

Why I believe students are too concerned with failure to experiment with art
Joanne Lee

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/187833.article>

2 APRIL 2004 Times Higher Education

Failure is a powerful and emotive term. High failure rates on any higher education course or module are naturally a cause for concern.

One must also be sensitive to the students coming to university having previously had very real and often devastating experiences of educational failure. While course documents may fete "risk-taking", the reality is that risking failure is not an option for either staff or students. Students do not pay their fees or acquire burdensome debt to view failure positively.

I teach art students at BA and MA levels and have noticed a shift in attitudes towards the idea of failure over recent years. Art has always had something of a fascination with failing. The idea of the artist unrecognised in his or her own lifetime established a myth of a certain type of "romantic" practice - Van Gogh is a good example. The idea of glorious failure persisted in art schools into the 1980s.

This is rarely the case today. Students, not unreasonably, want clear guidance as to what they need to do to achieve a "good" mark. That their experiences at A-level have often been shaped by a kind of "training" for exams or coursework - the offering of specific information as to what must be included to guarantee success - underpins an approach to learning that is quite different to the exploratory traditions of much fine-art studio practice.

I frequently note two particular approaches in my students. First, they feel that they must constantly justify anything they do. Indicative of this is the fact that art students increasingly produce vast amounts of supporting material for assessment while remaining emphatically uncomfortable with actually producing artworks.

The second approach arises when students quickly perceive that there are preferred positions, readings and opinions (both for staff and in the broader sphere of contemporary art). They worry that transgression will result in getting the art "wrong" or will incur the wrath of their tutor (for which read poor marks and potential failure). For some students, certainties of interpretation are reassuring: they fear having to experience art without having it first pre-digested by criticism. The potential for rich and complex responses is seen as a significant difficulty rather than an aspiration. I am concerned that in recent years much fine art theory has pursued an agenda concerned with how other artists, artworks, theorists or theories have failed. Students encounter this from the earliest days of their studies, and it creates a defensiveness that does not foster experimentation and exploration.

Susan Hiller, professor of fine art at Newcastle University, has asserted that artists work with "unknowledge", and it is an opinion I share. If we truly wish to foster the confidence to work with this kind of uncertainty (very much a feature of the 21st-century job market awaiting our graduates) we need to be less binary about the idea of success or failure. We ought to be more open to the actualities of making and

experiencing things and able to acknowledge that complexity and even contradiction can be strengths.

In a recent book, the Cambridge scholar Peter de Bolla discusses the wonder he feels encountering certain artworks. He says that "wonder requires us to acknowledge what we do not know or may never know, to acknowledge the limits of knowledge. It is, then, a different species of knowledge, a way of knowing that does not lead to certainties or truths about the world or the way things are."

It is this lesson I would like fine art to teach. If students are confident in their uncertainty, it surely means they have not failed.

Joanne Lee
Senior lecturer in fine art
The Nottingham Trent
School of Art and Design

Joanne Lee speaks on this subject at the Association of Art Historians' annual conference in Nottingham, April 1-3.