**0-39%: The beginning of an infrastructure of failure in academia**

When I reflect upon my working life, I can think of three memorable times when I ‘failed’. Each time, I cried about it[[1]](#footnote-1). The first was when I was 17 and I had been working in an Italian restaurant for a couple of years. One particular evening, the restaurant was full to capacity and the food preparation was unusually slow. At one table, three customers each ordered a lasagne but, unfortunately, when their long-overdue order arrived it comprised, instead, of three bowls of spaghetti Bolognese. The error must have occurred either in my haste at inputting the order or being distracted by another request. I apologised sincerely, corrected the order and the customers appeared understanding. I knew I had blown my chance of a tip but all seemed to have been resolved. However, the customers complained to my manager. The manager told me that ‘the customer is always right’ and they got a free meal. I got extra training. I sobbed my heart out, into my apron, for an hour until they’d left but even I couldn’t deny I’d failed. In the restaurant industry, failure is outlined with clarity: supplying the incorrect order is undeniably unacceptable.

Looking back, I don’t know why I was so upset. I guess no-one likes to be told off but I had made a mistake and it wasn’t intentional. I had rectified it according to the correct procedure. In consequence, then, the real affront was that one simple, accidental error had led someone to question my capabilities. I hadn’t thought about that day for a long time – it’s now half my life ago – until I came to reflect on the other time I cried when someone suggested I’d failed in the requirements of my job. But, unlike my ‘lasagne tears’[[2]](#footnote-2), these tears were great, bulbous, monsoon-worthy drops that held gallons of my perceived shortcomings – or failure – to excel in my chosen career as a university lecturer. On this second occasion, a student made a complaint about me. It was personal, extremely unrestrained and, although rendered unsubstantiated by my colleagues in terms of any disciplinary action, it was decided that a practical response in favour of the student was necessary to dissipate the situation. Again, the ‘customer is always right’. I sobbed for three days this time. I was inconsolable. I spend hours of my life designing courses, planning lectures that I hope students enjoy being in, and reply to countless emails where I fuss, worry, sympathise, empathise, rage, exasperate and, mostly, agonise over the queries I receive and the people that send them. I sobbed because, despite all of that, someone had thought I had been derelict in my duty.

I am a little embarrassed to write about the third time I cried about my own failure. Not long ago, I entered a competition to win a University teaching prize. My colleagues emphasised the prestige that our department could enjoy if I was successful and reminded me that previous winners had drawn upon these achievements in promotion applications. The application involved presenting your intervention at an award showcase, whereupon a panel would appraise the best. The 15-minute presentation took a whole day to prepare. I didn’t win and, although I genuinely celebrated the success of my deserving colleague at the proceeding drinks reception, I cried all the way home. If I had measured their temperature, these would have been boiling globules of rage and indignation. I had failed and this was a disappointment, but the prevailing emotion was my own measure of my ‘lack of success’. Not only had I not been ‘the best’, I had also failed in something that demanded so much of my time – time I knew could have been spent doing something that was perhaps more measurably successful, like reducing my marking pile.

After my tears had dried, I came to reflect that my failure was necessary. It was necessary to set up a system of awards and prizes that would allow individuals to excel and utilise these accolades in career progression and it was necessary to expect ‘losers’ to participate in a system where we can be appraised. This is paralleled by the other academic successes, such as grant capture, which necessitate a number of other unsuccessful applications and often demand the mere application (successful or otherwise) a necessary part of fulfilling the requirements of the job and achieving promotion. Contending and failing is a vital part of academia. It sounds so obvious but, in order to have winners, there must be individuals who demonstrate ‘lack of success’; there must be failures.

This is where I began to consider how failure is an expectation of my everyday employment. Although we are starting to talk about it – during a chat in the corridor, on a Twitter feed – few people can or will admit to it or advise how to deal with it. This is because there are two types of failure: 1) the neglect or omission of expected or required action and 2) lack of success. In my restaurant job, (whether intentional or otherwise) I had neglected to do my job. I had served the incorrect order: a clear failure in the food service industry. But, on those other two occasions, I had not neglected my responsibilities. And so this leads me to the other aspect of failure: the lack of success. This could be cases where we do not officially neglect the technical responsibilities of our job, but where we might not consider our actions to be *only* satisfactory. We might also consider instances where we do fulfil our roles requirements but when certain aspects of what we deliver are subjectively measured as somehow substandard; or where we are unsuccessful in the outcome of what we produce. Such activities – like student module reviews, grant applications, journal rejections (see Table 1 for further examples of ‘acceptable’ academic failures) – are not only frequent, but normalised in academic life. In this profession, one type of failure is more acceptable than the other; one might affect the individual more than the other; and one is set up by the academy as actually necessary to career progression. And, indeed, the very ‘threat’ of lack of success is the substance upon which the whole principle of university education is balanced. Accordingly, in the remainder of this paper, I further explore failure as far from being an ‘unseen’ component of our academic workings (Horton, 2008), and instead as very much a present, consistent, fundamental and visible constituent of academic life often beginning with and anchored by the process of student attainment.

<*Insert* Table 1: Examples of ‘acceptable’ academic failure *about here*>

**Marking to fail**

There is significant discussion on failure in education. Frequently, news outlets report the positive and negative effects of student performance in key national examination milestones – in the UK, this often begins with the SATs testing at age 10-11 (National Education Union, 2018) and ends with A-Level qualification at age 17-18 (Griffiths, 2019) – on health, wellbeing, achievement and employment prospects. In academic terms, research has broadly concerned itself with the resultant effects of failing to secure an adequate education. In that vein, much work is considerate of how failure is strongly associated with, for example: race and ethnicity (Gillborn 1999); persistent or short-term unemployment (McKenna, 1996; Núñez and Livanos, 2010); lower-than-average income, lack of in-employment training and poor career progression (Palmer et al, 2005); substance dependency (Grant et al., 2012; Swendsen et al., 2009); poor mental and physical health (Poutlon et al., 2002; Ross and Wu, 1995); and imprisonment (Tulman and Weck, 2009; Wald and Losen, 2007). In another vein, there is also significant concern about ‘failing’ schools and the impact that they might have upon the most socio-economically ‘disadvantaged’ pupils (Chiang, 2009). In that respect, the threat of failure is a persistent discourse throughout the years of compulsory education worldwide.

Although far less academic attention is paid to the failure of students in Higher Education establishments, the subject is not ignored. In the UK, attention has thus far illuminated the supposed prioritising of international student income over their academic successes (Anonymous academic, 2019) and, conversely, the *lack* of failure by students in many universities (Gilligan, 2018). In that respect, the university is apparently outwardly a space where failure is of significant concern, and made visible in the everyday mechanisms that uphold it. This is, of course, legitimised and maintained via the system of awarding a degree based on percentage performance aligned to a particular degree classification. In the UK system, marks of between 0 and 39% are considered grades of failure and students would be unable to graduate with a degree qualification with an average mark of below 40%. To offer an analogy: they did not deliver the correct food order. However, although some institutions may allow students to hold ‘conditional’ or ‘acceptable’ failure marks of 35-39% in modules that are not compulsory, most would not allow students to progress through to the subsequent year of study without such an average and they would be required to re-take modules below the pass mark either in a re-sit period or in another year of study to continue their studies. In that respect, (if students are to be awarded any degree qualification), cases of persistent or permanent technical failure (an average below 40%) are rare. Indeed, entry requirements for particular courses act as a benchmark to ensure suitability and capability in that subject. As Fraser and Killen suggest, “[to] knowingly admit students who, for whatever reason, have no chance of academic success would be immoral” (2003: 254). There is no enjoyment to be found in failing a student.

Here, failure is a visible motivator on the pathway to graduation. The threat of attaining below the pass mark is the base concern for all students. In an attempt to respond to student concerns and demystify the marking process, universities are introducing marking criteria to illuminate the most overtly critical part of the degree-awarding process (see Figure 1 for an example from my institution). Vagueness around assessment has been considered as a barrier to student interpretation of marking practice and thus has led to the development of grading schemes. As Ecclestone (2001: 302) explains, “motivation, learning and standards of academic work are improved when students know exactly what they have to do”.

<*Insert* Figure 1: An example of essay-marking criteria at University of Liverpool *about here*>

However, beyond the threat of actual (below 40%) failure, the prevailing threat of ‘lack of success’ for most students in the UK is that they will be unable to attain the minimum 60% average required for an Upper-Second Class degree (known as a 2:1). A 2:1 is often considered the benchmark for employment as this is often the qualification required for application to most graduate schemes and postgraduate courses. This is because, as is illustrated in Figure 1, despite being well above the ‘pass mark’, the criteria used to describe the work of candidates below 60% are laden with failure. For example, assessments graded between 40 and 49% are ‘deficient’, ‘inaccurate’, ‘poor’, ‘limited’, ‘sparse’, ‘inappropriate’, ‘irrelevant’ and, at best, just ‘not very good’. Even when students achieve marks above 60%, the criteria still dictates that work is ‘not very insightful’ or ‘requires some improvement’. In other words: students have delivered the correct order, but the food is lukewarm. It is not a surprise, then, that in my feedback to students, the ‘for higher marks:’ comments are always lengthier than my comments of praise. Such ‘failure’-laden feedback surely raises implications of mental distress for students receiving it, especially if their performance consistently falls below 60%.

Beyond this, the term ‘degree classification’ (almost always shortened to class) is also problematic. A ‘Third’ class degree means that even if you are successful in achieving an undergraduate qualification, your degree result evokes tensions around social ranking. This isn’t simply scoring students but socially constructing them as ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than others in a sense that extends far beyond the technicalities of their module scores. Even when they have completed the sufficient requirements of their course, the ‘lack of success’ of a particular ‘class’ of degree is inherently visible. But, as Fraser and Killen (2003) explore in their research into staff and student perceptions of ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ in relation to University study, ‘successes’ encompass a variety of different aspects, such as ‘ability to manage stress’ and ‘dedication to a career goal’. Ordinarily these are unappraised in marking criteria.

Beyond the phraseology of the criteria itself, here we can see a fundamental link between marking practice and wider academic infrastructures of failure. It is this marking criteria that I would argue is the beginning (or indeed the starting point in a continuum) of an infrastructure of failure in academic life. This argument springs from the recognition of the subjectivity of the assessment mechanisms. As mentioned, students are marked on a scale of 0 to 100. However, this scale is only made feasible “subjects in which ambiguity regarding the standard of performance is low, as is particularly the case in mathematics … The question ‘percentage of what?’ becomes impossible to answer when students are given latitude in the way they can respond to an assessment requirement” (Yorke et al., 2000: 20-21). And, more than this, “although the percentage scale implies 100 points, the reality is that in most cases the majority of the scale is not used, and some marks never are!” (Ecclestone 2001: 302). In that respect “‘a good third’ may be difficult to discriminate from ‘a poor lower second’” (Yorke et al. 2000: 21). As Ecclestone contended, examiners were likely to express that they “know a 2:1 when they see it” (2001: 302). In their 2000 study, York et al. found that not all markers used specific criteria: “most had learned about the practice of marking from colleagues” or recalled “what had been done to their work when they were a student” (York et al. 2000: 19). Bloxham (2009) makes an appraisal of ‘fair’ marking and draws attention to blind marking. We may consider whether it is fair to blind mark. Marking is an emotive process and the weight of the repercussions of awarding marks may be acutely felt – stressful, even. The grade descriptors don’t acknowledge personal circumstance. An ‘adequate’ essay might well be an ‘excellent effort’. Likewise, an outstanding essay might genuinely be a poor effort. Here, we can interrogate just what a student demonstrates their ‘lack of success’ in. Accordingly, in some way, marking criteria fails.

And this, of course, is where our own experiences of having our work ‘graded’ is likely to have a bearing upon our definitions of failure in academic marking. Peer review is, despite its often double-blind process[[3]](#footnote-3), often vastly subjective. This often depends on a number of factors, including whether reviewers find the subject interesting and/or whether the author has sufficiently cited said reviewers previous work (Bedeian, 2003; Kelly et al., 2014; Smith, 2006). This then leads the reviewer to weigh in on their opinion of whether the manuscript is ‘publishable’. We might then, question how far our own experiences of both reviewing and being reviewed are likely to have a bearing upon the interpretation of the marking criteria for assessed work at undergraduate level. Indeed, in my institution, the marking criteria for most student essays, examinations and dissertation projects for assessments awarded scores of 80 plus, indicate that the submission must be ‘of publishable quality’. Aside from subjectivity around what denotes an acceptable standard of writing and structural composition, as Baume et al. (2004) explain, additionally examiners may not agree with the outcomes/findings of the work. In that respect, given we all have different views of that particular criteria, we might assume that students will experience varying responses to their work. We might find that in social sciences, in particular, students are rarely awarded marks within the highest 20% and perhaps such components in relation to our own appraisal of publishable standards are the barrier to this. More than this, given it is rare – at least in my modest experience of the publishing process – to have a manuscript accepted without revisions and after receiving, perhaps, three separate reviews that are often prevailingly critical, that we might also subject our students to these same high expectations (see Figure 2). In that respect, whilst many students achieve marks of between 70 and 79%, their lack of success in producing work of a publishable standard still renders it something of a failure[[4]](#footnote-4).

<*Insert* Figure 2: The continuum of influence in assessment marking *about here*>

However, conversely, we may see how wider academic infrastructures of failure have a positive bearing upon student grading. Aside from the disappointment that a student will likely feel, failing also has serious resource repercussions for staff. Some of this has workload implications. Failure requires further administration: re-sit examinations involve development of additional questions and provision of additional invigilation; and, of course, the output then requires more marking. Given time is a precious resource in academic life that often leads us to prioritise particular tasks, we may question whether we fail as teachers by not failing students. Bloxham (drawing on Smith and Coombe [2006]) explains how casual staff, in particular, “may feel under pressure to mark generously when they face evaluation by students and fear poor appraisal following low marks” (Bloxham, 2009: 211) and Black Minority Ethnic (BME) colleagues are systematically rated lower in student evaluations (Sian, 2019). We are also, perhaps more frequently in the neoliberal market of Higher Education in the UK, cognisant of student opinions of our teaching and assessment practice. We may question whether ranking devices such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) make us more cautious in admitting that the customer is anything other than ‘always right’. Marking is therefore an emotionally-loaded exercise. A colleague once suggested to me (in that aforementioned process of learning from peers in relation to best marking practice) that they “will always try to find every mark” from a student assessment if they can. In the main, I would agree. But, in that respect, we may consider whether we consciously assist students in ‘not failing’ academically.

**Removing or retaining failure?**

Given that our approach to marking and assessment is at the centre of a wider infrastructure of academic failure, we might question what we can do to resolve this situation. There is no easy response since the failures that demand so much of us are bound to large, often neoliberal, processes of economy and education (see also Horton, this issue). In my view there are two options. The first is to demand less failure. Here, our own academic experiences are likely to have a positive feedback effect on the continuum of academic practice I previously acknowledged. We could petition journal and grant reviewers to be less critical of our applications. We can further acknowledge the time and effort it takes to succeed in such endeavours and remove the more futile mechanisms of drawing attention to lack of success in our academic lives, such as the removal or reduction of module evaluations. But, for me, this option endangers the stringency in education and the quality and rigour of our outputs. We then lose the significance of success.

Instead, as a second alternative, we can accept our failure to succeed and, as much as possible, make them visible to normalise this process[[5]](#footnote-5). As this special issue argues, we should talk about it more. This can begin at an undergraduate level, where we can use formative feedback as an opportunity to discuss marking criteria and set up expectations around university-level grading structure. We can train PhD students and early-career researchers to deal with journal reviews as part of their career development. We must ensure institutions do not simply pay lip service to their advertised mentoring schemes. We can call for productive reviews where critique *is* levelled but inevitably we will learn from what is written and our writing is improved. We can rejuvenate the module evaluation process – perhaps to survey random students rather than all – and change the wording of our feedback mechanisms to reduce compulsory demands to document specific failures, rather ensure that poor practice is illuminated and improvements can be made. In both of these contexts, we must demand that biased, gendered, racialised, demoralising language is unacceptable. We can strive to value grant applications, rather than simply grant capture, and to make this more acceptable in promotion and probation criteria to acknowledge the complexity of the funding world and the hard to access research sites that can often be prohibiting to it. In doing so, we may find, as Harrowell et al. (2018) call for, the power in failure.

And here I recount a fourth time I shed a few tears. This was when I gave my parents a copy of my monograph, to whom I had dedicated it. The book was a culmination of research that had been born out of two failed PhD funding attempts, failure to gain access to several case study locations and several hundred ‘pulling-no-punches’ supervisory comments. Because, as I have already said, in order for there to be success, there must be lack of it or else the success becomes meaningless. However, what we can change is the proclamation of our failings. We must celebrate success *and* the lack of it – our failures – as a critical infrastructure to academic life.

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1. In the spirit of this issue, I am sharing examples that represent the stereotypical and gendered ‘failure’ of being outwardly emotional. My admission of crying is: a) factually accurate; b) best describes my embodied response to these situations; and c) a reaction rarely committed to publication (although they may appear widely in more informal mediums such as Twitter). Whilst I am cognisant that ‘crying’ is not always the appropriate reaction to a particular scenario, this admission is written in the spirit of encouraging others to accept rather than admonish emotive responses to particular disappointments and/or ‘failures’ in the academic workplace. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I wonder if there are many academics crying their own ‘lasagne tears’ after similar unintentional errors made when trying to balance the demands of the workload. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It must be noted that reviewing practice varies by journal and it is often possible for authors to suggest reviewers. The implementation of this practice can be critiqued from a number of competing viewpoints but this is outside the scope of this intervention. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. During the process of writing this paper, my department have removed a requirement for ‘publishable’ standards from their 80-100% category on the basis of the aforementioned discussion around its subjectivity and the disparity between an undergraduate assessment and an academic publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, I am not advocating the erasure of recognition of the first type of failure – where individuals neglect or omit their responsibilities. We must ensure that the everyday functions of our job are delivered: such as taking action if staff do not sufficiently deliver the fundamental obligations of their job e.g. failing to offer the teaching hours outlined in a module specification or ignoring institutional policy such as marking deadlines. We must also be cautious in our exposure of failure too. It is important to acknowledge that not everyone can or will wish to highlight their ‘failures’ and that the outcome of doing so may be more detrimental to some than others (see Clare, this issue). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)