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Failure to Launch: Feelings of Failure in Early Career Librarians

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Abstract

This feature article is adapted from a lightning talk given at the New Librarian Symposium 3.0 held in Toronto, Ontario on Friday, June 15, 2018. Failure has been a familiar feeling to us at various points in our LIS careers. By exploring our personal narratives of failure, we look more critically at our understanding of failure and how it manifests within the broader context of our profession and professional identities. This exploration revealed that our experiences of failure are heavily influenced by systemic structures, including institutional and societal pressures, professional norms, and broader neoliberal and capitalist ideas. Failure tends to be something that we regard inwardly and carry individual responsibility for; we want to encourage readers to look beyond themselves as a source of failure to the structures and systems that influence our work and understanding of failure.

Keywords

Failure, vocational awe, professional identity

Introduction

The perception of failure can influence our sense of who we are and can lead to feelings of inadequacy. We also often regard failure as an individual responsibility, sometimes overlooking external factors that may be responsible for our internalizing judgments. Failure has been a familiar feeling to us at various points in this profession. After some reflection, we began to question whether our professional identities as librarians¹ and the systems we work in have a role to play in the ways we experience failure. We initially explored this conversation at the New Librarian Symposium 3.0 held in Toronto on June 15, 2018. In preparing for this talk, we looked more critically at our understanding of failure and how it manifests within the broader context of our profession and our professional identities. During this process, we began to wonder if perhaps our perceived failings were, in some ways, a result of the systems within which we operate.

Carli and Melanie's Stories

Carli

The sense that I've failed is a feeling that's been following me since I left library school. Before graduating, I thoroughly believed that libraries could only be inherently good institutions and a place where I would undoubtedly find success and fulfillment once becoming an academic librarian. However, the reality of the workforce wasn't as ideal as I expected and left me questioning everything I once believed I could achieve professionally. The first punch of failure came in the form of a job rejection and the renowned line "we were looking for someone with a little more experience". This was followed by more rejections from libraries, all of which seemed to come to the same conclusion about me: I was a great candidate but I didn't have enough experience. I took this as a personal failure. I felt there was something inherently wrong with me because I was unsure of what else I could have done as a new graduate to gain more experience. I'd completed multiple co-ops, achieved high grades, and participated in professional associations and conferences. Scrolling through LinkedIn and talking to graduates from my cohort about their new jobs was difficult. Everyone else's successes were further indications of my failing to fit within the profession.

My next encounter with failure came shortly after accepting my first library job after graduation. This was a non-librarian role within an academic library institution. I was initially very excited and, just as I had at graduation, fully believed that this role would help me build relevant skills that would be recognized for future librarian jobs. In my mind, working in a library environment and learning about an important service point (not to mention earning money to pay my bills) was a good thing. However, I quickly

¹ We use the term *librarian* throughout this paper but are speaking of anyone who works in a library, regardless of whether they hold the title of librarian or are in possession of an MLIS or comparable degree.

came to realize that taking a technician or non-librarian position was a polarizing topic. I was told that this move could be interpreted by potential employers as a decision to not to become a librarian or an admission that my skill set wasn't strong enough. This interpretation was confirmed when my non-librarian experience was patronized and belittled in subsequent job interviews. This "failing" of mine to secure a librarian job quickly became compounded by my realizing that I still could not contribute to the profession in the ways I wanted to. It became a daily struggle to watch my librarian colleagues attend meetings, conferences, and workshops and see them have a voice in conversations. I never thought that hearing someone else say the words "I'm going to a meeting" would elicit so much envy and feelings of failure.

In a profession that prides itself on inclusivity, I had never felt so excluded in my life. I began to feel like academic librarianship was an exclusive club that I needed a magical key to get into. I was convinced that I was the problem. I began to doubt whether I had the skills to stand out in a shockingly competitive job market and whether I should identify as a librarian at all if I didn't have a job with that title. Perhaps I wasn't passionate or dedicated enough and needed to throw my entire being into my career to find success. My experience in the job hunt and within the workforce caused me to question whether I belonged in this profession at all.

Melanie

I too went through library school with the idea that libraries are inherently good places. Libraries facilitated the freedom of information (information *wants* to be free!), helped the downtrodden and the defenseless, and knew the answers to all of life's questions. Librarians were tireless, brilliant, self-sacrificing, and caring. It wasn't so much that I saw myself as one of those people as that I wanted to *be* one of those people.

Beginning my career as a librarian has been difficult. I was immediately surrounded by people who were everything I had expected librarians to be, and I had no idea how to reach their level. I felt lost in meetings and conversations, ill-equipped to have opinions on matters I had no experience with. I didn't know many of the people or acronyms others would mention, I wasn't familiar with various concepts or processes, and there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day for me to do my full-time job, look for my next job, and catch up on years of institutional and professional history. I would wake up in the morning and pray that whatever meetings were scheduled for the day would be cancelled, so I wouldn't have to sit quietly in confusion, terrified that someone would ask me to say something.

The expectations around work and deadlines were wildly different as a librarian than in university or in my previous jobs. As a librarian, I was being asked to do some of the same things we did in school, but the amount of time I was given to prepare was vastly reduced. I was shocked to learn how little time there was between being asked to do a thing and having to deliver on that thing, and I spent (and continue to spend) a great deal of time working evenings and weekends to meet my deadlines. The people around me seemed to be simultaneously living a balanced life and to be working endless hours without qualms or complaints. I would lie in bed at night worrying about the work I was

not doing and how I could teach people to use tools I had never used and follow processes I didn't understand.

Everyone around me seemed prepared, accomplished, and effortlessly smart — that last part most of all. It seemed to me that the problem I was having was that everyone I worked with was *smart* and I was *dumb*. It was my dumbness that made me feel like a failure as a librarian. But more than that, it was my laziness (if I worked harder I could be smarter), my timidity (if I asked more questions I would know more), and my selfishness (if I cared less about myself I would be more invested in the issues) that all worked together to make me the dumb, dumb dummy who was trying — and failing — to be like all the other librarians.

The Reality

For both of us, these perceptions of failure, whether regarding obtaining a job or doing the job well, were turned inward and interpreted as individualistic or as personal inadequacies. Our instincts at the time were to keep these feelings to ourselves, lest we tip off those around us who may not have noticed we were failing. Through conversations with each other and with other library workers, we realized that these feelings are not uncommon. Furthermore, while most people struggling with perceptions of failure blamed their own actions (or inabilities), they would not necessarily agree with the self-blame others put upon themselves. Through these discussions, we began to see some of the potential structural causes of our feelings of failure that were not always within our power to control.

Our current individualistic understanding of failure can be traced back to the 19th century. As the Western world became increasingly dominated by entrepreneurial and capitalist values which emphasized individualism, failure became an identifying characteristic (Kleinig, 2012, p. 1366; Hoggett, 2017, pp. 364, 375). This shift accompanied the narrative of the “self-made man”, whereby failure could be fixed squarely on individual faults, not external circumstances (Sandage, 2005, p. 3). In our narratives, we felt that our failures indicated a deficit of character. This kind of historical rhetoric echoes into modern discussions of success and failure, where failure continues to be seen as something inherently bad.

The way in which we construct and conceive of our professional identities also impacts our sense of failure. Here we feel it is useful to draw on the work of Fobazi Ettarh and her concept of vocational awe. Ettarh argues that the narratives around librarianship and libraries lead to the belief “that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (2018, Introduction, para. 3). Even before we entered the profession, vocational awe was feeding into our expectations for ourselves and for those around us, via the narrative of the librarian as tireless information warrior and libraries as bastions of free speech and endless possibilities. In her article detailing the concept of vocational awe, Ettarh (2018) cites Hillary Clinton's speech at the 2017 ALA Conference where Clinton states that libraries are “guardians of the First Amendment and the freedom to read and to speak. The work you do is at the heart of an open, inclusive, diverse society” (Introduction, para. 1). This kind of rhetoric

pervades conversations around the work that libraries do, even for those outside of the profession. Ettarh (2018) argues that when we uphold a system that perceives our work to be sacred and essential to democracy, failure to commit to the work of preserving democracy equals in a failure to live up to the ideals of the profession (Part Three, para. 1). The difficulty with casting our work in the light of the sacred means that any complaint — whether expressed outwardly or not — leads to feelings of guilt and shame, as if doing good work for the sake of goodness is insufficient. Any desire for a lighter workload or increased compensation is read as selfish and suspect.

In her keynote address at the 2018 Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians conference, Jane Schmidt described society as “obsessed with productivity, doing more with less” (p. 4). This supports the notion that if we are working towards lofty or inherently good goals, then we ought to work tirelessly. According to Fassett and Warren (2010), rhetoric around success and failure functions hegemonically to re-secure power of the institution over the individual (p. 1). This is evident when we look at the nebulous construct of success, which can purportedly only be achieved by reaching or exceeding expectations that are often vague, undefined, or unattainable. In both of our narratives, we talked about the need to work tirelessly in order to have our work meet an often-unspoken standard. Hoggett (2017) suggests that a culture where success is constantly shifting and undefined forces workers to constantly re-evaluate their productivity (p. 366). The result of this is feeling constantly judged. This, in turn, feeds into a system and cycle where “we become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent” (Ball, 2003, p. 220).

By looking at failure as something with strong individualistic overtones, we began to see our narratives through a different lens, specifically regarding the precariousness of current library work. In Carli’s narrative, the reasons for the job rejections were initially internalized as a personal and inherent inadequacy. Structures around job precarity and the deficit of entry-level positions, however, are part of what feeds into those feelings. Due to a competitive landscape and increasingly scarce job opportunities, it has become difficult to obtain stable employment as a librarian. Instead, finding a job as an early career professional means accepting that you will likely be working on a series of contract or on-call positions for a few years, possibly in part-time positions. New professionals are often told they should be willing to move across the country or to another country, which can entail leaving their homes, families and support systems, in order to take any employment opportunity they can. If this is something you are unable to do, your sense of failure can increase as suddenly it is your own fault you don’t have a job and not the fault of a system that prioritizes precarious positions or unstable employment opportunities. It is tempting to internalize job precarity as a personal failure — if it is your fault, it is also within your power to change. However, to blame yourself is not only unfair but also releases the library profession from taking any responsibility for creating this culture, thus preventing any lasting systemic change.

Conclusion

Stories of failure in popular culture and history often conclude by turning the failure into a success or by demonstrating failure to be a construct without which there could be no success (Kleinig, 2012, p. 1366). While we agree that learning opportunities can come from failure, our interest in this topic began because we felt that these generalized and idealized stories of failure did not adequately address its complexities. Why do people continually feel like they have failed and what systems do we exist in as librarians that foster repeated feelings of failure? In attempting to answer this question, we focused on identifying the ways in which our experiences intersected with systemic structures, including institutional cultures, professional norms, and broader neoliberal and capitalist ideas.

We wish to emphasize that our perceptions of failure are not an indictment on the specific places where we have worked or the people with whom we have worked. These feelings are common to people working in a variety of library institutions and across many library sectors. This suggests that this issue may be systemic, arising from the larger organizational structures that dictate how libraries and librarians should function.

For the two of us, our expectations about who we should and would be once we entered the profession were enticing enough to propel us forward, but also intimidating enough to prevent us from advocating for ourselves and from questioning why the bar is set so high. We looked at our mentors and colleagues and saw people who seemed to be living up to the ideals while we kept falling short. It is only recently that we have come to understand those people feel many of the same frustrations and inadequacies as we do. By becoming more aware of how idealized norms around the library profession can foster feelings of personal failure, we can take steps to adjust our perceptions and recalibrate what constitutes success.

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