



Addressing psychological barriers to student learning: our role as learning developers

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Abstract

Since the launch of ALDinHE's Health Community of Practice (CoP) in 2021, members have been sharing practice ideas and resources via monthly activities. One activity that stimulated particular interest related to the topic of psychological barriers to student learning (i.e. low confidence, anxiety, perfectionism and imposter syndrome) and how, as learning developers, we might address these. Although healthcare students may be particularly vulnerable to these kinds of issues (Bogardus et al., 2022), they are on the rise among all students (Curran and Hill, 2019). Therefore, it is pertinent to consider how they infiltrate learning development practice and how they can best be supported. The purpose of this workshop was firstly, to explore the professional boundary issues that this may raise, and secondly, to share and explore practice possibilities. This involved showcasing ideas from the aforementioned Health CoP activity and drawing on relevant research. In doing so, we aimed to open up a wider discussion about how learning development spaces can foster emotional growth and provide takeaways that participants can apply to their own practice.

Keywords: perfectionism; academic anxiety; failure; redefining failure; healthcare students; learning development practice.

Community response

The workshop began with an invitation to complete the adaptive/maladaptive perfectionism scale (AMPS) for our own reflection and personal insight. This task, entirely voluntary, was

not only useful in helping us understand our own approaches to perfectionism better, but also allowed us to tap into the elements that most resonated with us, whether that was the fear of failure, the setting of unrealistic expectations, or the subsequent anxiety. Where we might have assumed we knew what perfectionism was, first the AMPS and then the workshop soon showed us that far from being a simple condition, perfectionism is complex, multifaceted, and disabling. The respondents in this section have each addressed the aspect that spoke most powerfully to them.

Respondent 1

The first respondent addresses her own approach to the concept of failure:

The boggish overlaps between perfectionism, procrastination, anxiety, “writer’s block”, motivation, self-efficacy, etc. are a constant consideration for me – and when working with students on *academic* writing we can borrow and learn more from *creative* writing, and how creative writing (in my experience) is taught and discussed in academic contexts such as universities. In creative writing, I take for granted the normalisation of 1) “process” being a rough, sloppy, ever-evolving entity; and 2) “failure” as an expected and encouraged step that one may take a thousand times.

To point A, creative writing classrooms typically operate with sequential drafts as the norm. You do not get a single go at a piece of writing: you submit a draft; you take feedback on board; you submit something else; you take that feedback on board; in the end, you submit revised copies of all works, often with a reflective statement on what you changed and why. Basically, experimentation is supported, and thoughtful growth is rewarded. To point B, as creative writers, we are taught that we will ‘fail’; agents will ignore our queries, literary journals will reject our poems and stories. Professors readily share anecdotes of their own torturous slogs to eventual publication. Classmates trade delighted stories of receiving their first rejection letters from the ‘New Yorker’; it is a rite of passage, and many people even make collages of their rejection notices as a reminder to keep on going (it is, after all, a numbers game). In Q&As, visiting authors describe the countless overhauls to plot and structure and theme and character they had to make again and again and again, pursuing and abandoning options, before that elusive “final draft” became a thing worth reading.

My provocation, as a result, is this: If we call a stumble or roadblock or less-than-hoped-for performance or product a ‘failure’, are we not in danger of reifying the mindset of perfectionism that we are trying to dismantle? I am more interested, perhaps, in modelling the ups and downs of *process* in honest ways. For example, we see university announcements when a researcher lands a huge grant. We do not see the 1,000 tortured application drafts and 37 rejections that paved the way to that grant.

Why not have a Festival of Scientific Fumbles? A space to showcase and celebrate the *real* process rather than pretending the eventual outcome was easy or

straightforward? Professors who both teach and publish: great! How many of those professors would be willing to show their supervisees an early-days version of the article, before the edits and cuts and peer review and proofreading? Wouldn't that candour tell students more about the reality of writing (and make them giddy with relief, I'm sure) than just repeating the hollow words, "Remember, you can always edit"? The language matters, and 'failure' carries this sense of finality that is troubling given the need to navigate undesired setbacks in pursuing any goal.

Respondent 2

The second respondent challenges the performativity of the contemporary higher education environment, which seems to feed the idea of perfectionism:

What does 'good enough' look like? And why equate 'difficult' with 'incapable'? Just as students struggle with the fear of failure and the performativity that can imbue their higher education, so perhaps can we as educators get caught up in the ever-present need to show reach, value, impact, beyond the positive outcomes we see in our tutorials and classrooms and scholarly activity. Are we doing enough? Are we doing it well enough? Can we demonstrate our worth?

I appreciate any call for more realistic celebrations of success, that more authentically represent the journey to that success. I also agree that sometimes a failure (or a 'stumble') is just that, and we don't need to learn from everything we do (my personal motto comes courtesy of the inestimable Oscar Wilde: "Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes." But that focus on failure wasn't the message I took from this workshop. Rather, it was that it serves us well to recognise the signs of perfectionism – in ourselves as much as our students – because these are the traits that can overwhelm, immiserate, sidetrack, and burn out. They are destructive, for our relationship with our work, with ourselves, and even with each other. Perhaps Samuel Beckett is useful here, when he says, albeit problematically, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better". By sharing our own stories with those around us who are stuck in the jaw of perfectionism, whether students or colleagues, we can demystify achievement, champion process over product, and meet each other as people, asking each other and knowing the answer to what is good enough, and feeling justifiably happy with that.

Next steps and additional questions

How can we tackle emotional growth as educators without overstepping professional boundaries? Would normalising terms like 'failure' impact on student perceptions and outcomes, and in what other ways can academia measure 'success'? Are there ethical implications of educators sharing their own experiences with failure with students?

Authors' reflection

A core focus of the session was to explore views on the role of learning developers within a context in which increasing numbers of students are struggling with psychological (most notably perfectionism) and emotional barriers to learning. Sharing the CoP activity reiterated to us the importance of addressing these dimensions of learning, and discussions suggested that this is becoming more integral to LD practice. It was interesting to find many participants already engaged in this kind of work (and hugely inspiring to hear of one participant's development of writing-yoga sessions!). The eloquently written and insightful community responses pick up on aspects of the session that time constraints prevented a full exploration of, specifically, the construct of failure and how, as educators, we might attempt to deconstruct some of its perilous links. As noted above, failure, and more specifically failure in relation to writing, was not a focus of the session; nonetheless, the community response allows us to add a little more on this topic.

The societal perspectives through which we view and understand failure may partially explain the increased anxiety we observe among students, and we feel it is important to have explicit conversations with students about that. This might include messaging around what we call failure as a completely normal part of the human experience, that it is not something we can necessarily control, and that most of the time we are not progressing our learning if we are not negotiating obstacles along the way. Unfortunately, though, and as argued elsewhere (McKay et al., 2023), this is at odds with the climates of expectation that might sometimes be fostered, albeit inadvertently, in the classroom. It seems that we need systemic efforts and targeted work to challenge the core beliefs held by all too many students, to help them understand where these come from, and how they lead to unhelpful (and potentially dangerous) study behaviours.

We agree wholeheartedly with the ideas shared by the community, which add to those shared by Health CoP members; having the courage to share our first (nowhere near perfect) drafts and delivering 'festivals of fumbles' are brilliant suggestions. Reflecting on the comments has bolstered our understanding of the problems inherent in the use of language; 'failure' does indeed carry a sense of irreversible end, and mistakes and failures would be so much better conceptualised as 'experience' (marvellous Oscar Wilde quote). And finally, a gripe with growth mindset theory, which echoes Respondent 1 above: if we insist on 'rehabilitating' every perceived failure into a learning opportunity, are we not

simply reinforcing the very notions of failure-related shame that we should be trying to dismantle? We may conclude with more questions than answers, but we are grateful for the opportunity to start a conversation on this emerging branch of LD practice and hope it continues.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Alice Stinetorf, University of Southampton and Carina Buckley, Southampton Solent University for your contribution.

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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