

The beauty of failure and disappointment

Daniel Xerri discusses a topic many teachers deal with on a daily basis.



As English language teachers we experience failure and disappointment on a number of occasions in our professional lives. Whether it is due to our unrealised ambitions or the thwarted expectations of our students, we cannot really avoid experiencing failure and the disappointment that accompanies it. These dispiriting experiences are compounded by the failures and disappointments we go through in our personal lives. Being able to persevere in the face of unfulfilled intentions seems crucial for our emotional, mental and physical health as professionals. As we were reminded by Sarah Mercer's (2017) plenary at the IATEFL Conference in Glasgow, teacher well-being is not yet widely discussed despite its vital importance. In this article I reflect on the nature of failure and disappointment and on how perseverance might require a shift in perspective.

Minton's story

John Minton was a minor British artist who gained a bit of fame in the 1940s and '50s. However, at only 38 he committed suicide because he considered himself a failure. In a review of an exhibition marking Minton's centenary, Gayford (2017: 40–41) claims that 'In its way, failure can be as interesting as success, as well as more poignant ... Minton's greatest problem ... was misplaced ambition. His was a brilliant lightweight talent, but he wanted – admirably but misguidedly – to paint big, serious, important pictures.' Unfortunately, his work was not able to compete with that of Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Alberto Giacometti; this disappointment was something Minton could not stand.

Ironically, the last painting Minton produced before taking his own life

was *The Death of James Dean*. This unfinished picture seemingly depicts the dying figure of the 24-year-old Hollywood star, who was involved in a tragic car accident two years prior to Minton's suicide. While Minton might have identified with Dean because he symbolically represented the difficulties experienced by young people, there is a stark difference between the two. Dean went on to become a cultural icon and his premature death served to catapult his status to legendary heights. The same cannot be said about Minton and his relatively early passing.

Despite the fact that his wide range as an artist helped him to gain the respect of the Royal Academy and The London Group, in the mid-1950s Minton could not bear the thought that his reputation had reached its limits and was now in decline partly due to the increasing popularity of abstract art. His resignation to what he must have seen as an

unchangeable state of affairs indicates that failure for him seemed permanent.

In many ways, Minton's story is a reminder that for many of us one of the most disappointing experiences in life is to fail at the things we value and aspire to achieve. Failure is most often a horrible and deflating experience that every single human being has to go through at some point or another. Failure hurts because we do not just feel disappointed at having missed out on an opportunity or achieved what we longed for; it hurts because we end up feeling disappointed with who we are and what we're capable of. Failure is a curt and brutal notification that we aren't as good as we thought we were, a clear sign that our dreams aren't going to materialise. Failure is a punch in the belly, a hard slap to the face, a sharp kick to the shin.

Experiencing failure

One of the most misquoted inspirational quotes about failure that can be found pasted all over the internet is by Henry Ford. In *My Life and Work*, he says that 'Failure is only the opportunity more intelligently to begin again. There is no disgrace in honest failure; there is disgrace in fearing to fail' (Ford & Crowther, 1922: 19–20). The novelist Paolo Coelho (1993: 141) seems to share Ford's sentiments when he says that 'There is just one thing that makes your dream become impossible: the fear of failure.' Many people's fear of failure is so powerful that it makes them avoid the experience altogether. It's just like that first time you burn your hand as a child. Once you feel that kind of pain, the fear of it becomes an indelible part of your brain and you avoid the sensation at all costs. The pain haunts the recesses of your mind and you can never forget what it feels like to fail. It dogs your efforts throughout your entire life and you seek to elude it at all costs. It bites too hard to experience repeatedly. If you are determined to attain what you want, you know you can't possibly shun it completely. But once you've experienced the pain – even if it's as early as your childhood – you seem to become wired to steer clear of it as much as possible.



The pain of failure is many times searing and it makes the person experiencing it feel alone. Just as physical pain is felt alone, failure is experienced alone. Even when we fail together with a team of colleagues, the failure is not just a team failure. Each member of the team plays a role in the creation of that failure and even though shared with others it is experienced on an individual basis too. Being part of the team that failed means you yourself have been lacking in some way or other, even if only in choosing to be part of the losing side. Failure is one of the loneliest experiences we can go through. Our friends and relatives are usually willing to share our joy and success, but when we fail we are made to feel alone. And even when we do find support, our failure is ours alone. We would have failed as individuals and the gnawing thought that we are responsible for our failure makes us feel disappointed in ourselves.

Self-disappointment

The little known Victorian author Eliza Tabor Stephenson (1863: 10) claimed that 'Disappointment is to a noble soul what cold water is to burning metal; it strengthens, tempers, intensifies, but never destroys.' However, for some people disappointment can be a destructive force, especially when it is directed at oneself. Disappointing

others is bad enough since we often try to please those who are invested in our success, but being disappointed in yourself is probably worse since the person you value the most is the person you are or want to become. Your opinion of yourself shapes what you do in life and if you end up being disappointed in yourself you're unlikely to find much joy. It's as if you turn your back on yourself and are left with nothing at all. The disappointment can spiral out of control and make you hate yourself. The relationship with the person who should have most value in your life – yourself – ends up becoming the sourest of all and that poisons everything else. Being disappointed with what you've done can turn into disappointment with who you are. That is why perhaps nothing can make us feel more alone than when we're disappointed in ourselves.

According to another popular inspirational quote attributed to the American naturalist and essayist John Burroughs, 'A man can fail many times, but he isn't a failure until he begins to blame somebody else.' To avoid the pain of self-disappointment, we sometimes channel our disappointment towards others. When we fail, we are bound to feel disappointed with the world and with other people. We are likely to feel angry at being so unfortunate and we sometimes blame others for having been

cheated of what we wanted to achieve. Some of us persist in blaming the world for our bad luck, but those of us who are sufficiently self-critical know that most often we are the only ones to blame. As hard as it might sometimes be to admit this, we know that we cannot help telling ourselves, 'It is *my* failure. *I* have failed.'

Acknowledging responsibility for failure is difficult because it might quickly lead to the sensation of identifying with failure: 'I'm the failure.' There are very few things as dispiriting as becoming one with failure. Feeling you are a failure is much more potent than admitting you've failed at something. Not distinguishing between the two makes the pain of failure even more excruciating. It takes away all our courage and resolve and that's why some people prefer to bury their heads in the sand and blame others for their failure. They don't want to slide into the debilitating experience of becoming a failure. Not owning up to one's failures isn't going to change things, but some of us feel it helps to shield them from the possibility of having their very being wiped out by the risk of failure swallowing them whole.

Resigned to failure

After failing at something, especially if it happens more than once, we sometimes end up resigning ourselves to the way things are and embracing failure as the natural order of things. Failure would have hit us so hard that we do not want to persist in trying to attain what we aspired to. We look at those who are more successful than us and with a hint of envy wish we could have been them. We perhaps yearn to have had a better hand in life, lived a different life where success came naturally to us. We settle for failure and allow disappointment to wash over us and paralyse our efforts to try again. Giving up is hard, but some of us prefer doing so rather than experiencing failure once again. The pain does not seem worth it. Falling hurts. To pick oneself off the ground takes too much courage and effort. The prospect of falling again is just too painful. We ask ourselves, 'Why should I keep doing this to myself?' So, we stop. With that decision, we bring to an end those things we would

have wanted to achieve in life and our profession but failed to do so. Some of us are left with a sense of bitterness while others learn to live contentedly in spite of their disappointments.

The disappointment that failure engenders is partly responsible for warping our thinking about the value of failure. Its connotations seem to be entirely negative to us and we refuse to acknowledge that it can have any redeeming qualities. That is why in human culture, success is lauded and those who succeed are admired and seen as being a cut above the rest. On the

“Disappointing others is bad enough since we often try to please those who are invested in our success, but being disappointed in yourself is probably worse since the person you value the most is the person you are or want to become.”

other hand, those who fail are sometimes made to feel tarnished, as if their failure is written large all over their faces. Just like a pock-marking disease, failure is ugly and potentially contagious. We don't want to look at it and we're afraid of being contaminated by it. It seems as if there is nothing for us to learn from it. The disappointment of failure seems a wasteful sensation, a depletion of time and effort, a squandering of life and being.

Conclusion

Recently, at Adelaide Airport I saw a large wall panel featuring a quote widely (mis-)attributed to Henry Ford: 'When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.' Despite not being able to verify whether these words were a genuine product of Ford's thinking, they helped to remind me of the significance of determination in the face of failure and disappointment. Like any other teacher and human being, I have had my fair share of failure and disappointment in both my professional and personal life. Ford's words made me realise that there is a kind of beauty in failure and disappointment. Aspiring beyond our limitations is bound to lead to failure at some point, but this should not stop us from attempting to clinch what might be presently unattainable. Disappointment is a reminder that the fortitude that drives our aspirations still roils within us like a sea that will one day breach the rock that holds it back.

References

- Coelho P (1993) *The Alchemist*. (AR Clarke, Trans.). New York: HarperCollins. (Original work published 1988)
- Ford H & Crowther S (1922) *My Life and Work*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company.
- Gayford M (2017, July 15) A tale of two artists. *The Spectator* 40–41.
- Mercer S (2017, April 5) *Connecting minds: Language learner and teacher psychologies*. Plenary at 51st Annual IATEFL Conference and Exhibition, Glasgow.
- Stephenson ET (1863) *St. Olave's* (Vol. 3). London: Hurst and Blackett.



Daniel Xerri is a Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta, the Joint Co-ordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG, and the Chairperson of the ELT Council in Malta. www.danielxerri.com