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Honest Talk About Failure

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Honest Talk about Failure

Historians today must carry hefty toolkits. In addition to the traditional demands of the discipline—critical thinking, analytical acumen, the ability to locate and make sense of evidence, storytelling talent—we have been gradually adding items to our job descriptions. Emerging historians are expected to be able to build a website, develop an app, raise money, engage with various publics, make a map, court the press, and manage and curate multi-authored history projects, often simultaneously.

Like it or not, failure is often a part of our education, our practice, and our profession. For many historians, it is often a quiet affair, a private crisis. It can happen in the archive, when we don't find what we are seeking. Fired up with a new idea, we conduct literature searches and realize that someone else has just published an article making our argument. Our work is rejected for publication. Disappointing and frustrating, failures can drain confidence and jeopardize career aspirations. For many, failure is also lonely; it takes place behind the closed doors of offices, alone in our cars, outside of the realm of understanding of our families and friends.

For historians engaged in projects, partnerships, and collaborations, however, failure runs the risk of becoming all too public. As practitioners who are engaged with communities, schools, government bodies, cultural and heritage institutions, and other organizations, our work becomes increasingly complex. At the same time, our efforts take place on a public stage and involve diverse participants with varying needs, goals, and resources. When we involve students through service-

learning and civic-engagement projects, we are faced with a range of pedagogical and training issues—we become responsible for providing the diverse skills and competencies necessary to engage in collaborative and experiential practice. When we design and participate in digital humanities initiatives, we often face a host of unprecedented challenges and we may need to seek out specialized expertise.

Given the multiple constituencies at play in collaborative endeavors, things can and do go wrong. We openly acknowledge the risks of doing history in public, yet we rarely discuss failure frankly. Euphemisms abound; we refer to stumbling blocks, hiccups, and of course, the ubiquitous “lessons learned.” Admitting failure is embarrassing and humbling. It jeopardizes our public image and may compromise our legitimacy and with it, financial funding in the present and future.

While the tendency to euphemize failure and move on from it quickly is understandable, honest and open confrontation of failure and its causes can encourage innovation, transparency, and stronger relationships—all key ingredients to sustained collaborative work. According to Ashley Good of Fail Forward, a consultancy that helps organizations learn from failure to become more resilient, those who don't have any failures to talk about are either being dishonest or they are not taking risks. Conversely, the ability to be honest about failure is a sign of strength. In short, how we respond to failed projects is a litmus test for public historians and all practitioners who take commitments to engagement seriously. When we rebound from failures by moving on to new projects

without stopping to reflect on what went wrong, we miss a valuable opportunity to grow.

In other fields, failure is recognized as critical to success. Indeed, it is usually built into the development process. We originally discussed learning from failure at a roundtable with a group of colleagues who work in varied professional settings at the 2014 meeting of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) in Monterey, California, just down the coast from Silicon Valley, where trial and error is integral to its culture of experimentation, innovation, and the pushing of boundaries. A similar mindset exists in medicine, where trial and error is central to the development of vaccines, treatments, and medication. In the academy, architecture, design, and engineering programs have a long history of reducing the fear of failure by acknowledging its essential role in the learning process.

If knowledge is indeed power, recognizing and reshaping power dynamics is often a critical component of knowledge. Sharing authority can be as destabilizing as it is necessary. In preparation for the NCPH session, panelists prepared case studies that reflected on failed efforts at collaboration, on what they learned about moving forward after failure, and on how they repaired broken relationships. The case studies included a start-up community-based heritage site; a multidisciplinary conference intent on sharing authority between diverse practitioners in history and heritage; a museum's effort to collect, preserve, and interpret the history of immigrants who were

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also neighbors and tenants of the museum; and two service-learning public history projects involving nonprofit organizations.

Most of the roundtable participants were longtime members of the NCPH with successful track records and reputations for diligence. It took courage, we were told over and over by people who attended the roundtable session and others we talked to later about the session, to “air our dirty laundry.” One of the difficulties of assessing failure honestly is that it is usually impossible to convince all participants in a failed collaborative effort to speak or write about what occurred. Honest and full renderings of failed partnerships, paradoxically, require a level of trust and commitment—and often in failed collaborations, trust and commitment were either never in place or were compromised.

Due to the sensitivities of our projects and confidentiality issues, it would be unethical to provide details about our case studies here (yet another reason that truly frank assessments of failure are hard to come by). However, we can outline some of the larger problems that

Matthew encountered in his work as a historical consultant and board member for a community-based heritage site. This project was plagued by insecurities among the volunteer board of directors, fundraising failures, miscommunication with external power brokers, and a general lack of trust. Matthew shared some of these difficulties and challenges at the NCPH roundtable, and we discovered that many of the roundtable participants shared similar experiences. The panelists agreed that ostensibly clear-cut issues—such as inviting project participation, delegating tasks, and maintaining a coherent shared vision and mission—can become complicated. Nearly all of the projects discussed by participants were plagued by poor communication, a lack of trust between stakeholders, staff/participant turnover, and an inattention to the varying degree of power individuals, organizations, and institutions hold within and beyond a project. The case studies helped to highlight essentials for successful collaboration: a clearly understood and communicated shared purpose that could withstand

pressures and setbacks, mechanisms for ongoing decision-making, and a framework for maintaining a commitment on all sides to open and honest communication even in the face of difficulty or conflict.

The NCPH session was a multi-platform discussion. It of course existed in real life, with much interaction among the panelists and between the panel and the audience. It also took place in real time through Twitter, as audience members and panelists live-tweeted and interacted using the hashtags #failure and #ncph2014. We also used an app called Poll Everywhere, which allowed audience members to anonymously text comments from their phones; the comments then appeared on a screen behind the panelists. The discussion on Twitter was much more theoretical, and less personal, because our real names were attached to our accounts. The discussion on Poll Everywhere was anonymous and as a result was very lively and much more personal. One of the session's best comments came via Poll Everywhere: an audience member asked if it was indeed possible to build failure into our historical practice, could we then fail proactively, as is the case in technology and medicine? The audience and roundtable participants deliberated on this question; suggestions included naming new or cutting-edge ventures "history labs" or "history workshops" to highlight experimental qualities.

The crowdsourced reflections helped us distill some of the most important lessons to be learned from failed collaborative efforts in

public history teaching and practice. Here are some of the most salient takeaways:

Assumptions are collaboration killers. In each case study, project partners made assumptions about one another and about the purpose of the collaborative endeavor, which weakened relationships and compromised the project's success. What steps should we take to avoid assumptions? Revisit the goals and the mechanisms for meeting objectives early and often. Clarify who is responsible for what. Make timelines explicit. Listen actively. Be attuned to gender, race, and class differences shaping the positions of your partners. Take responsibility for gently but clearly correcting assumptions others have made about your role.

Building collaboration into the planning process allows a project to survive implementation.

In all of the case studies we examined, fragile or insufficient relationships were a primary cause for failed collaborations. To foster strong personal and institutional relationships, dedicate time, resources, and energy to establish trust, to establish roles and responsibilities, and to identify and manage all expectations of all partners. Often, collaboration means that we bring our expertise as historians and curators to a project, but we rely upon the expertise of our informants and partners to shape its vision and scope. As one audience member at the NCPH session put it, "it is vital to work from the very beginning to answer all participants' questions, not just our own."

Friction and contestation are necessary and not necessarily bad. An exciting and valuable project will provoke. That's not a bad thing. Accepting conflict as a part of the process and not a deal-breaker allows for elasticity and dynamic engagement that ultimately can improve and strengthen a collaboration, as long as trust is established and communication lines are open.

It is OK to take time to regroup when things go wrong. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we fail. Balls get dropped or key players get sick, go on leave, or quit. Interpersonal conflicts emerge. Publicity generated about a project focuses on some partners while ignoring the roles and contributions of others. Supporters of the collaboration turn their attention elsewhere. Organizational or political changes have a trickle-down effect that jeopardizes or compromises a collaborative project. Taking a step back is not a failure but a realistic response to a complex situation. As long as the lines of communication between you and your partners remain open, a temporary retreat can be helpful and necessary.

Never underestimate the power of a genuine apology. If and when relationships are damaged, projects suffer and the resolve to work together often goes out the window. Sometimes what is needed is a genuine apology. At personal and organizational levels, acknowledging mistakes and seeking to make amends and rebuild is often the best, though often the most difficult, way to come back from failure. ■■■■