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It Will Go Wrong

Reflections on Growing through Failure as an Instructional Partner

There were twenty-two students in the first course where I was trying my new research workshop. By the end of class, just eleven students had responded to the first question of the Padlet. The second question? Six. On question eight, only one student had responded, and that student did not finish the remainder of the workshop. It was a catastrophic failure, more than a little embarrassing, and absolutely essential to my growth as a library instructor.

As instructional partners, this is one of the most daunting and challenging things librarians can face. We often have to work hard to secure meaningful partnerships with our collaborating departments, so taking a chance on a new instructional style feels doubly risky—what if, due to a failure like the one mentioned above, the faculty member decided they don't want to work with us again? That would feel like a serious blow to our progress in building a departmental relationship.

There was a piece of my brain that cringed and said, "Just go back to the lecture, you know it won't go wrong," but I stifled it for the students' sake. Face-plant or not, I knew that I was taking steps in the right direction. Yes, my background in education and pedagogy told me so, but more importantly, and more tangibly, the students that I failed told me what they thought because I surveyed them for input. Across the board, the students acknowledged that they had not gotten enough information to be fully successful on their project—ouch. But despite that, when asked if they would have preferred a lecture, they almost unanimously said no. They liked that I was doing something different. They saw the potential *despite* my failure. So I had to go back to the drawing board for the next round of students.

When I first made the jump to college library education after nearly a decade in high school education, I came in with a lecture mindset. I thought, well, these are *college* students now. It's their responsibility to learn, and they are choosing to be here, so why complicate things? Let's stick to the lecture so I can prove to the students and professors that I am a competent, knowledgeable source of information.

However, I felt anxious after every lecture. I tried to do all the good lecture strategies—asking questions and facilitating discussion, using student input to drive demonstrations, engaging with an end-of-class Kahoot, and so on. I could estimate the engagement of the students who participated or see whether they could identify Boolean operators in a multiple-choice Kahoot, but I realized I was never sure how well any of them could actually *perform* research strategies for their project by the time I left their class. That anxiety was

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realized when two weeks after one of those lectures, a professor reached out to invite me to class a second time—she did not feel that her students were making effective progress on their research. Graciously but incorrectly, she placed the onus on the students, saying they may not have paid close enough attention to my "very informative" lecture. However, this was my sign that change was imperative: Despite proving that I was in fact a good source of information, my lecturing did not actually work to meaningfully teach the students.

The example I mentioned at the beginning was an apparent failure, but it did provide me with direct evidence to explore and analyze. That evidence helped shape the changes I made to the formula. As I have iterated again and again on that first example of experiential learning, now my evidence is proof that students are succeeding in independent application of research skills—something I found impossible to prove via lecture.

In that course, I now only lecture for approximately five minutes. The remainder of the time is spent on a workshop-style activity that helps students make meaningful progress on their research project, and I get to spend my time observing, correcting, and answering questions. I can see the students at work because I am on their level, sharing their space as a collaborator rather than dictating from a screen at the front of the room. I can learn their strengths and weaknesses and customize my instruction to meet the unique needs of the diverse students in the room.

Change is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. The first failure stung, and it was hard not to take it to heart. But the second time I ran a redesigned session for a summer class, the professor asked me to stay for an extra thirty minutes because her students seemed to be making so much progress—a resounding success. In the fall, however, the time constraints of a fifty-minute course once again led to a few nearly botched sessions as I learned what took too much time, so I had to adapt the process yet again for a new set of hurdles.

Throughout the course of this change, no faculty members have abandoned our partnerships, even when things were going sideways (aided by transparency on my end). The dust seems to be settling after this past spring, and the workshop might be approaching its final shape after a full year of design and redesign. It's approachable and focused, and every choice was made based on the evidence from all the times something went wrong—evidence I would not have without a willingness to step away from the podium and try something drastically different.