Failure and learning amongst Arts and Humanities students

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Introduction

This is an interim report on an investigation that was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy History Subject Centre at the University of Warwick. It was motivated by an informed hunch – that although most people acknowledge the importance of failure in learning, many students fail to exploit the rich opportunities to learn from their small failures - encountered often in their studies – especially in the challenge-rich environment of Arts and Humanities subjects. It is the start of a process of discovery, a process that we hope will lead to new practices and new approaches, to help students to make the most of failure. The report will lead to further investigations, in the form of follow-up surveys, focus groups, interviews and design experiments – including technology experiments. Some interim conclusions are given in the text below.

The survey is available on-line, to view the questions or to add a further contribution to the large data set: http://www.inspireslearning.com/survey

Purpose of the study

The main objective of this study was to gauge the reflexive relationship that Arts and Humanities students (and graduates) have with "failure". Essay writing was chosen as an activity common to all of the students, an activity in which generic and significant points of failure are often encountered.

How familiar are they with common points of failure? How do they respond to failure? Do they learn from failure? How might they advise other students on how to avoid failure? Does their advice tally with the 'ideal' model that we expect? (The loop – try, get feedback, plan to improve, change behaviour).

In addition, evidence was sought that might indicate a positive correlation between a student's engagement in creative activities and their ability to avoid or overcome common forms of failure (forms that might often be encountered in creative practice).

Target population and sample size

We surveyed Arts and Humanities students during the Spring Term of 2011, receiving 722 responses in all.

684 were current Warwick students, representing around **25% of Warwick Arts Faculty students**. Others were alumni or students at other institutions. Little variation in the results was found amongst the various groups within the sample.

More details of the sample are given in Appendix 1 below.

Some headline results and inferences

Awareness of specific points of failure in the essay writing process

Of the 14 specific points of failure presented to the students (in questions 1.1 to 1.14), the students demonstrated a high degree of familiarity – with the exception of:

"1.7 Repeating past success" (40.4% said that they had never thought about this before).

This result, combined with other indicators of recognition ("it happened to me", "it often happens to me", "I've learned to overcome it") and the quantity of advice given in the free-text box, illustrates the extent to which the students have encountered a rich range of forms of failure. We might infer from this that the essay writing process is a valuable opportunity to experience problems. We could then consider if and how the students are learning from these challenges.

Experiencing and overcoming points of failure

Five of the specified points of failure were found to 'often' happen to more than 30% of the students. They are:

	Often encounter	Have learned to overcome or to avoid
1.2 Not having the will to start – you just can't get started in what seems to be too big a challenge	41.8%	14.5%
1.5 Exploring too many ideas, not enough focus	37.7%	17%
1.13 Lack of energy – you become physically or mentally tired	36.3%	9.7%
1.1 Not knowing how to start – you just can't work out what to do first, where to start, what to try	33.1%	23.4%
1.8 Struggling to express yourself – you know what you want to say, but you are struggling to express your ideas clearly	33.1%	11.0%

A complete set of results is given in Appendix 3 below.

Perhaps more worrying are the statistics on how students have responded to these common points of failure. For example, although 41.8% of students often encounter "1.2 Not having the will to start", only 14.5% of them "have learned to overcome or avoid it". This might indicate a lack of opportunity or support regarding the specific problems, or it might point towards a more systemic problem with the ability to learn from failures and to modify behaviour. This suggests a design experiment – provide facilities (e.g. an IT system) that encourages students to: keep hold of all of their work and feedback in one location; to reflect upon feedback (not just once, but continually, and in collaboration with advisors); to plan to improve; to practice; to keep the past in mind when writing further assignments.

Advice given by the students

The students were asked to:

"Tell us about what you personally do to avoid or overcome one or more of these problems."

579 students gave advice. Many of them responded with detailed and insightful advice. One student's response was almost 2000 characters long. Seven students gave responses of between 900 and 1500 characters. 1st year students were just as likely to give long responses as were alumni or PhD students. Neither age nor sex made a difference to the length of the responses.

Interesting terms used in some of the responses are:

Contains…	No. of records used in	Percentage of responses
Plan (planning)	215	37.1%
Time	190	32.8%
Read (reading)	144	24.9%
Try	116	20%
Research	91	15.7%
Tutor	71	12.3%
Early	58	10%
Deadline	48	8.29%
Talk	24	4.15%
Feedback	20	3.45%
Creative	10	1.73%
Preparation	5	0.86%

Much of the advice concerned better planning and better time management. The low frequency of the words "feedback" and "tutor" might either suggest that they are not a problem, or that the students do not understand the vital role that they can play. The notion of using "feedback" from previous work as a means of improving new work might be uncommon.

Responding to failure

In question 1.16 (following a series of questions about 14 possible causes of failure in the essay writing process), we asked:

"If something does go wrong, how are you likely to respond?"

The respondents had to choose one option from a series of 6. From all respondents regardless of institution, subject or level, the responses were:

Response	Number of respondents	As a %
Scrape something together and hope it is adequate	222	30.7
Treat it as a valuable learning opportunity	219	30.3
Reluctantly start again	177	24.5
Give in and try a different topic	48	6.65
Thrive on the challenge and the excitement	46	6.37
Resign yourself to failure	10	1.39

There was little variation between the results for history students and other disciplines:

34.2% of history students and 28.5% of other students would "treat it as a valuable learning opportunity".

21.8% of history students and 25.8% of other students would "reluctantly start again".

8.55% of history students and 5.74% of other students would "resign themselves to failure".

It is promising to see that 30.3% of the students are prepared to treat failure "as a valuable learning opportunity". However, we might question (considering other findings) whether this happens in practice – do the students reflect upon failure, plan to improve or change, and consequently alter their behaviour in the future?

Testing out ideas

We asked the students about the social contexts that they use to test out their ideas before writing. Six options were given, along with an opportunity to specify an alternative. The students could choose more than one option.

One-to-one	201	27.8%
In an informal group	196	27.1%
Learning Grid	9	1.25%
On a blog	10	1.39%
Facebook	53	7.34%
In a seminar	160	22.2%
Twitter (specified as other)	1	0.14%
Email (specified as other)	1	0.14%

30 students (4.16%) said that they never try out their ideas.

Creative practices and overcoming failures

The students were asked to list "creative" practices of which they have experience (e.g. non-academic writing). They were also asked to specify practices that they have encountered as part of their education. As might be expected from Arts and Humanities students, many had experience with at least one of the practices listed (85%). Many students had experience of more than one. 64 students specified further practices that were not listed. Similar results were found when asking about the creative practices that the students had experienced in their education.

As can be seen in the tables in Appendix 2, no correlation was found between the exposure that a student had to creative experiences and their ability to overcome the writing problems. This might indicate one of the following:

- problems faced and skills learned in creative practice are irrelevant to academic essay writing;
- the students are failing to learn from mistakes in creative practice;
- they are failing to transfer their skills and experiences between the distinct practices.

Appendix 1

7 were Warwick alumni
18 were current students at other universities
13 were alumni of other universities
182 were 1st year undergraduates
203 were 2nd years
172 were 3rd years
36 were 4th years (at Warwick this usually means students who have spent a study year abroad)
55 were taught MA students
2 were research MA students
52 were PhD students

216 male
506 female

234 History
30 History of Art
13 Philosophy and Literature
48 Philosophy
173 English Literature
135 French
60 German
44 Italian
30 Theatre
31 Film and Television

Appendix 2

The following table correlates the number of writing issues "overcome" by students with the number of the specified creative practices that they identified.

Number of arts experiences	Number of students with this range of experience	Average number of essay writing issues "overcome" by these students
11	1	0
10	2	2.5
9	1	7
8	5	3
7	11	1.45
6	35	2.34
5	55	2.52
4	76	2.1
3	106	2.07
2	151	1.87
1	172	2.01
0	107	1.7
Number of arts experienced in education	Number of students with this range of experience	Average number of essay writing issues "overcome" by these students
7	3	3
6	6	0.83
5	5	2
4	19	2.21
3	41	2.34
2	90	1.83
1	176	2.2
0	382	1.9

In addition, 64 students stated that they had done creative experiences other than those listed. These students on average overcame 2.18 of the specified writing issues.

Another 78 stated that they had done creative practices in their education that were not listed in the shorter list of educational creative practices. These students overcame, on average, 1.94 of the writing challenges.

Appendix 3

	Never thought about this	%	Never a problem	%	It happened to me	%	It often happens to me	%	I've learned to overcome or avoid it	%
1.1 Not knowing how to start – you just can't work out what to do first, where to start, what to try.	13	1.80	86	11.91	314	43.49	239	33.10	169	23.41
1.2 Not having the will to start – you just can't get started on what seems to be too big a challenge.	7	0.97	105	14.54	257	35.59	302	41.83	105	14.54
1.3 Technique – you struggle with using the appropriate academic technique, or you use the wrong technique.	60	8.31	187	25.90	281	38.92	115	15.93	130	18.00
1.4 Knowledge – you haven't got the necessary facts, or you make a factual error.	29	4.01	227	31.44	320	44.32	57	7.89	144	19.94
1.5 Exploring too many ideas, not enough focus.	13	1.80	76	10.53	300	41.55	272	37.67	123	17.04
1.6 Too few ideas explored, not enough experimentation	54	7.48	300	41.55	284	39.34	57	7.89	63	8.73
1.7 Repeating past success – you try to use work that you have done before (i.e. at A Level), but it doesn't work.	292	40.44	280	38.78	134	18.56	29	4.017	37	5.12

1.8 Struggling to express yourself – you know what you want to say, but you are struggling to express your ideas clearly.	15	2.08	150	20.77	278	38.50	239	33.10	86	11.91
1.9 Poor structure – your work is poorly organised.	13	1.80	220	30.47	280	38.78	117	16.20	156	21.61
1.10 Failed to be creative/original – you fail to find anything new or interesting to say.	39	5.40	191	26.45	327	45.29	126	17.45	71	9.83
1.11 Poor planning – resulting in running out of time, not getting access to the required resources (e.g. books), not realising how much work was involved.	13	1.80	217	30.05	268	37.12	174	24.1	117	16.20
1.12 Lack of commitment – you just don't put enough time and attention into it.	21	2.91	259	35.88	283	39.19	124	17.17	84	11.63
1.13 Lack of energy – you become physically or mentally tired.	20	2.77	110	15.23	313	43.35	262	36.29	70	9.69
1.14 Basic misunderstanding – you realise that you've misunderstood the question or issues.	47	6.51	240	33.24	369	51.10	23	3.18	100	13.85