



## CHAPTER 7

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# A Failure Framework

### INTRODUCTION

In the previous three chapters, we have shown how, for a variety of reasons, it can be difficult for all those involved in the cultural sector, whether as policymakers, practitioners, or participants, to talk openly and honestly about failures. This means that narratives of failure are often absent when cultural professionals speak publicly about their work, whether in person or in written texts such as websites, policy reviews, or evaluations of practice. Even where cultural professionals do publicly discuss failures, they are unlikely to use that term, and they do so strategically and for the most part for their own advantage.

The prevalence of narratives of success means that a sanitised representation of cultural participation work is dominant, one in which the difficulties, trade-offs, mistakes, compromises, and messiness of such activities are primarily kept to the personal sphere of private self-reflection or confessionals between trusted peers and colleagues. Publicly, failures appear to be rare in cultural participation work, and written texts by both policymakers and practitioners focus on communicating competence, efficiency, and results delivered. In doing so, these texts replicate and amplify the discourse that such interventions are consistently working and progressively delivering social change. If these narratives are to be believed, it would seem the cultural sector is transforming lives, diversifying audiences and workforces, and improving social integration and inclusion.

As we have shown in Chap. 2, however, the national picture suggests that such projects have done little to change patterns of cultural participation or the demographic makeup of those benefitting most from public subsidy for cultural activities. Likewise, recent research has shown how poorly the cultural sector has fared in diversifying its workforce (Brook et al., 2020a) despite countless projects oriented towards this issue. Based on the dominant public narratives about the success of cultural participation projects, such findings are ostensibly difficult to explain. However, our fieldwork showed that despite professionals and participants acknowledging that failures are occurring in this work, they are rarely leveraged as opportunities to learn. As a result, common failures are being repeatedly experienced with little to no evidence that anything is being done to eradicate them or to make the necessary changes to increase equity in the cultural sector.

This final chapter argues that rather than being irrelevant to cultural projects and policies, experiencing failure in their design and implementation is inevitable. As the advocates for Intelligent Fast Failure (Matson, 1991), which we discussed in Chap. 3, argue, “avoiding failure is not an option. If you accept this premise, the choice before you is simple: continue to use practices that limit what you can gain from failures—or embrace the concept of intelligent failure, in which learning can create substantial value” (McGrath, 2011, p. 83). Furthermore, we argue that acknowledging and learning from failures in ways that result in meaningful change is a moral and ethical responsibility for any organisation or individual that accepts public funding on the basis that the work they undertake will create a more equitable cultural sector where the benefits of cultural participation are maximised for all those involved.

Instead, the cultural sector has become so focused on proving its “value” and justifying the legitimacy of public subsidies that evaluations have become statements of worth primarily oriented towards recounting positive narratives about short-term successes. This is to the detriment of any learning about where the work failed, why it may have done so, and what impact these failures have on the individuals, groups, and communities the projects or policies were intended to benefit. We propose that if those working in or researching the cultural sector are truly committed to supporting more equitable cultural participation, then they must place far greater priority on sharing learning from, and avoiding the repetition of, failures which limit the ability of the sector to achieve meaningful and sustainable change. We suggest that the first step in this process is to

normalise talking about failures by encouraging those working within the broader cultural sector to share narratives of failure more openly and honestly. To facilitate this, we present a framework that allows for more nuanced conversations to take place. This framework offers an alternative to the false binary between success and failure that appears to be pervasive among professionals when it comes to talking about and evaluating cultural projects and policies. Instead, it encourages a recognition that cultural projects and policies can and do succeed and fail simultaneously, in different elements of the work, to differing degrees, at different stages, and for different people in different ways.

### PARTICIPATING IN FAILURE

The previous three chapters have highlighted the various ways in which policymakers, practitioners, and participants define and relate to the notion of failure regarding cultural participation projects and policies. There exist clear differences between how each of these groups understood the purpose of policies and projects intended to support participation, and, relatedly, the ways in which success and failure might be judged. Likewise, we observed different attitudes towards talking about failures, though there were some shared perceptions about the barriers that prevent open and honest discussion about failure.

In Chap. 4, we focused on policymakers and showed how a gap exists between the values that are said to have shaped the participation agenda and the ways in which participation policies are developed and implemented. We also saw how the historical tension discussed in Chap. 2 between those who understand participation policies as seeking to increase and diversify engagement with existing cultural infrastructure and those who see it as a commitment to support the expression of individual cultural agency persists even today. In turn, this leads to a confusion between whether the core aim of participation policies is to address inequities regarding how resources are distributed or to provide equal access to aspirational “excellence”. For some, cultural participation policies should seek to address both, yet we also saw how policies and projects that deliver on neither can still be labelled as a success because of other factors such as the quality of the artistic output, the extent to which they raise the profile of organisations involved, or even if they result in securing further funding. Conversations with policymakers about the potential failures in a particular policy or project in terms of participation quickly become discussions

defending the value and impact of the artistic practice within such work or even the value of art and culture in general.

In Chap. 5, we turned our attention to the practitioners who deliver cultural participation policies and projects. Not only did the practitioners tend to draw on different meanings of participation than the policymakers, but they also exhibited significant differences in perspective. For some, participation was about individual agency and the ability to contribute equally to decision-making processes. For others, participation was about the ability for individuals to be actively involved in working with a professional artist, even if they had little to say in what form this interaction took or what sort of creative practice it involved. In both cases, however, it was notable that for most practitioners, the invitation to participate was an invitation to participate with art and artists, rather than to recognise everyone as a participant in society.

Furthermore, as much as many of the practitioners claimed reflective practice was part of their professional training, there was little evidence of truly critical reflection (Hanson, 2013) taking place, in part because of a creative drive to continue moving on to subsequent projects. Reflection was mostly presented as a private, self-directed process based on their own judgements. This insularity meant that practitioners underestimated how frequently others were experiencing failures and the extent to which these failures were similar to their own. Just as Sousa and Clark have noted about academics (2019), the absence of stories about failure in their professional narratives meant that many cultural practitioners may feel as if failure accompanies them personally, even as they are surrounded by professional success.

Practitioners also tended to be defensive or dismissive of judgements about success or failure which were based on someone else's priorities, whether those were policymakers or participants, or about the need for alternative perspectives to be considered equally as part of a truly critical reflective process. It was clear that many practitioners appeared far more comfortable in presenting themselves as someone whose work challenges structural inequities rather than reflecting and being challenged on their own role within an inequitable system.

Participants were the focus of Chap. 6, where we showed how the majority of the participants we spoke to saw one of the most significant failures as the tendency for policymakers and practitioners to see them solely as the beneficiaries of cultural participation projects and policies rather than decision makers and creators of their own cultural opportunities. They did not feel that there existed a "problem" of cultural

non-participation which needed to be tackled, but rather they felt there was a policy failure regarding the extent to which certain forms of cultural participation continued to be valued by policymakers more than others. They saw their communities as being culturally active but lacking in resources. The participants we spoke to were also most likely to feel that their voices were not being heard in the current system. Despite being asked repeatedly for feedback as part of project evaluations in which they felt pressured to provide positive responses, they struggled to see how their feedback had been acted on or otherwise changed the approach taken to future policies and projects. Participants appeared far less likely to see success and failure as absolute judgements and were relaxed about the extent to which some degree of failure was inevitable. They recognised that different people would value things for different reasons and that this would also mean that they viewed success and failure in different ways. In contrast to policymakers, however, they saw this as a positive dynamic and acknowledged the learning that could come from hearing different perspectives about any given project or policy.

Regardless of whether someone we interviewed was a policymaker, practitioner, or participant, or where they sat on the debate between cultural democratisation and cultural democracy discussed throughout this book, they appeared to broadly agree on two points. Firstly, that cultural participation does have the potential to affect positive, desirable change in individuals, groups, and communities and should therefore be supported and encouraged. Secondly, that there are observable inequities in the extent to which the cultural participation of different people is supported and that the current policies to support greater equity in cultural participation are not delivering the results that they desire. There was also recognition that many of the policies, projects, and the approaches to their development and implementation that have failed to deliver the desired results continue to be repeated. For example, almost everyone we spoke to recognised that short-term funding and a project mentality was failing to deliver any sustainable long-term change, yet it remained the primary way such work was supported.

For all that our different research participants could point towards these sorts of recurring failures, the majority expressed a sense of powerlessness regarding the ability to make change happen. Participants often felt that they had no voice and that their opinions and stories were never properly heard. Practitioners saw themselves as beholden to funders and lacking in agency because of the precarious position in which they perceived themselves to be existing. Policymakers felt that significant change would be too difficult to achieve and that any marked change from the

status quo would face resistance from both politicians and the practitioners who would have the most to lose.

What was also common across all our data was a perceived lack of trust, respect, and openness between the different stakeholders involved in cultural participation projects and policies. For example, while our research participants were uncomfortable using the term failure if they were talking about something they had some measure of responsibility for developing or delivering, they were happy to use it to describe the work of others, especially in relation to the work of another “type” of stakeholder within the sector. Every policymaker, practitioner, or participant we spoke to was able to point to a failure they had experienced or observed and that they felt that could have been avoided if only some other stakeholder had acted in a different way.

There also appeared to be a culture of fear, felt most strongly by the practitioners in our sample, that being open and honest about your failures risked being blamed for them, which in turn put both your professional status and opportunities for future work in jeopardy. It was not failure *per se* that they feared, but rather others judging their work as a failure in absolute terms and as therefore being of little value and unworthy of future support. This was a fear strongly felt despite none of our research participants being able to provide an example of when this had happened either to them or anyone they knew, and even acknowledging the failure of repeating mistakes mentioned above. This fear was, in part, seen to stem from the audit culture of contemporary politics, which cultural professionals felt places an outsized importance on justifying expenditure and “proving” value for money rather than learning for development and enhancement.

This is indicative of the extent to which the publicly funded cultural sector has, for some time, existed in a crisis of legitimacy (Holden, 2006) and a culture of precarity (Brook et al., 2020b) in which many feel the need to constantly and defensively “make the case” for culture. As a result, the “cultural value debate” (AHRC, 2012) is primarily a politicised discussion about the value of state subsidies for certain types of cultural activities. In such a febrile atmosphere, any suggestion that a cultural project or policy may have failed in some way is often assumed to be a challenge about the value of the work and thus also a veiled attack on the use of public and/or charitable funds to deliver it. We argue that this defensive approach to discussing, evaluating, and researching cultural projects and policies places significant constraints on any effort to deliver progress

towards a more equitable cultural sector in the UK. As such, a more critical, reflective, and honest approach is needed, one in which failures are not only acknowledged but learnt from.

### CRITICAL REFLECTION, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING

As we discussed in Chap. 5, one of the perspectives regularly shared by the cultural practitioners who took part in our research was that art, and in particular participatory or community arts practice, cannot fail as it is a process and not an outcome. As such, they felt that failure was at best an unhelpful term and at worst irrelevant to this field of activity. Furthermore, as François Matarasso said in reflecting on our research (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021) in a blogpost:

Whilst I applaud the intentions and values of this initiative, I have reservations about the language of failure itself. It seems to come from other cultures than community art—the mainstream art world that awards stars and prizes, and the public policy world that expects outcomes to be delivered and targets to be met. There are large parts of life where failure is neither a relevant nor a helpful concept. (2021)

We agree that it is important to note that talking about success and failure should not be the same as talking about winners and losers. To do so is to assume that those who have enjoyed successes should be rewarded, while those who have experienced failures should be punished or shunned on the basis that the project or policy in which they were involved was not valuable. The suggestion that we should therefore not talk about the failures in a process or any other part of the design and implementation of a project or policy, however, ignores the potential for learning that failures offer, and risks compounding one failure with another, especially given that, as one policymaker we spoke to suggested, failure is also “when individuals or organisations don’t learn from anything that’s gone before”. You cannot learn from what has gone before by only looking at part of the picture and given that failure is as probable and commonplace a feature as success in participation projects and policies, it is worthy of just as much reflection and analysis. Likewise, you must be open to alternative narratives that challenge your own perceptions of success and failure and which consider the different priorities, perspectives, and experiences of each stakeholder, regardless of what community they come from. Policymakers, practitioners, and participants will all experience success and failure in

different ways, and ignoring the failures perceived by one group, or within each group, in favour of focusing on the successes perceived by another risks failing to holistically understand a project or policy or its place within the wider system of which it is part.

It also ignores the moral obligation to be honest about situations where policies and projects fail to deliver what they set out to achieve. Not every participation project will be successful in making long-term, meaningful change to complex social issues such as the demographic constitution of an organisation's audience, social integration within diverse communities, or the eradication of racist and homophobic bullying within a school. As we have already discussed, this does not mean that such projects were not valuable or that they were not successful in other ways. If the policy intention is that these projects will cumulatively address some of the complex and intractable problems faced by society, and there is evidence that they may be failing to do so, then those delivering and evaluating them must be honest about those failures and explore what is causing them so that both policymakers and practitioners can make changes accordingly. These failures can exist at any level, from localised failures to do with a lack of expertise, underbudgeting, or ignorance about a particular group or community, to more meso or macro failures such as the selection of the lead organisation, the lack of pre-existing local cultural infrastructure, or the prevalence of project-based, short-term funding that makes sustaining any positive impacts virtually impossible.

The purpose of honest critical reflection is not to blame anyone for why a given project or policy failed to deliver greater equity, but rather to ask whether there have been other failures in how the policy or project was designed and implemented that could be addressed in future iterations of such work, thereby increasing the probability of delivering greater cultural equity in the future. It is the same principle that is at the core of the Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce's (RSA) "Living Change Approach" to social change (2021), which argues that anyone seeking to affect meaningful, societal change must think like a system but act like an entrepreneur (Conway et al., 2017). In practice, this means that rather than attempt to take on large-scale, social challenges in their entirety, the focus should be on identifying "nimble opportunities for change within the system, seeding innovations, testing prototypes and supporting efforts to grow and influence other parts of the system" (Conway, 2017). As is the case with the model of Intelligent Fast Failure (Matson, 1991) discussed in Chap. 3, the aim is to convert assumptions about how change can be delivered into knowledge by testing various approaches, codifying

what you learn, and sharing it with others. Failures are to be expected, but they should be identified quickly, shared with others within the system, and their impact minimised by making changes before the next iteration of the project or policy. To do so requires the ability to identify, categorise, and talk about failures in a manner that supports the ability to engender targeted change.

### Complex Projects

At the time of writing this book, Creative Scotland has launched a new fund—the Culture Collective—initially supported by £6 million of Scottish Government emergency COVID-19 funds they said were intended to support “creative practitioners, organisations and communities to work together across Scotland to help shape the future of local cultural life” (Creative Scotland, 2021). This policy intervention resulted in grants of between £100,000 and £300,000 being distributed to several collectives across Scotland. In promoting their inclusion in the collective, these groups committed to a range of outcomes, many of them wide-ranging and oriented towards post-COVID recovery and societal “transformation”. For example, one group suggested that their project would make “a long-lasting, positive impact towards a better future for their communities and for Scotland’s wider cultural sector” (Creative Scotland, 2021), while another aimed to “inspire and unlock community potential, to create a sense of place, celebrate local identity and renew pride in the area whilst developing a creative vision” (Rig Arts, 2021). These are bold claims for projects with such relatively modest budgets and an initial duration of around twelve months. The sort of societal change they are seeking to achieve requires complex and challenging intersectional work that must engender structural as well as individual change. In such complex work, experiencing failure is inevitable (Omerod, 2005). If these projects fail to have the long-lasting impact for which they aimed, or if they fail to create a sense of place for anyone other than those taking part, or if they fail to celebrate the local identity in a way that does not exclude some, then this should be acknowledged and reflected upon. However, they should be able to conduct this analysis in such a manner as to allow successes in other areas to be recognised, for example, if the policy was successful in providing work for freelance artists whose income had been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our research suggests that there exists a general lack of policy learning in the UK cultural sector, and that even where learning is claimed to have occurred, there are often few tangible actions and little evidence of sustained, systemic change. Although everyone we spoke to recognised that learning was important and that failures could provide the opportunity for valuable learning to take place, there was also a general sense that the learning was for someone else to do. Policymakers devolved responsibility to the artists and organisations they fund, requiring regular evaluations but failing to either methodically and consistently evaluate their own policies or share the learning from the evaluations that were returned to them. Likewise, practitioners pointed towards participants who failed to understand how to participate in the “right way” or the value of what they were participating in, placing the onus on them to learn and change their attitudes and perspectives in order that the work might be more “successful”.

All too often, monitoring and evaluation were also understood as being synonymous. Evaluations were seen as part of the audit culture that required anyone receiving funding to account for how they spent it, rather than a process of effectively shared critical reflection which leads to insight, understanding, and change. Many organisations receiving funding felt it was acceptable to lie on their evaluations, and many policymakers had little faith in the accuracy of the evaluations they received. Indeed, some said that they lack the time or resources to read them in any depth, and all agreed that they fail to effectively communicate their learning, let alone any actions which may arise from it. No one was able to say whose responsibility it was to make sure that collective insights were effectively identified, shared, or acted upon. Despite this, evaluations were a ubiquitous element of project delivery, taking up significant time, resources, and, in some cases, causing anxiety and stress for those who felt pressured to “prove” the value and impact of their work. These perspectives are mirrored internationally by those who have claimed that “instead of sharing [they] compete with each other for funding and [their] reports, evaluations and hard-earned lessons are lost or end up in binders and basements” (About—Global Grand Central, 2017). It has further been recognised that:

... it is tempting to only report positive results, claiming our work as an all-out success, with smooth and effective cooperation, that our target audiences were reached, and that the objectives of the [funder] were met. The short-term social consequences of disingenuously upping our impact would

likely be small. And if done properly (with just the right amount of “learning potentials” added into the narrative) we would probably increase our chances of securing new funding. The short-term risks associated with describing failures, however, are much greater—socially, and in terms of chances to attract new funding. However, the chances for learning across peers is significantly larger if we are honest. Focusing on the positive reduces potentials for learning and might have real implications on the lives of people we involve in our work. (Haraldsson et al., 2017, p. 14)

It was evident from our data that the inability to take ownership for failures has meant that the majority of learning taking place in cultural participation policies and projects is political learning (May, 1992) through which certain groups with shared interests (what have often been understood as advocacy coalitions [Matti & Sandström, 2013]) become more competent and increasingly sophisticated about how to advance their own arguments. In so doing, they protect their own position of relative advantage within the sphere of cultural policy. However, for learning to foster sustainable, positive impacts on the lives of those which cultural policy in the UK currently benefits the least, it must be reoriented towards social and instrumental learning (May, 1992).

Social learning is concerned with better understanding of how different and diverse interest groups experience and understand the cultural participation “problems” that cultural policies and projects are intended to address. It focuses on an appreciation of the complexity of such “problems” and the various factors that can shape their construction such as cultural norms, relations of power, and competing values. Instrumental learning is concerned with learning across and between different stakeholders about how policy interventions work and the ways in which they can be better designed to foster a more equitable cultural sector. To encourage this sort of social and instrumental learning to take place, we believe that a culture of tolerance for failure must be engendered in the cultural sector. It must be accepted that delivering meaningful and sustainable change in a complex system will involve both experimentation and risk, both of which come with a margin of error that makes experiencing failure inevitable. This requires change from everyone involved, from policymakers to practitioners, and from politicians to participants.

Our research process has demonstrated that talking openly about failures not only feels liberating and reduces the fear that one will be judged for failing when everyone else is succeeding, but also aids the ability to

reflect critically upon failure as part of a wider system. This is where the potential for collective action and change may lie. We therefore argue that seeking out and discussing narratives of failure should be as important as recording and celebrating narratives of success. However, we recognise that doing so is not easy, and does not come naturally to anyone, let alone those who feel that their ability to “be creative” relies on the distribution of resources tied to an abstract notion of success. Therefore, to support more open and honest conversations to take place, we have developed a framework for research and evaluation in which success and failure can co-exist, and which encourages more nuanced discussion about the degree to which each was present. The final sections of this chapter will present that framework and explain how it might be applied.

### OUR FRAMEWORK

As we discussed in Chap. 3, attempts have been made by policy studies scholars to categorise the different types of failures that can be observed when analysing the implementation of a given policy. Our own research has been informed by these taxonomies and has tested their efficacy within the field of cultural policy to develop a bespoke framework that recognises the different logics, values, and meanings that underpin policymaking in the cultural sector. For example, in applying McConnell’s (2011, 2015) categories to the data from our fieldwork, we found that there were some failures that did not easily fit within one of the three realms of failure that he uses (Janovich & Stevenson, 2021). We found instead that many of our respondents felt the success or failure of the work as a piece of artistic practice tended to be overlooked when evaluating a project or policy because the objectives were often oriented towards some form of social or economic outcome. Likewise, we found that McConnell’s political focus did not adequately capture the issues of professional profile and reputation that were clearly very important for the policymakers and practitioners to whom we spoke. Furthermore, we found that neither McConnell’s realm of process nor Newman and Head’s (2015) mode of distributional failure gave adequate recognition to the importance of the ability for all stakeholders to be able to participate throughout each stage of the policy or project, from conception to design through to delivery and evaluation. This was indicative of the extent to which these frameworks were focused on the actions of the professional, while tending to portray the intended beneficiaries as relatively passive, something we argue perpetuates the tendency to overlook certain failures and in so doing contributes towards sustaining existing inequities.

From analysing our data, we identified five different elements of cultural projects and policies that people would discuss when reflecting on their relative success or failure. We call these the Five Facets, all of which must be examined and evaluated separately if the type of critical reflection (Hanson, 2013) that is a prerequisite to meaningful social and instrumental policy learning (May, 1992) is to occur.

### The Five Facets of Success/Failure in Cultural Projects and Policies

- **Purpose**—*the attainment of stated aims, objectives, and outcomes of the policy or project. It also relates to the delivery of intended benefits for target groups.*
- **Process**—*the design and implementation/delivery of the policy/project. It encompasses all of the actions, activities, and stages of a policy/project from beginning to end.*
- **Participation**—*who participates in the policy/project and how, at every stage from design to delivery and evaluation. It also relates to the development of a sustainable coalition of stakeholders, with different interests but equal influence.*
- **Practice**—*the creative and cultural intentions/aspirations of the policy/project. It also relates to its critical reception as a piece of creative practice.*
- **Profile**—*the reputation and future prospects of the organisations and/or professionals involved. It also relates to control over the policy agenda and the ability to promote organisational or personal interests and values.*

### DEGREES OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS

The second key barrier we observed as preventing cultural professionals from talking openly about failures was that they tended to perceive success and failure as a binary opposition. As such, they were unwilling to label their work as a failure for they were fearful of the implications this may have for their professional practice, especially where they were reliant on public finance. However, as we have stressed throughout this book, it is more productive to locate success and failure at different points along a spectrum, because very few of these projects or policies could be legitimately called an outright success or failure.

As was the case when considering the different facets of a cultural project or policy, we found it useful to leverage McConnell's degrees of success (2010) and failure (2015) as a starting point, particularly in relation to the scale of opposition and support from different stakeholders. We support the view that the greatest learning comes from critical reflection that has been informed by a range of perspectives and recognises the legitimacy of divergent narratives offered by different stakeholders. In order to attain the necessary nuance required to account for all of the different degrees of success and failure we identified within our data, we created a more graduated scale that equally balanced both ends of the spectrum from outright success to outright failure.

**The Six Degrees of Success/Failure in Cultural Projects and Policies**  
(Substantially Adapted from McConnell, 2010, 2015)

- **Outright failure**—*Even if there have been elements of success, the goals/intentions have fundamentally not been achieved. Opposition and criticism are great and/or approval and support is virtually non-existent.*
- **Precarious failure**—*A number of the primary goals/intentions are only partially achieved. Opposition and criticism outweigh approval and support.*
- **Tolerable failure**—*A number of the primary goals/intentions are only partially achieved. Opposition is small and/or criticism is virtually non-existent, but any support/approval may be limited to specific groups of stakeholders.*
- **Conflicted success**—*The achievement of goals/intentions is varied. Criticism and approval exists in relatively equal measure but varies between different groups of stakeholders. It proves difficult to avoid repeated controversy and debate.*
- **Resilient success**—*A number of the secondary goals/intentions are not achieved. However, none of the failures significantly impede the fulfilment of the primary goals/intentions. Opposition is small and/or criticism is virtually non-existent, but any support/approval may be limited to specific groups of stakeholders.*
- **Outright success**—*Even if there have been some elements of failure, the prevalence of successes resulted in all of the goals/intentions being fully achieved. Criticism and opposition are virtually non-existent and approval and support is almost universal and from a diverse group of stakeholders.*

## WHEEL OF FAILURE (AND SUCCESS)

Combined, these five facets and six degrees offer a framework within which we believe nuanced discussion about failure can occur, discussion that recognises and focuses on the different elements of cultural projects and policies and provides the scope for success and failure to occur to differing extents in each of these elements. We have presented this as a “Wheel of Failure” (Fig. 7.1) because we believe it is important that the word failure is normalised in the discourse of cultural professionals, as it is among participants. The Wheel therefore encourages reflection on both successes and failures simultaneously.

The purpose of the Wheel is to encourage a multidimensional analysis of a project or policy’s successes and failures which acknowledges that within any given policy or project, one might find it to be, for example:

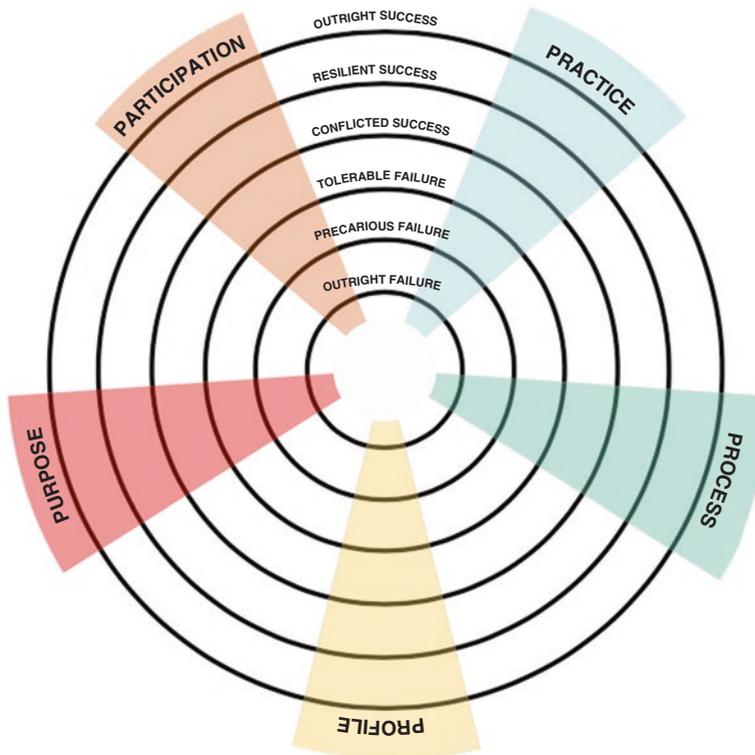


Fig. 7.1 The wheel of failure

- A tolerable failure in regard to purpose
- A resilient success in regard to process
- A precarious failure in regard to participation
- A resilient success in regard to practice
- An outright success in regard to profile

Take a hypothetical policy intended to support young adults living in areas of multiple deprivation to take part in meaningful cultural experiences as an example. The policy received a significant amount of positive media attention and was celebrated by politicians as an example of the transformative power of culture. As such, those involved may categorise it as an outright success in terms of profile. However, the numbers who took part in this initiative were far lower than had been hoped for, and the intended collaborations between national and local cultural organisations were fraught with difficulties. It was therefore felt to be a tolerable failure in terms of its purpose and a precarious failure in terms of process. Despite the difficulties, the creative outputs produced were generally accepted to be both of a high quality and highly representative of the locales in which the work took place. As such, the policy was categorised as a resilient success in terms of both participation and practice.

One of the core principles of Intelligent Fast Failure (Matson, 1991) is to agree what success and failure will look like at the outset of any initiative (McGrath, 2011). Currently, while cultural participation projects or policies might begin with a clear statement of what success would look like from the perspective of the policymaker to which other stakeholders are then expected to align their interests and objectives, less consideration is given to what successes other stakeholders would like to see the project or policy achieve beyond or in addition to that which the policymakers have set out. Furthermore, almost no consideration is given to what any of the stakeholders would perceive as a failure, making it far easier to ignore them if and when they do occur. As such, our framework does not require a consensus between stakeholders about what success and failure will look like for any given project or policy. Instead, it encourages an awareness and understanding at the outset of how different stakeholders perceive success and failure regarding each of the five facets and to use this insight as the project or policy develops to critically reflect on for whom the project or policy is succeeding or failing, in what ways, and to what degree.

Table 7.1 provides an illustrative example of how funders might define the different degrees of success and failure across each of the five facets at

**Table 7.1** Illustrative example of how funders might define the different degrees of success and failure across each of the five facets at the outset of a participatory project such as Creative People and Places (CPP)

	<i>Outright failure</i>	<i>Precarious failure</i>	<i>Tolerable failure</i>	<i>Conflicted success</i>	<i>Resilient success</i>	<i>Outright success</i>
<b>Profile</b>	The programme generates primarily negative coverage at a local and/or regional and/or national level	There is little to no awareness of the programme at local and/or regional and/or national level	The programme generates positive coverage at a local level but does not result in a national discussion about the importance of this type of work	The programme generates positive coverage for the funder but does not raise the profile of the organisations or artists	The programme generates positive coverage at all levels, raises the profile of all the organisations and artists involved and leads to new opportunities for them	Increased awareness and profile lead to a national commitment to mainstream the funding to support this type of work
<b>Purpose</b>	Opportunities for people to participate locally did not increase and few of the participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased but few of the participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year	Opportunities for people to participate locally did not increase but most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased, most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year, but there was little local interest in sustaining the programme in long term	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased, most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year, and there was strong local interest in sustaining the programme in long term	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased, most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year and were also now participating with other local activities/organisations

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

	<i>Outright failure</i>	<i>Precarious failure</i>	<i>Tolerable failure</i>	<i>Conflicted success</i>	<i>Resilient success</i>	<i>Outright success</i>
Process	Local organisations, artists, and audiences are only collaborating in ways they have done before	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways, but with limited effect	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating effectively in new ways but only for work related to this programme	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways, but some involved have found it hard to adapt and won't adopt these approaches in future	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways and have committed to adopt these approaches to work together in future	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways, have committed to adopt these approaches to work together in future and are supporting others to do the same
Practice	Those involved in the programme do not feel that the art created was of quality	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was of mixed quality	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was of quality but did not involve new or innovative practice	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was innovative and of quality, but a significant number of their peers disagree	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was innovative, of quality and most of their peers agree	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was innovative, of quality and their peers are building upon the work in new ways
Participation	Those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund were not consulted about the design of their local programme	Those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund were consulted but their opinions didn't influence the design of their local programme	Those who are currently least likely to take part in the cultural activities we fund were invited to help design their local programme, but the majority opted not to	The opinions of those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund informed the design of their local programme, but they weren't involved in decision making	The opinions and decisions of those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund significantly shaped the design of their local programme	The opinions and decisions of those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund significantly shaped the design of their programme both locally and nationally

the outset of a participatory project similar in scope and intention to Creative People and Places (CPP) that we used as a case study in Chap. 4. It demonstrates how the framework can facilitate a more nuanced reflection about what success and failure would look like. It encourages those involved to move beyond setting simple targets to express more fully what they believe to be the aims of the project or policy and in doing so clearly outlining what outcomes would be seen as more of a failure than a success. Other stakeholders in this project may perceive success and failure in some or all the facets differently from the funders, and as such their table may look very different, but by using our framework as the basis for discussion and dialogue at the outset these differences can be foregrounded and understood. The result should be a multidimensional and multi-perspectival framework that can be used to guide the implementation and inform the evaluation of the project in a way that allows for failures and successes to be acknowledged, and learnt from, equally.

#### Using the Framework at the Outset of a New Project or Policy

The first stage in using the framework is to explore each of the facets in detail, considering how they relate to the project or policy you are working on. At the outset of a new project or policy, you could do this by using the Wheel to facilitate a discussion with everyone involved about what success and failure would look like in each facet. You could have separate discussions with each of your stakeholder groups or one discussion with everyone involved; what is important is that you hear a range of perspectives and treat each equally. You can approach the discussion in different ways, such as by adopting an open space technology (Shaw, 2020) or world café method (Carson, 2011). Whatever approach you take, be sure to keep these points in mind:

- Does every facet matter for this project/policy? Does every facet matter for every stakeholder? Some groups of stakeholders may only be interested in a selection of the facets.
- It is important to discuss what each of the degrees of success/failure would look like for this project/policy in each of the facets that stakeholders feel are relevant. While our definitions of the degrees are there to guide you, do not feel constrained by them.

*(continued)*

**(continued)**

The focus here is on creating a more nuanced framework to assess the outputs and outcomes of the project/policy you are working on, and as such your finished framework should represent what you and your stakeholders have agreed that different degrees of success and failure would look like for your project/policy.

- Do not feel constrained by numbers and metrics. While these may feature in your framework, try to think about what each of the different degrees might look or feel like for those involved. For example, might an indicator that a project/policy has been a conflicted success regarding its process be that the artist was not paid for their time when developing the project? This suggests that the project could have been budgeted better. Likewise, an indicator of resilient or even outright success in participation could be that the output of the project/policy changed from what was originally proposed in response to the input of participants. This suggests that the voices of participants were heard and acted upon throughout delivery.
- Are there other facets to this project/policy that any group of stakeholders would add into the wheel? What would the differing degrees of success/failure look like for that facet?

As acknowledged above, success and failure may exist in different ways at different stages, so it follows that the learning from failures and the change this facilitates should also happen at different stages of a project or policy. We therefore argue that critical reflection must be employed at each point in the life of a project or policy, from planning and design to delivery and evaluation, in order to encourage critical reflection on what changes can or should be made in real time, as well as providing learning about what might change over the long term in order to avoid similar failures in the future.

For example, at the mid-point in a project, there might be a large amount of social media engagement that leads organisers to feel that the project will be a resilient success in terms of organisational profile.

Likewise, the commissioned artist may be pleased with the opportunities that the project affords their practice and feel confident that the creative work will be something they have never done previously, which for them would be an outright success. At the same time, however, the level of engagement by participants in the decision-making processes that shape the creative output may be lower than the organisers or the participants had originally planned. This might lead some to feel that the project is a tolerable failure in this regard. At this point, the project team may wish to discuss whether there is a way the artist could adapt their approach to engage the participants more fully as co-creators. However, while this may move the participation in the project into the realms of conflicted or even resilient success, it may equally result in the artist feeling that the creative output will be compromised in some way, garner less interest and publicity, and that both the practice and profile elements of the project would end up as being less successful as a result. In this instance, the project team may also recognise a process failure, in that the way in which they approached commissioning an artist for this project had failed to deliver someone whose creative practice and/or previous experience was sufficiently aligned with the co-creative principles of this work. As such, they may decide to change the way they commission artists in the future, inviting participants into this decision-making process as well.

This example is indicative of the extent to which the framework also invites those using it to consider their priorities when it comes to the different facets of their policy or project. Rather than trying to deliver outright success in every area, trade-offs may often be needed, meaning that some degree of failure in one facet can be tolerated to maximise success in another. Likewise, having an outright success in one facet but precarious failures in all the rest may indicate a need to rebalance what is being prioritised in order to achieve more sustainable outcomes. All too often, there is an implicit prioritisation that places the delivery of success in certain facets above others. For example, in our research we found that maximising the positive profile of work was often seen as a priority and used as one of the main proxies for the overall success of a project or policy. However, as we identified in Chap. 6, many participants felt a focus on profile inherently reduced the quality of the participation they experienced. As such, we also argue that cultural professionals, both policymakers and practitioners, must accept that what might be the best choice to maximise success in terms of participation and increasing equity in the cultural sector may not always necessarily be as successful in terms of the artists' creative

practice or the profile of the project or policy. Therefore, they must consider the balance of their work overall to ensure that there are enough policies and projects in which participation is prioritised, even if it means the outcomes in other facets may be less successful as a result.

### **Using the Framework for Critical Reflection**

As the project/policy is being delivered, return to your definitions of the degrees of success and failure and reflect on where you think your work currently sits. Are you on course? Should you adjust? What have you learnt so far?

At the end of the project/policy, return to the definitions again, ideally with the same stakeholders who helped you to create them, and discuss how they feel the project/policy has gone. Take each facet in turn, look back at what each group of stakeholders said at the start of the project/policy regarding what each degree of success/failure would look like and agree which of those degrees the project/policy ended up most closely resembling. You may want to graphically represent the outcome on a completed Wheel or create separate Wheels for each stakeholder group to allow easy visual comparison between how different stakeholders have perceived the relative successes and failures of the project.

Once you have completed your Wheel(s), talk about those areas where the project/policy failed to some degree and discuss these questions as a group:

- Were these failures inevitable?
- Were expectations too high to begin with?
- Could these failures have been avoided? If so, how?
- What could you have done differently?
- What could others have done differently?
- Are the failures balanced out by successes in other facets of the project/policy?
- What have you learnt from the failures in the project/policy?
- How can you recognise these failures alongside your successes in any evaluation of your project/policy?
- How can you share your learning openly with others to facilitate social and instrumental learning within the cultural sector?

## CONCLUSION

UK cultural policy has tried to address inequalities and inequities in cultural participation for decades. Despite this, evidence suggests that success remains elusive and that the sector remains persistently inequitable. The research that has informed this book set out not only to try and understand why this might be the case, but also why there is so little public acknowledgement of this fact. What we found was a sector that has a problem with failure: a problem in the sense that all those who have a responsibility for the design and delivery of cultural participation projects and policies, whether they are policymakers, practitioners, or participants, find it difficult to talk openly and honestly about any failures that occur. This is in part because of a culture of fear and blame avoidance. In turn, this leads to a lack of critical reflection and shared learning, the absence of which prevents any meaningful, systemic changes from being enacted. As such, projects, policies, and ways of working that have failed to make the cultural sector more equitable in the past fifty years continue to be replicated and repeated, while at the same time, the cultural lives of the most affluent and educated individuals benefit the most from state support. These are the groups who have the most access to cultural resources, who occupy the most positions in the cultural sector, and whose cultural values are granted the greatest status and respect.

We believe that there is a moral obligation to openly acknowledge, discuss, and learn from the failures that have and continue to limit progress towards greater cultural equity. This is not about apportioning blame or questioning the value of state-supported activities. Rather, it is about recognising that if there is a genuine desire to change existing patterns of cultural participation, to diversify the voices of those involved in decision making, and to expand the breadth of activities and organisations that are recognised as culturally valuable and accordingly supported, these goals will not be achieved by ignoring failures and avoiding difficult decisions in favour of sharing feel-good narratives and defending the status quo.

We have argued that the first step is for everyone involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of cultural participation policies and projects to acknowledge that failures will happen, and to normalise talking openly and honestly about them when they do. This cannot be achieved by a single group of stakeholders in isolation. As we have discussed, policy change requires social and instrumental learning to take place between all the agents involved in a complex system, be they policymakers,

practitioners, or participants. This sort of learning does not come about by delegating the responsibility for learning to a single stakeholder group. Focusing on making changes at one point in the system may deliver limited results, but the overall impact will be diminished if those who can exert most power in the system are willing to let significant failures go unaddressed elsewhere. Likewise, celebrating numerous, small-scale successes may have a positive effect in the short term, but if unacknowledged failures hinder those successes from generating greater, cumulative impact, then their potential will not be fully realised. The process also requires each stakeholder to recognise that there will be failures for which they have some responsibility, but which they are currently choosing to ignore because the solution is unknown, unpalatable, or too difficult to implement. Although some failures will indeed be difficult to fix, this does not mean that they should go unacknowledged. Likewise, there will be structural failures that no single stakeholder can solve alone and which will require collective problem solving and shared responsibility for making and implementing difficult decisions where necessary.

This is not a call for greater accountability and more evaluation, especially where they are not used to generate collective insights and are nothing more than monitoring by another name. Instead, we propose that there is a clear need for greater and more honest dialogue between policymakers, practitioners, and participants. Such dialogue can take many forms, and we believe it would be best served by less, but more nuanced, evaluation, evaluation not only of individual projects, but also of the overarching policies to which they relate. In other words, evaluation designed for learning, informed by critical reflection, collectively analysed, and effectively shared. Such evaluations would not only contain narratives of success, but they would also include narratives of failure. They would recognise that success and failure are not mutually exclusive and that both can exist simultaneously across the different facets of any project or policy, for different people, to different degrees, and at different times. These narratives should also be analysed to identify patterns or themes that can highlight where, for example, similar failures at the point of delivery may be the result of systemic failures built into a given policy or project from the outset.

These narratives of failure, however, should not solely be confined to the pages of evaluations. We argue instead that conversations about failures should also become a normal part of ongoing dialogue between policymakers, practitioners, and participants, with each party encouraging the

others to acknowledge when failures do occur, to avoid apportioning blame, and to talk openly about what might be done to limit or even avoid the chances of repeating similar failures in the future. We recognise that talking about failures is difficult, especially where there is a pre-existing lack of trust between those taking part in such conversations. Failure is a complex and emotive term, and it is far more comfortable to talk about success. As such, discussions about failure can easily feel like judgements, or even a personal attack, and the defensiveness this engenders is not conducive to open and honest dialogue.

It is for this reason that we developed our framework, presented above, for talking about failure. We offer it as a method of having difficult conversations in a structured way and employing language that allows for a more nuanced and critically reflective account of where failures may have occurred, for whom, and to what degree. While we have made some suggestions about how our framework might be employed, our intention is not to be prescriptive about its use. Rather, our aim is to embed the principle that conversations about failures are necessary, not only in safe spaces among peers, but also with all stakeholders who have an interest and responsibility for making the cultural sector more equitable. We want to ensure that, going forward, narratives of failure are not overlooked, discounted, or suppressed but are instead foregrounded alongside narratives of success as a vital component in learning how participation policies and projects can result in more meaningful, long-term, sustainable change towards a more equitable cultural sector. If we discuss these failures now, perhaps we will not still be talking about the same problems in fifty years.

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