

Talking about professional failure: what can we learn from each other?

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Abstract

This article presents a brief overview of the literature about professional failure, impostor syndrome, perfectionism, burnout, and resilience, literature which also informed a workshop at the EAHIL Conference held in Cardiff, UK, on 12 July 2018. The workshop brought together 20 participants from across Europe who ranged in age and in career experiences. It aimed to enable participants to feel comfortable talking about and sharing their experiences of professional failure for medical or health librarians and information professionals, and drawing out solutions to those failures. This article shares the outcomes of the workshop, and includes suggestions for ways to manage professional failure.

Key words: burnout, professional; occupational stress; resilience, psychological; education.

Background

Crawford defines “failure as an initiative or process that was either terminated before its planned ending date or that failed to achieve its stated goals” (1). “Professional failure” is a subject which has been observed to be discussed implicitly at conferences for medical or clinical librarians, yet has never been the subject of a conference workshop, to the best of the authors’ knowledge. As Brown and Ramsey write, “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” (2).

Two outreach and clinical librarians from UK hospital trusts gave a workshop at the EAHIL Conference held in Cardiff, UK, on 12 July 2018 specifically aiming to enable delegates to talk about this subject in order to contribute to their “professional and personal development”. The workshop drew on the literature about failure in libraries, the interpersonal skills (confidence, resilience, persistence) for dealing with the emotional side of life at work, and the literature around impostor syndrome, to share experiences.

The preceding literature review on professional failure in library contexts

Seven databases (Web of Science, PubMed, MEDLINE, Embase, British Nursing Index, CINAHL, and LISA: Library and Information Science Abstracts) were searched from inception to May 2018 to retrieve papers from the library and information, medical, and nursing literature using the keywords “professional failure”, or “failure in libraries”; “imposter syndrome”; “perfectionism”; “burnout”; “stress”; and “resilience”. After deduplication, 88 papers remained on the topic of professional, library, librarian, or librarianship failures, from a broad range of countries including South Africa, China, the US, and Croatia, which suggests a global phenomenon.

Several papers argue that we need to talk about our failures in order to learn from them. For example, Crawford asserts that “we can learn more from failure than from success”. He writes that the library staff who are “willing to float and try new things, and who are secure enough as professionals to step back and say, ‘Maybe we made a mistake’ ” are the ones who can learn from library users in order to make

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improvements. He advocates that librarians promote and publish papers about these failures to let others learn and benefit (1). Brown and Ramsey write about librarians sharing failures on Twitter using the hashtag #libraryfail (2). Another example of this aspiration to talk about and learn from failures is Garza's description of FailCamp. This is designed to encourage panel participants to talk about their failed projects in order to "address outstanding problems", and "to prepare for future initiatives" at an institution. The motto of FailCamp is "Imagine, Fail, Learn, Grow" (3).

A variety of failures in libraries are addressed in the literature, including failures of library catalogues which are not easy to use, and so library users fail "to find known items they were seeking" (4). Authors address their personal experiences of failure in their roles as library leaders (5, 6), including failing to implement strategic planning into library management (7). In short, there are examples in the literature about failure in every aspect of our profession. The literature offers some solutions to these failures, including talking and sharing these examples in order to learn from them (1-3). Moran suggests that library leaders need to change the behaviour of library staff in order to plan for and "implement change within the library" (8). Farkas wrote in 2010 that libraries in North America often fail when they "offer innovative new services". She recommends that staff are encouraged "to learn and play", and that managers "develop a risk-tolerant culture", giving "staff time to experiment with potential new initiatives" (9).

Lacey and Parlette-Stewart brought over 80 professionals together in 2017 at the Ontario Library Association Super Conference in Toronto, Ontario, to talk about their experiences of impostor syndrome – the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills (10) – and how it relates to burnout and stress in the profession. They argue that librarianship and impostor syndrome are a good match, unfortunately, because "As a group, librarians set high goals for themselves, which, when overworked, are not easily achieved". This ultimately exacerbates the self-doubt and the sense that we may be impostors. Additional reasons given are: 1) right from the first moment of professionalism, "library school provides little guidance on how to tran-

sition to the workforce"; 2) "new librarians often experience the 'let me show you to your desk approach'" when starting a first professional post, without adequate "orientation or mentoring", which can lead to a demoralizing sense of "isolation and pressure to succeed"; 3) "lack of clarity in the scope of one's position". Lacey and Parlette-Stewart suggest solutions for impostor syndrome, including some affirmations to repeat to oneself to build self-confidence, or a Success Log to note all "big and small" successes (10).

Perfectionism and "setting high goals" are also features of our profession (11, 12). Performance anxiety, or the fear of failure (13), are linked to burnout, as Lacey and Parlette-Stewart describe as leading "to poorer work outcomes in satisfaction and performance" (11). The causes for burnout occurring in the library environment are numerous: bullying, workplace abuse, and low morale (14); "rapidly changing jobs, increasing workloads due to budget cuts, and frequent interactions with patrons" (15); "role ambiguity, role overload" (16); the "emotional labor in library work" (17); as well as stress, "poor working conditions", "low pay, constant interruptions, and a lack of job recognition" (18).

Solutions provided in the literature for burnout and stress, once the signs of these are recognised (18), include stress management (19), "Mindful Librarianship" (20, 21), as well as the importance of recognising the "emotional labor" involved in library work, and conducting more research on this topic (17). One paper suggests that "ongoing communication" can help, along with "job sharing, recognition of a good performance/ service/ idea, mentoring, and continuing education" (18).

Resilience is an attribute or skill that can help with all of these issues, with the health warning that resilience itself can lead to burnout, if it leads to more work when individuals are reluctant to say no, uncomfortable with "expressing dissatisfaction with their work and advocating for themselves" (22).

The 2018 workshop at the EAHIL Conference in Cardiff

Twenty delegates from countries across Europe gathered for the 90-minute workshop titled "Talking about professional failure: what can we learn from each other?". It opened with a note about the Chatham House Rule, which asks that the partici-

pants “use the information received”, whilst ensuring that they do not identify individuals (23), for example when making notes, tweeting, or otherwise reporting back about the session. The facilitators presented personal moments of professional failure to introduce the topic, with examples of failing to respond to clinicians’ information needs in a timely manner, and an unsustainable project which could not continue once it had ended. After a description of the literature review, delegates were given 5x3 cards on which to write a sentence about failure. These were sorted and thematically analysed during the session, with the results presented after the first 30 minutes. The delegates were seated in four groups, and were asked to discuss their instances of failure in 15 minutes, before they were mixed up to sit in three groups to discuss solutions for these moments of professional failure. The literature on the key topics was presented briefly, before the participants were asked to talk about the skills and personal attributes which they believe are required to overcome these failures. Mentimeter (24) was used at the end of the workshop to quickly collect feedback.

Findings from participants

3x5 cards: What does failure mean to you?

An analysis of the 20 responses to what failure means, written on 5x3 cards, revealed seven cards providing examples of moments of professional failure. These covered making mistakes in search strategies, a library collection move, users unable to access resources, failing to support users, breaking a 3D printer, not getting permission to use a photo for a staff magazine. The remaining 13 cards provided definitions and thoughts about the meaning of the term. One card suggested that failure means “overpromising + underdelivering”. One person linked guilt to failure, going on to state that embarrassment “can prevent one from asking questions” which are necessary as “getting answers can help to solve the problems”. Two people wrote that “failure is in the eye of the beholder”, or “things we think are failure aren’t necessarily a failure”. Doing something means risking failure, as “if you don’t do anything, you cannot fail”. Others asked, “are errors failures?”, and “are errors fixable and failures not?”.

Two responses provided an alternative perspective on this issue: “Everything is fine. Nobody died.”;

“Nobody was dying, only figures everything is ok”. Failure was also viewed as being inevitable in professional life: “There is no way that you will never fail”. It was seen as potentially positive: “Failure is a sign that you have tried something outside your comfort zone”.

Others took the question more personally, referring to how failure can make them feel: “Failure is hugely personal, what I perceive as failure, you may see as just different”, or “When I’m not feeling confident failures seem to be devastating, when I feel more confident I am able to reflect + move forward”.

Finally, there was a thought-provoking response about gender on the last card: “How do men or women deal with [failures]? I think, each person [deals] [differently] with [failure]. Try to act to be resilient”. There is no literature about professional failure and gender, which suggests that this is an area for further research and discussion.

Task 1: Participants’ moments of professional failure

When asked to feed back to the wider group about their moments of professional failure, whether personal or failures of the library as a system, delegates gave examples of technical failures, intellectual property issues, failures during teaching sessions, moving a library, performing a literature search using only the topic field, and failures in user support. As reflected on the 5x3 cards, mood and confidence were reported as important factors in how people responded to those moments, depending on how much they cared, and how they recovered from a situation perceived as embarrassing. It also depended on personal perspective, as failure is “in the eye of the beholder”. According to participants, an event only becomes a failure if it was preventable, or if it was not responded to, or acted on. Failure is important for learning, as reflected in the literature, as well as learning how to manage others when they fail at a task. Failure depends on expectations, and whether you have control over a situation. Delegates talked about how failure can be inevitable, as well as the difference between making a mistake or an error which is fixable, and failing to respond when something goes wrong, leading to a worsening situation, an unfixable failure. They mentioned the danger of overpromising, and therefore managing the expectations of library service users and managers.

Task 2: Solutions to overcome or learn from professional failure

Workshop delegates were asked to report back responses to a second question: What solutions have you identified to help you to overcome, or learn from, professional failure? One solution was the mind or mental shift that happens over time, with experience, and age. Participants reported that they learned to recognise patterns of behaviour, and their reactions to their common mistakes. They advocated that there has to be a culture of allowing mistakes to happen, and learning something new from those mistakes, building confidence in the process, making space and time for learning. Participants noted that there is a balance between using failure as a learning opportunity, letting mistakes go, and actively not correcting an identified fault or error, which was seen as unethical.

Task 3: Personal and organisational attributes needed to learn from professional failure

Participants were asked to discuss and feedback on a third question: What skills and personal attributes do you need to help you to overcome, or learn from, professional failure? How can you acquire or develop these? Participants stated again that organisational cultures need to allow mistakes to happen, and the work environment must offer people the opportunity to be resilient, support colleagues through failures, and reciprocate help. Good self-awareness was stated as being key to saying no to taking on too many projects, being mindful of workloads and stress, and not wanting to burn out. Abilities to reflect, be calm, and to recognise distress in others were also noted. Resilience was mentioned as a factor in making sure that mistakes are not repeated, and that they are acted upon. Similarly, there was an emphasis on the importance of letting things go, especially if something is not your fault, and not your failure.

Collecting feedback on the workshop using Mentimeter
Mentimeter is a free online tool that can be used to collect feedback quickly during presentations and workshops (24). Participants were asked to contribute three words to describe the workshop at the end of the last feedback and summary. The results are summarised as a word cloud in *Figure 1*.



Fig. 1. Mentimeter feedback collected at the end of the workshop held on 12 July 2018.

Conclusion

The feedback from Mentimeter indicated that the workshop was successful. From the point of view of the authors as presenters and facilitators, it was remarkable and impressive that delegates were willing and able to share experiences on a delicate topic. There was considerable interest in the topic, during the workshop, on Twitter, and during the rest of the conference. Our conclusions from the discussions mirror those from the literature: organisations have to allow for failure; and managers have to ensure that staff are allowed to experiment, make mistakes, and know that they will be supported if something goes wrong. Not to report a mistake or an error, is a failure of professional duty. Future workshops are planned in the UK to develop these ideas and encourage colleagues to share their experiences.

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