

## 18. Failing

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### ■ Definition and Background

Popular maxims like “Nothing succeeds like failure” or “Success is the surest way to kill *creativity*” are predicated on the idea that failure is a necessary part of *innovation*, a catalyst for finding better solutions to problems on both micro- and macro-scales. On one hand, according to Gerard J. Tellis (2013), “Success . . . provides a strong motive to sustain the status quo and resist innovation” (p. 10). On the other, tolerance for—and even *pursuit of*—failure promotes radical risk-taking behaviors that lead to abiding success in fast-paced, dynamic environments. Failing can be defined as performing, creating, designing, and innovating unsuccessfully and is often thought of as a breach between intention and outcome. But failure can also be rewarding if we approach it through the lenses of failing forward and failing sideways.

In Western learning, creating a positive culture around failure is difficult because failure is constructed ontologically as a state of being as opposed to epistemologically as a way of knowing. Failure marks people as derelicts, defeated by a lack of persistence, ability, or intelligence. This ontological violence is an inherent part of formal education; however, Emily Wierszewski (in this collection) notes that while education has brought us to fear failure, we can teach ourselves to embrace and reflect on our own errors and become more creative. By embracing failure, we lean into its affective and cognitive domains. Certainly, failure can occasion frustration, anxiety, or shame, but it can also challenge, motivate, and ignite passion. Failure can reveal insufficiencies in task, process, or problem-solving knowledge, but it can also prompt the development of metacognitive strategies. Moreover, the embrace of failure can strengthen intra- and interpersonal capacities as we become more open and flexible in the design process and seek out others to consult or collaborate with. By leaning into the lessons of failure, we reframe failures as springboards for reaching our goals. In other words, we fail forward. To quote John C. Maxwell (2000), author of the titular book that popularized the term, “failing forward” means “taking responsibility, learning from each mistake, knowing failure is part of progress, maintaining a positive attitude, challenging outdated assumptions, taking new risks, believing something didn’t work, [and] persevering” (p. 10).

As an alternative to the practice of failing forward, which (eventually) pays dividends through the normative objects of success, we also recognize queer notions of failure which hold promise for *failing sideways*. J. Jack Halberstam (2011) writes of failure as something that offers different rewards, rewards that would not be attainable through success. For Halberstam (2011), failure *is not* indicative of an individual's shortcomings or performance in a given system, nor is it a necessary springboard for achieving traditional markers of success. Halberstam writes, "Failure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well. . . . In fact, if success requires so much effort [and is always already on someone else's terms], then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers differing rewards" (2011, p. 3). Failure, as a queer tactic, rejects the expeditious route to success. Historically, technical communication has framed success around the qualities of concision, clarity, accuracy, and coherency. Failing sideways would allow technical communicators to momentarily uncouple their practice from these norms and follow meandering, circuitous—even dead-end—paths that lead to other ways of knowing, being, and making together. As such, failing sideways offers the potential to center bodies, especially those from marginalized communities, in the design process by accounting for a diversity of needs, wants, desires, outcomes, and experiences. Instead of framing the non-normative user as the "trouble" or "failure," failing sideways can restructure normative notions of *usability* and aid designers in becoming advocates who create useable systems, products, and texts for those whose bodies and behaviors don't or won't conform to prescriptive goals or outcomes (Moeggenberg & Walton, 2019; Ramler, 2020).

To put it simply, failure, as traditionally constructed, is a termination of creative processes. Failing forward, on the other hand, reframes failing as an inherent part of an iterative design process that is necessary to bringing designs to fruition. Finally, failing sideways as design praxis troubles the journey toward a predefined end goal or outcome. It expands flattened and linear design processes to follow the bodies and behaviors of diverse users who have histories of failure with normative systems, products, and texts.

## ■ Design Application

Design thinking is critically informed by failing forward. In other words, failing forward invites different perspectives, processes, movement, and *iterations*. Failing forward requires us to pause and take note of our surroundings, material conditions, assets, influences, and lenses, which is a crucial knowledge-making practice in design communities. To fail forward, designers move beyond the hubris of their previous successes with tools, materials, concepts, or methods. Designers not only apply new approaches, but they scrutinize outcomes, most of which will fail spectacularly. Maxwell (2000) also notes that designers who fail forward pursue quantity over quality, engaging in the *rapid prototyping* of and early feedback

to a wide range of design solutions as opposed to investing time and energy into perfecting their singular, most-beloved idea.

Design thinking works best when negative results are produced, or when we understand what does not work—but this is uncomfortable (Bason & Austin, 2019, p. 86). This is why when we more readily formalize failure in design thinking and problem-solving projects, we become both more comfortable to fail in the future and open to what constructive feedback it can give us (Gomoll et al., 2018). It is important that we be open to engaging with our failures. When we acknowledge shortcomings and provide spaces for their safe discussion, this helps us build communities and increase our shared knowledge (Grover et al., 2017, p. 252). In a given project, we often work to find who or what is to blame instead of framing failure as distributed across human and non-human actants in a system (Pflugfelder, 2018, p. 32). It's easy to ignore the failures and move onward (Poggenpohl & Winkler, 2009, p. 107). Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder (2018) urges designers in project management to consider a project's material-discursive elements, as they influence its vulnerabilities and potential for failure (p. 47).

In design thinking—moving iteratively through design stages—one can succeed in the eyes of one participant but fail in the eyes of another. For example, a successful prototype designed for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transitioning, questioning) stakeholders may not necessarily be the right fit for LGBTQ stakeholders with disabilities. Or, in the case of the recent acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk, users of the social media app have voiced serious concerns about the impacts of implementing user authentication as it could compromise privacy and anonymity (Rigot, 2022). Afsaneh Rigot (2022) notes that Twitter's most marginalized users—those who use the app to forward racial justice, to perform a host of marginalized identities, and to find and communicate about abortion access—stand to suffer disproportionately. Rigot reminds us of the importance of actively pursuing these *edge cases* to failure. Failure helps us understand how we may overlook intersectional identities within those whom we should be “designing with” instead of “designing for.”

## ■ Pedagogical Integration

One way to encourage failure-oriented design in technical communication classrooms is to implement alternative grading practices that prompt students to take risks, fail, and sit with the cognitive and affective experience of failure. These experiences may or may not result in successful or useful communication products, but an assessment-for-learning approach privileges process over product and can disrupt the practices of rushing to solution. A host of classroom assessment practices such as contract grading, labor-based grading, specifications grading, and digital badging can make the classroom more amenable to failing forward and failing sideways (Inoue, 2019; Litterio, 2016; Nilson, 2015; West-Puckett, 2016).

Lisa Litterio (2016) also found that contract grading in the technical communication classroom “reinforced that writing technical documents is a process that mirrors the collaborative and communicative practices of workplace writing while the writing, rewriting, and negotiating the contract itself is applicable to the writing in their professional lives” (p. 6).

Another way to incorporate failure as pedagogy is to provide students opportunities to engage with diverse stakeholders. Through practices such as user testing, students find out that designs won’t meet user needs. Perhaps the student designed for users with disabilities but failed to account for language barriers. We need to address that failure looks differently all the time. Likewise, if we posit questions—like “How do you address a failure like *this*?” or “How do you address a failure like *that*?”—it gives opportunities for students to address failures through additional design thinking, *collaboration*, revision, and addressing stakeholders directly. Attempting to postulate all of the ways a project can fail, but also discussing how those failures can be capitalized on and addressed, makes failure a rewarding process.

Finally, we can guide students in researching and creating design failure case studies and analyzing those cases through multiple lenses. Pflugfelder (2018) demonstrated this approach by reviewing how technical communicators have assigned blame to the oft-cited Challenger o-ring disaster and offered a new perspective on design failure. Pflugfelder introduces actor-network theory to illustrate the ways that things and texts, materials and discourses become agents that can conflict and contribute to system failure. Applying these lenses can prompt students to interpret failure from multiple perspectives and to understand how different communicators and stakeholders may have misaligned purposes and conceptual frameworks for a design idea that contribute to its failure. By making those diverse and competing paradigms more transparent, technical communication students can learn to anticipate failure as a necessary part of realizing cooperation, coalescence, and coaction.

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