class, saying, "Sorry, I'm dyslexic and have a hard time spelling." At the end of the session, the reading instructor made a point of letting Deana know how fortuitous her mistake had been, "I didn't know you were dyslexic. What a powerful thing for these remedial readers to know! Will you please share that with all my other remedial classes when I bring them in?" In that instant Deana went from feeling like a fraud to feeling validated. It had never occurred to her that admitting to her perceived failures in spelling and reading could be empowering to others.

All too many of us hide our true selves out of a misplaced feeling of being a fraud, of somehow deceiving other people into believing we are more capable or intelligent than we truly are. This inability to internalize our accomplishments is known as imposter syndrome. It can act as a catalyst for failure in that it stymies momentum. Research notes that we can regain momentum by internalizing external validation, finding like-minded allies, taking stock of our success, and looking at others objectively. In other words, avoid social media! Elizabeth found that when she re-assessed her value with the help of friends, she was motivated to apply for a job that she wasn't sure she was capable of attaining. Not only was Elizabeth hired, but she is now thriving at Boise State University.

Assessing the true value of ourselves and our efforts at the workplace is essential in moving past failure. The American Library Association acknowledges the place of failure in the development of programming in its Teen Programming Guide, "Programming should be fluid and flexible, undertaken with the expectation that there will be some failure, adjustments will be made, and evaluation will be ongoing" (2014). Deana embraced this perspective when developing a series of workshops to promote emerging technologies in the library. Not all the workshops were well attended. Indeed, some had no attendees whatsoever. Still, even the lack of attendance provid-

ed a data point for the overall assessment of the workshop series, as well as a pause for a moment of reflection on what may have affected the varying attendance rates. Deana is continuing the workshop series, but has adjusted timing and topics based on the accumulated data. Her assessments were key in translating the relative failure of a lack of attendance into a possible success in the future.

Literature in business management has touted the importance of failure in innovation for some time. In 2002 Farson and Keyes encouraged managers to "create failure-tolerant work environments that invite innovation." In the library world Bell (2013) called for leaders to create "a culture that fosters risk, rewards achievement, and accepts failure." Note that Bell exhorts LEADERS, not management to create this sort of workplace culture. There's an important distinction between the two in that, although few are in management, we can all act as leaders when it comes to helping to foster environments that support creativity, innovation, and failure.

An example from Elizabeth's experience might help you see how these business management tips can translate into our actions as library leaders. As Outreach Coordinator at Albertsons Library, Elizabeth tries to foster contributions from people throughout the library. Last year she helped a library staff member produce a blog post for the very first time. By supporting this staff member's interest in the blog topic, and her creative endeavors in sharing that interest, Elizabeth has created a kind of safety zone in which the staff member now feels free to suggest topics and contribute additional blog posts.

The theories and examples provided in this article have demonstrated how failure can work in a positive way in all facets of our professional lives. Failure is inevitable if we are experimenting, but it can be a powerful catalyst for growth. Through assessment and reflection failure can function as an essential aspect of our personal and professional development. By creating an encouraging workplace environment we can help our colleagues, too, to feel safe to create, innovate, and fail. Sometimes all it takes is sharing our own failures to foster the feeling in ourselves and others that's it's alright to fail because, like many others before us, it's possible to translate that failure into success.

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Deana Brown is an Assistant Professor and Librarian in the Web and Emerging Technologies unit at Boise State University. She liaises with the philosophy and sociology departments and is active in working groups related to her research interests in user experience, space needs, 3D printing, and other emerging technologies. Her interest in emerging technologies has led to her becoming a faculty advisor to the Creative Technologies Association student group and a member of the Idaho Commission for Libraries' Special Projects Library Action Team (SPLAT). Deana can be reached at deanabrown@boisestate.edu; read more at http://works.bepress.com/dea-na_brown/.

Elizabeth Ramsey is an Assistant Professor and Librarian with responsibilities in outreach and social media at Boise State University's Albertsons Library. She is also the liaison to programs in the School of Public Services, as well as those serving the international student population. Her research interests include cross-cultural awareness, the intersectionality of identities, and issues related to diversity and inclusion. Elizabeth can be reached at elizabethramsey@boisestate.edu; read her other publications at http://works.bepress.com/elizabeth_ramsey/.