

Central Queensland University, University of Canberra and University of Canberra

Donna Lee Brien, Sandra Burr and Jen Webb

‘Fail better’: doctoral examination and the creative field

Abstract:

Anyone working in the creative arts is likely to have to deal with ‘failure’ at some stage. This paper briefly outlines the rhetoric associated with the concepts of success and failure, and then moves to how these terms and the values associated with them are applied in the process of examination. We critique the pervasive focus on ‘positive’ results, and posit what may be alternate ways to think about creative processes and their outcomes. Drawing on data gathered for an Australian government funded project, ‘Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards’, we discuss failure in the light of current examination practices and processes in the creative arts, and from the point of view of candidates, supervisors, examiners and research higher degree administrators. We provide definitions for ‘failure’ in this context, and explore whether – and how – failure can be useful in doctoral level creative arts.

Biographical notes:

Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries, Assistant Dean (Postgraduate and Research), Creative and Performing Arts, and Chair of the Creative and Performing Arts Research Group for the Learning and Teaching Education Research Centre at Central Queensland University. A chief investigator on a new nationally funded project developing a MOOC on creativity for postgraduate coursework students, Donna has been a key project team member of three nationally funded learning and teaching projects – *Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards*; *CreateEd: strengthening learning and teaching leadership in the creative arts*; and the *Australian postgraduate writers network*; and was awarded an ALTC Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning in 2006.

Sandra Burr is an Adjunct Associate at the University of Canberra where she also teaches in the Creative Writing program. She has a doctorate in creative writing, is a member of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, and currently manages the ARC Project *Understanding creative excellence: A case study in poetry*. Sandra’s publication and research interests focus on human-animal relations.

Jen Webb is Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research. Jen holds a PhD in cultural theory, focusing on the field of creative production, and a DCA in creative writing. She has published widely in poetry, short fiction, and scholarly works: her most recent book is *Understanding Foucault: a Critical Introduction* (Allen & Unwin, 2012). She is currently completing a book on theories of embodiment, and a textbook on research for creative writing. Jen is co-editor of the Sage book series, 'Understanding Contemporary Culture', and of the journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. Her current research investigates the use of research in and through creative practice to generate new knowledge, and the relationship between poetry and innovation

Keywords:

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Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. (Samuel Beckett)

Introduction

In Western culture, success is highly valued – at least in principle. High achievers in business, the academy or sport are rewarded; the chief executive officer is the person who matters; and everyone pays attention when the vice-chancellor speaks. The person who wins the gold medal at the Olympics goes into history, the person half a millisecond behind does not rate a place in Olympic history. Similarly, who remembers who almost got that important job?

This is, however, just one way to look at success and failure; while they may be presented as two parts of a binary relationship, this is a false dichotomy. Both success and failure are defined by context, and the status of each is contingent: sometimes the CEO is put on trial rather than cheered, and the race winner ignored in favour of a more current, or more telegenic, celebrity. The context changes, the goal posts move, success slides further out of reach; and ‘all the while’, as Michel de Certeau reminds us, ‘ideology babbles on’ (1984: 46).

It is risky to ignore ideology – or, to use Foucault’s preferred term, discourse – on the grounds that all it does is babble, because that babbling produces what counts as material reality. So, in the current era, there is a plethora of discourse reminding us that success is the outcome of having a positive attitude and making a personal effort, while failure is due to a lack in the individual. ‘If your business fails or your job is eliminated’, Barbara Ehrenreich observes, ‘it must because you didn’t try hard enough, didn’t believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success’ (2009: 8).¹ The sociological, economic or psychological contexts are thereby ignored, and a kind of magical thinking applied that simply overlooks the complexities of the case. NASA flight director Gene Kranz, for example, insisted that ‘failure is not an option’ (Kranz 2000), and this mantra has gone into the vernacular – as, for example in much sports commentary and many self-help books – despite the fact that on several tragic occasions, NASA has found that failure was not only an option, but an unavoidable actuality. Similarly, Henry Ford is widely quoted as saying that failure ‘is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently’ (2006/1922: 24). The upbeat tone and the no-fault logic of this statement are appealing, and it has become a familiar mantra along the lines of ‘if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again’. However, like the Kranzian approach, this does not address the contexts of failure; and it assumes that success, measured by market position, is the only acceptable outcome from an action.

In this paper, we address the questions of success and failure, and particularly what those terms mean for candidates, supervisors and examiners of creative arts doctorates. These questions have significance for this group of people because of the role played by the discourse of success in the academy. Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis shows that success and failure are field-specific, rather than generalisable (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 81), and

so we maintain a focus on the use of these terms within the academic field, and the field of creative production.

In the academy, the Fordian perspective tends to dominate: that is, an approach where failure is simply the opportunity to begin again. This is evidenced in the validity associated with the testing of a null hypothesis, for example, or in the validity offered to research iterations that allow a gradual building of knowledge. Such an approach to the meaning of success – that it is a creative exploitation of ‘failure’, or the productive use of trial and error – is also an approach used in the teaching of creative arts. Students who apply the trial and error principle learn not only how to explore, but also what their limitations are, and hence what skills they need to develop.

This, however, is not the attitude that mobilises research training policies and practices: here the academy moves into a Kranzian mode, where failure is not an option, and success is the opposite of failure, rather than a temporary endpoint in an iterative process. University research offices, HDR supervisors, examiners and candidates are all involved in a quest for reportable, summative success. For the university, students who do not complete, or do not complete in a timely fashion, are markers of failure, bringing into question the academic rigour and integrity of the institution and its HDR processes, and causing the loss of an income stream, and of the investment the university has made in that student.² For the university, then, the ramifications of failure are both financial and reputational. For the supervisor, such failure casts doubts on their academic and leadership skills, and can result in the denial of a salary increment, or reduced promotion prospects. But perhaps the biggest impact falls on the candidate who, after investing anything from two to ten years on a research project, has nothing to show for it.

Like the academy, the field of creative production has a complex relationship to the logic of success and failure. All artists, we could say axiomatically, want to produce great work and to be recognised for it. But as in other social domains, success is fluid, and the values of the field are not consistent across all art practices and contexts. The field is bifurcated, with autonomous work (‘art for art’s sake’) at the valued end of the field, with heteronomous (popular and commercially successful work) at the less valued end. Art works, Bourdieu argues, are ‘realities with two aspects, merchandise and signification, with the specifically symbolic values and the market values remaining relatively independent of each other’ (Bourdieu 1996: 141), though of course they affect each other. Artists who are neither technically proficient, creatively innovative nor operating with a good eye to a potential audience are not likely to be in a position to take up any sort of place in the field. Artists who are technically proficient and have good commercial instincts are the ones who may achieve wealth and fame, but who are likely to be considered failures in strictly artistic terms (Bourdieu 1993: 39).

This may sound a bit severe; and certainly the space between the autonomous and the heteronomous ends of the field has narrowed since Bourdieu produced his analysis; twenty years ago. However, it is still evident that, by and large, titles on the bestseller lists are rarely identified, by the gatekeepers, as works of quality literature.³ These works

rarely go on to win the major international literary awards. And the gatekeepers – critics and judges – can be savage in their rejection of *arriviste* producers. Read Clive James on Dan Brown, for example: ‘he makes you want to turn the pages even though every page you turn demonstrates abundantly his complete lack of talent as a writer’ (James 2013). James acknowledges the commercial ‘pull’ of Brown’s writing, but excludes him from the field on the basis of what he sees as a lack of artistic content, talent, or sensibility.

Of course there are exceptions to this ‘rule’. An artist who has had a long career marked by critical recognition can become fabulously successful in commercial terms, without losing their identity as artistic successes; and vice versa. Annie Proulx, who has been writing to critical acclaim since 1975, leapt to popular attention after the film versions of her ‘Brokeback Mountain’ and *The Shipping News*, without losing credibility as a literary writer, and without ceasing to operate as a literary writer (Proulx 2009). Stephen King, on the other hand, after a long career as a ‘pulp’ horror writer, has come to be respected as a literary elder (King 2006). Context is everything, it seems, when it comes to determinations of success or failure.

Nonetheless, academic failure, negative critical reviews, or rejection by one’s peers tend to feel more like instances of personal and general failure than a contextual event, and this can have a negative effect on personal wellbeing. Such failures reflect directly on what Judith Halberstam describes as ‘the desire to be taken seriously’ (2012: 6) and on both external and self-perception of value. In 1989, psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman reported on research that tests the importance of illusions in maintaining a positively oriented adaptation to the world. This effect, also named ‘ego-shock’ (see Campbell, Baumeister, Dhavale & Tice 2003), can profoundly damage self-esteem and have a negative impact on an individual’s ongoing confidence and thus their ability to make and disseminate work. So, to bring this discussion back to research higher degrees, although not all academics are capable supervisors, not all HDR candidates are equipped to take on the demands of a research degree, particularly when it is undertaken in and through the equally demanding framework of art practice. The pressures on candidates may make successful and timely completion unlikely, and this equates to failure in the world of research training where ‘failure is not an option’.

Research higher degree failure

How is failure actually construed in creative arts HDR contexts? During our recently completed Office for Learning and Teaching project, ‘Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards’ (Webb, Brien & Burr 2012), this question generated considerable discussion among project participants.⁴ An issue consistently raised by these participants was that the structure and creative content of creative dissertations complicates the HDR process, because it provides two distinct objects for examination, and requires two distinct sets of evaluation criteria and standards to be employed. There were a number of stories offered about examiners who failed to engage adequately with a candidate’s work because they did not understand it. Others spoke about examiners lacking sufficient guidelines or criteria with which to make scholarly

and aesthetic judgments about the work under examination. Some of this centred on the lack of uniformity amongst universities, and especially the lack of standardised guidelines that clarify pass/fail criteria. As one HDR convenor said:

Actual failure is a complex question given how final it seems. I certainly think that disciplines need to be proactive in providing criteria that differentiate quality in theses—that is, what a great thesis is, and what a problematic thesis is, and what would be required to bring it up to standard.

Despite this, very few HDR candidates are, in fact, failed by their examiners. We assert this on the basis of our personal experience (authors Brien and Webb having, to date, supervised more than 70 candidates, and examined over 90 between them); on the basis of our analysis of some 70 creative arts doctoral examination reports (less than four percent of which recommended failure); on anecdotal evidence from conversations with colleagues and research project participants; and on the basis of the literature we surveyed as part of the project and after. Mullins and Kiley (2002: 376) calculated that about three per cent of submitted doctoral theses fail; while Cantwell and Scevak (2004), Johnston (1997) and Pitkethley and Prosser (1995) likewise report very few recommendations that a thesis should fail. The reasons offered for this low failure rate are various. A number of studies have attributed it to a predisposition – particularly noted among experienced examiners – to pass a thesis (see Mullins & Kiley 2002). Bruce Barber suggests there is a ‘deep cultural ambivalence ... especially at the graduate level – against failure’ (2009: 55).

Our research shows that most examiners felt that the failure rate was satisfactory, but some expressed concern about the high pass rate, and suggested that examiners lack the courage to fail theses. One participant said: ‘Who dares to fail the work? I think that’s an elephant in the room’ (examiner). A similar view was offered by a head of school, who asked:

Is it good for our discipline that people don’t fail? It’s good for our universities that they all pass and they get the money and get a pat on the back as a supervisor, but for our disciplines, should everyone be passing? What does that do to the standard of PhD?

Those who disagreed with this view argued that candidates typically do not fail because the HDR process has sufficient checks and balances to ensure that candidates who are unlikely to succeed withdraw before examination, for multiple reasons: including their experience of inadequate or unsatisfactory supervision; having underestimated the time and commitment required to complete their degree; or having come to a realisation that they are simply not up to the task. Consequently, as many of our participants suggested, ‘if a PhD thesis had been written and submitted, the candidate deserved the degree’ (Joyner 2003).

What examiners test

This leads to a consideration of what examiners mean by the words ‘pass’ and ‘fail’. The definitions of these terms are quite conventional: that a dissertation as a whole either achieves particular standards, or fails to do so. To some extent this is perfectly reasonable; after all, a higher degree is about knowledge, and not art: one participant made this point very clear, stating, ‘I have always seen a PhD as being a research training program and not an opportunity to produce great art. Sometimes great work does emerge, but this should not be the driver of a PhD’ (examiner). What constitutes the criteria for success or failure in the research project, as our survey of examiners’ reports revealed, is clearly understood. The work must: constitute an original contribution to knowledge; be scholarly, coherent and rigorous; be appropriately located in terms of the existing scholarly literature and creative work; be well presented; and, demonstrate a synthesis between the creative and critical elements (Webb, Brien & Burr 2012).

These are criteria that could reasonably be applied to any doctoral dissertation. But a creative arts doctorate is not ‘any doctoral dissertation’. It is produced according to a different paradigm, being practice-led or practice-based; and, typically being presented in two parts, results in an object that is not like the product of other humanities, arts or social sciences candidatures. This seems to introduce a wild card that makes examiners reluctant to apply those criteria confidently to the work as a whole.

The result is, perhaps, an element of uncertainty in assessing the components of the creative arts doctorate. Some figures from our analysis of examiners’ reports may clarify this. For those dissertations that examiners considered ‘very good’ – that is, requiring only minor corrections – 6 per cent considered the creative artifact to be unsatisfactory, and a surprisingly high 26 per cent found the scholarship in the critical essay to be inadequate. Where major revisions were recommended, 10 per cent found the creative artifact unsatisfactory, and 23 per cent found the critical work inadequate. In those reports, there were consistently lists of corrections and revisions required of the flawed critical work; but even when examiners offered quite scathing comments regarding the quality of the creative work, there was only one example of a report requiring revisions of the artwork.

Two key elements emerge here. First, where the creative work is considered to be of good quality, a dissertation seems to attract a milder evaluation overall. If the creative work is good but the scholarship underlying it is identified as being inadequate, an examiner will still record it as requiring only minor rewrites. Next, it seems that the creative work is not widely considered as capable of amendment – examiners treat it as they would a published book, or a finished exhibition. They might review it harshly, but not expect that any changes will be made as a result. As one participant said, ‘I’ve never known a creative component to be re-examined but almost consistently there are revisions that need to be made to the exegesis’ (Associate Dean, Research). So, although examiners insist that they treat the elements of a creative arts dissertation as a single unit, and apply conventional evaluation criteria to them, this is not occurring in practice. While the

critical work is evaluated according to widely accepted evaluation standards, the creative work seems to float in a 'no-man's land', occupying a 'not-quite art' and 'not-quite academic' place in the process.

This leaves candidates, supervisors and examiners in a difficult position. Generally, there is general agreement about, and understanding of, the logic of critical work; and, given that examiners are usually artist-academics, there is confidence in evaluating artwork. However, examiners do not seem confident about how to examine the quality of thinking and the contribution to knowledge effected by the creative element of a creative arts doctorate. Perhaps this is because examination *per se* relies on criteria designed to evaluate only those research projects that meet the conventions of scholarship, and as Halberstam argues, this does not fit with creative practice:

terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy (2012: 6).

If Halberstam is right, such criteria can be read as a failure in themselves: research is a creative act, and yet the effect of examination is to stifle creativity. Her view is expressed by many creative arts academics who suggest that attempts to apply generalised standards or guidelines in examination may suppress candidates' creativity, because they apply what Foucault terms 'a code of normalization' (2003: 38). Normalisation does not fit neatly with the highly experimental approach that drives much creative work; and nor does it allow for the possibility of failure. One participant, an Associate Dean of Research, said:

we're all creative practitioners, and we all know that some of our work doesn't work. So as a student you are committing four years of your life to a big creative project, and if it just doesn't work, what do we do with that?

A question that emerges here is whether the creative element of a creative arts doctorate is actually art, or simply another way to document a research project. Anthropologists, for example, frequently use photography to document their research, and the results may be very appealing – but they are typically made *as* research, and not as works of art. Such outputs are less likely to fail in the way that an artwork is likely to fail; and they are easier to examine because, provided they are sufficiently well made to act as a reliable document, an examiner can read them as commentary on, or evidence of, research findings, and need not address any aesthetic values they possess.

A creative arts doctorate is something other than this because, although it must be an attempt to build knowledge about a problem or question, it must also respond to the imperatives of the field of creative production. It is art as well as research, and must satisfy two different discursive regimes:

The creative component effectively has to meet two standards: it has to meet the standard of professional creative arts practice and demonstrate a level of professional competency as

well as demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge in a scholarly context. It's actually serving two masters, and it has to do two things: it has to prove that it's legitimate as art practice and it has to demonstrate that it's producing knowledge. If you accept that not all art practice involves the production of knowledge then that's actually placing a double burden on the creative doctorate (Associate Dean, Research).

Failure, we suggest, is at least as likely as success in this context. Failure is, after all, very much a part of the process of creative practice as research. This is perhaps not surprising, given that much creative work depends on an iterative cycle of trying, failing and trying again. Halberstam describes this as a 'grim process' (2011: 2), while Blackmur describes the production of failures as 'drudgery' (1947: 257). Blackmur does not, however, take a negative view of drudgery, writing that it 'is necessary to the production of the successes': 'there is no way out, drudgery is always necessary' (1947: 257). Failures are, indeed, as much a part of the creative life as are successes; indeed, even the most successful artists have great swathes of failure. Writing of artists such as TS Eliot, WB Yeats and Henry James, Blackmur observes that 'The graph of most good writers is mostly below par, sometimes from a relative failure in technique, sometimes from a relative failure in theme, more often from both' (1947: 257).

Blackmur's point is widely supported in the creative community. Booker Prize winner Anne Enright, for example, acknowledges, 'Even when I am pointed the right way and productive and finally published, I am not satisfied by the results. This is not an affectation, failure is what writers do' (2013). Margaret Atwood, another Booker Prize winner and immensely successful novelist and poet, states bluntly that:

Failure is just another name for much of real life: much of what we set out to accomplish ends in failure, at least in our own eyes. Who set the bar so high that most of our attempts to sail gracefully over it on the viewless wings of Poesy end in an undignified scramble or a nasty fall into the mud? Who told us we had to succeed at any cost? (2013)

Enright and Atwood are writing about writing, of course, and not about research practice. Research findings need to be convincing, unlike creative outcomes which may well leave the writer unsettled; and although it may be true that no writer is forced to 'succeed at any cost', the fact that each doctoral candidature costs tens of thousands of dollars of public money and years of effort for the candidate puts a great deal more emphasis on the need to succeed than on the risk of failure.

But for many writers, success will simply not be achievable. For such writers, failure does not fit Henry Ford's definition – it does not provide opportunities for subsequent success. It is simply a constant wound that requires attention; and the attention we provide is more writing, more failure, and – as Samuel Beckett writes – failing better. This is, perhaps, because as Enright also points out:

there are two, sometimes separate, ambitions here. One is to get known, make money perhaps and take a bow – to be acknowledged by that dangerous beast, the crowd. The other is to write a really good book (2013).

Or, in the case of a doctoral candidate, one ambition might be to be recognised as having completed a major research project and made a contribution to knowledge; the other, to have written a really good book. But these are not necessarily compatible ambitions. A great deal of any practicing artist's work is failure, practice, and more failure.

This is where Blackmur's insights can be of use: his point is that any artist must focus on developing technique, and this is never a once-for-all action. For Blackmur, as for Samuel Beckett, the life of an artist involves frequent failure, but this takes place in a lifetime of experimenting, learning to fail differently, and taking artistic and intellectual risks. As we develop expertise in one aspect of technique, we find a weakness or absence in another, so that we are never 'finished', as artists – we never know all that we need to know – but are always failing, and working through the drudgery required to build new skills, new techniques, new approaches to theme and content, and new modes of expression.

Ways forward: recognising failure

What this suggests to us, reflecting on the conversations we held with many examiners, supervisors and recent graduates of creative arts doctorates, and our other research for this project, is that it is imperative to take failure in this context more seriously. Rather than damning the creative artifacts produced in research higher degrees with faint praise, or effectively patronising these works (and their creators) by not demanding of them as high a standard as is expected of the critical element, we might, perhaps, more usefully acknowledge the necessity, and indeed the value, of failure. An examiner who participated in our research project agreed with this, and indeed argued that when a student's work is not successful:

What we hope happens is they recognise the failure. So I would say if that happens in a PhD and a student tells me it didn't work, and if they can write about why it didn't work and what knowledge generated that process, then perhaps that's the answer (examiner).

The notion that creative work is, by its very nature, experimental and therefore resistant to evaluation may be valid, but when creative practitioners enter the academy with the intention of gaining a higher degree by research they must expect their work to be evaluated. What is important in this context is a clear understanding of the terms and criteria by which that work (as a project involving a creative work and a critical dissertation) is going to be evaluated and examined, and that there are clear and sophisticated ways of discussing the creative work in the context of the research project. We know that many creative projects 'fail', in that they cannot successfully be realised; we know too that in many cases this failure is generative of a new line of work, a new way of thinking, seeing and practice. This is very well known in art. As Yoshua Okon notes, 'I can't really afford to resist failure, instead I need to embrace it as much as I embrace failure. To me, success is a series of productive failures' (ctd. in Antebi et al. 2008: 183). What the findings of our project suggest is that it may be time to

acknowledge this feature of creative work, and without vitiating academic standards, find a way to recognise productive failures.

Endnotes

1. Ehrenreich wrote this as part of her investigation of what she sees as the culture of relentless optimism that in her analysis dominates the discourse. This book, *Bright-Sided* (2009), is in some ways a companion volume to her earlier investigation of the underclass of American workers, described in *Nickel and Dimed: on (not) getting by in America* (2001). Ehrenreich is an essayist and social critic, not a sociologist, so her books express individuals' experiences rather than generalisable findings, and as such she has been criticised by policy and sociological analysts, but we consider her opinions sufficiently thought-provoking to be worth citing in this essay.
2. Fifty per cent of the RTS funding formula is derived from successful HDR completions; there is no reward for attrition, or for failure following submission of a dissertation, and thus failure constitutes a financial loss.
3. Forbes magazine's list of the top-earning authors of 2013 makes this clear: EL James of *50 Shades of Grey* fame tops the list, with 'pulp' writers James Patterson, Suzanne Collins, Danielle Steel, and Dan Brown (among others) nipping at her heels (Bercovici 2013). No winners of serious literary awards are included.
4. All citations are taken directly from the focus groups and roundtables held during 2011 and 2012. The Ethics approval for the project did not permit the naming of individuals, so the speakers are not identified.

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