# Failspace toolkit

**An AHRC funded project to help you talk about and learn from failure**

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# FAILSPACE TOOLKIT TO HELP YOU TALK ABOUT AND LEARN FROM FAILURES

We at FailSpace believe the greatest learning comes from critical reflection that has been informed by a range of different perspectives and narratives from many different stakeholders. While this will involve celebrating successes, it must also include acknowledging failures, this is vital if meaningful change is to be made.

But our research showed how, for many different reasons, it can be difficult for people working in the cultural sector to talk openly and honestly about failures. However, if people are unwilling or unable to openly acknowledge when failures happen, the sector is doomed to keep making the same mistakes.

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We found that one of the key barriers to talking openly about failures was that many cultural professionals consider success and failure as binary opposites and as such were unwilling to label their work as a 'failure'. However, we suggest it is more productive to locate them at either end of a spectrum, and that very little of what we do could be called an outright success or outright failure. So, rather than asking if something is a success or a failure, we ask success or failure for whom? To what degree? And to what effect?

Adopting this perspective allows for more critical reflection, in which success and failure can co-exist and different points of view may all be valid. Our tools are intended to help cultural professionals talk about failures in a more nuanced way so that moving forward we see learning from failure as an important component of achieving success.

In this pack you will find a series of tools intended to help artists, organisations, participants and funders have more open and honest conversations about failures. There are four stages and five tools, as outlined below.

The next few pages explain what the tools are and how you can use them, with suggested activities to guide your thinking / help you lead a workshop, alongside suggested timings. However, this guide is not intended to be prescriptive and there will be many other ways to use our tools to start conversations about failures. So please use them in whatever way works best for you or even design your own tools.

## Stage 1 - Starting the conversation
• Exploring different narratives
  (Welcome to the Cultural Desert book)

## Stage 2 - Exploring the five facets of failure
• Talking about failures (audio recordings)
• Describing success and failure at the outset (the wheel)

## Stage 3 - Critical reflection
• Sharing stories of failures from different perspectives (postcards)

## Stage 4 - Deepening understanding
• Further reading and discussion

The tools are designed to be used at every stage of a project, from planning, to delivery and evaluation. Each tool is designed to take up to an hour so you could combine them all into a day's workshop, or use them as standalone tools within a team meeting, at a board away day, or when working with participants.

*If everything always worked perfectly you're probably not taking as many risks as you might be*

**Participant**

# STAGE 1 – STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Set in a 'cultural desert' near you. Our picture book juxtaposes the claims we make publicly and the things we may think privately. It is a book that tells one story in two ways. It is about the successes we hear talked about, and the failures we often don't.

It is a well-known and simple story, but one that is often told with the narratives of failure forgotten or overlooked. You can download a pdf of the book at
**www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/failspace/**

**Read the book either individually or as a group and consider / discuss the points below:**

• Who is the narrator and audience for each of the two versions of the story and how does this affect the narrative they tell?
• Where are the points of similarity and difference in the two versions of the story?
• What do we miss if we only read one version of the story?
• What is the moral of the story and what do we learn from hearing both versions?
• Why is it hard to tell one story that includes both narratives?

The aim of these questions is to reflect how different people may have different narratives of an event or tell them differently to different audiences.

**Next reflect on the narratives you tell about your work and consider/discuss the following:**

• Which of those narratives about your work do you find yourself using publicly most often?
• Can you give an example of a project where the story you told about it publicly was different from the story you told about it privately?
• Do you tell different stories about projects to different types of people?
• Whose perspectives most inform the narrative you use when telling the story of your projects publicly?
• How might you capture other perspectives and how might those perspectives create alternative narratives about your work?

Like all the FailSpace tools, this is an exercise that can be used at any point within a project or policy-making process. Exploring the stories different stakeholders tell about your projects at the beginning can be as useful as reflecting upon these questions after the end. But the main purpose of this tool is to start a conversation that recognises there are different perspectives that are worth hearing and different narratives that are worth telling.
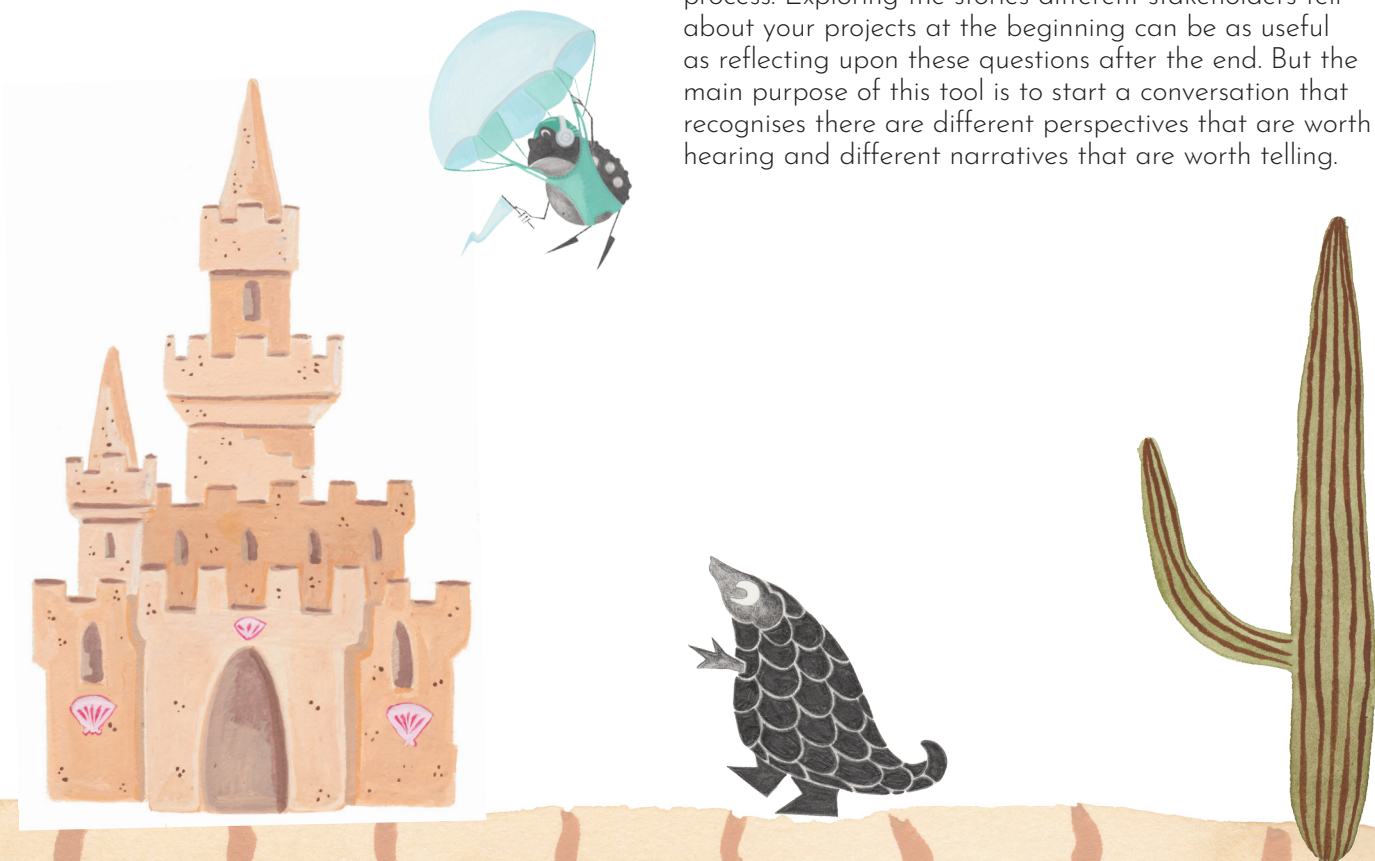
# STAGE 2 – EXPLORING THE FIVE FACETS OF FAILURE

Through our research we identified that although people recognised projects were rarely outright successes or failures they tended to talk about success or failure in absolute terms. As such, our tools offer a framework within which a more nuanced discussion can take place, one that recognises the different facets of cultural projects and the different degrees of success and failure that can exist in each.

## The Five Facets:

From analysing our data, we identified five different elements of cultural projects that people would discuss when reflecting on their relative success or failure.

We call these the five facets. In each facet a project succeeds or fails to a different degree meaning that we get a far richer and more nuanced insight into what has worked and what might need to change.

- **Purpose** - This facet relates to 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** - This facet relates to 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** - This facet relates to 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** - This facet relates to the creative and cultural intentions/aspirations of the policy/project. It also relates to its critical reception as a piece of creative practice.
- **Profile** - This facet relates to 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 / success:

In each facet there are six degrees of failure / success:

- **Outright failure**
- **Precarious failure**
- **Tolerable failure**
- **Conflicted success**
- **Resilient success**
- **Outright success**

You can find details of how we have defined each of these degrees at: **www.culturalvalue.org.uk/wheel-of-failure**

Together, the five facets and six degrees form what we call **the wheel of failure**.
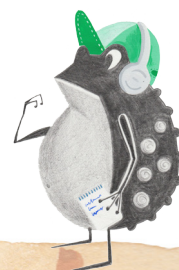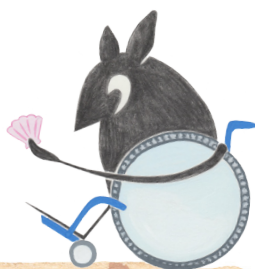
# FIVE FACETS OF FAILURE

The next two activities are connected, however we recommend you complete the Five Facets Of Failure activity before you move on to the Wheel of Failure, as the first activity includes stories of failure that may build the confidence of your team in sharing their own.

**The first activity explores each of the facets in a little more detail.** It involves listening to artists, funders and participants talking about failures they have experienced which we have categorised under each of the five facets. The purpose is to encourage you to think about failures you have experienced in cultural projects and to consider which facet you would locate them in.

We have used actors to record short extracts of our interviewees talking about failures they have experienced in real projects. listen here **www.culturalvalue.org.uk/facets-of-failure/**

**Listen to these recordings either individually or in small groups.** If you don't have time to listen to them all, make sure you have listened to a sample from each of the facets.

Come together as a group and if you listened to different stories first share what you heard. Then consider/discuss these points:

- How do these stories relate to the work that you do?
- Do any of these extracts remind you of your own experiences? In what way?
- Which stories stood out to you? Why?
- What are the differences between each of the five facets?

After you have discussed these points give everyone post it notes and ask them to write down brief descriptions of failures they have experienced in cultural projects they have been part of. Encourage them to write down as many as they can. Then, working together, use the five facets to organise everyone's post it notes into groups. Once this is complete consider/discuss the following questions:

- Which facets have more failures and which have less? Why do you think this is?
- What failures appear to be most common?
- Which failures could have been avoided? How?
- Which failures are the most likely to be overlooked when evaluating projects? Why?

# THE WHEEL OF FAILURE

The Wheel of Failure is a visual way of both examining and presenting all five facets of a project simultaneously, inviting you to think about what six different degrees of success and failure look like for your projects.

The purpose of the Wheel is to encourage a more multi-dimensional analysis of a project's successes and failures. Therefore, when evaluating a project, you might find it to be:

- 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

**For example:** Your project managed to engage the particular groups/communities you were planning to and the numbers involved were higher than expected.

Although you had hoped to encourage more of the participants to continue taking part after the project ended this was a secondary aim. As, such, your purpose might be categorised as a resilient success. However, in terms of participation, you struggled to get input from the participants into how they wanted the project to be shaped. The artist's vision for the work tended to dominate and some people felt their voices were not heard. As such, you might categorise the project as a tolerable failure in terms of participation.

While we often start projects with a clear outline of what success would look like, we rarely talk about what we would perceive as a failure. As such, the Wheel of Failure is intended to be used at every point in the life of a project, from planning and design to delivery and evaluation.

*At the outset of a new project or policy you could use the Wheel to facilitate a discussion about what success and failure would look like for your project. You could have separate discussions with each of your stakeholder groups or you could have one discussion with everyone involved in the project – what is important is that you hear a range of perspectives and treat each equally.*

You can approach the discussion in different ways, for example, brainstorming on the wall with post it notes, or using a world café approach with people rotating around separate discussions. Whatever approach you take make sure to discuss the following:

• Does every facet matter for this project? Some groups of stakeholders may only be interested in a selection of the facets.
• Taking each facet in turn discuss and agree what each of the degrees of success/failure would look like for this project. While our definitions of the degrees are there to guide you, don't feel constrained by them, the focus here is on creating a more nuanced framework to assess the outputs and outcomes of the project you are working on.
• Don't feel constrained by numbers and metrics. While these may feature 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 has been a conflicted success in regard to its process be that the artist was not paid for their time when developing the project – this suggests the project could have been budgeted better. Likewise, an indicator that the project has been a resilient or even outright success in participation could be that the output of the project changed from what was originally proposed in response to the input of participants.
• Are there other facets to this project that any group of stakeholders would add into the wheel? What would the differing degrees of success/failure look like for that facet?

If you have been working in smaller groups come back together to compare and discuss any differences regarding how you defined the different degrees of success/failure in each of the facets.

You can record the outcomes of your discussions as a grid, describing what you feel each degree of success/failure would look like for your project in each of the five facets. There is a template for a grid on the next page, or why not make your own! If you have been working in separate groups and it is difficult to combine different definitions, then keep them on separate grids – different stakeholders can view success and failure in different ways.

**As the project is being delivered** return to your grid(s) to see 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** return to the grid(s) again, ideally with the same stakeholders who helped you to create it/them, to discuss the project and compare it to your initial thoughts about success/failure. Taking each facet in turn agree which degree of success/failure the project ended up resembling the most. You may want to graphically represent the outcome on a completed Wheel or create separate Wheels for each stakeholder group to allow easy graphical comparison between how different groups have perceived the relative successes and failures of the project.

Once you have completed your Wheel(s) talk about those areas where the project failed to some degree. Discuss these questions as a group:

• Were these failures inevitable?
• Were expectations too high to begin with?
• How could these failures have been avoided?
• 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?
• What have you learnt from the failures in the project?
• How can you share this learning openly with others?

|  | Outright Failure | Precarious Failure | Tolerable Failure | Conflicted Success | Resilient Success | Outright Success |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Purpose | | | | | | |
| Process | | | | | | |
| Participation | | | | | | |
| Practice | | | | | | |
| Profile | | | | | | |

# STAGE 3 CRITICAL REFLECTION – POSTCARDS OF FAILURE

Throughout our research we used postcards to share our experiences of failure with each other. You can recreate this activity by purchasing blank postcards and design your own FailSpace postcards as part of your workshop.

We have suggested two activities for you to choose from depending on who you are working with. You could do this activity thinking about your work in general or you could use it as part of the evaluation activities for a specific project or policy.

## Activity (alone) (30 - 45 minutes)

1. Think about all the different people you work with (e.g., participants, artists, art organisations, funders) and the times when you have not felt able to be fully honest in the past.
2. Fill in as many of the postcards as you can, honestly sharing failures that you have never shared before.
3. If you wish to post your postcard(s) to whomever you are writing to, we've left space for a stamp and address. Why not invite them to send something back to you to keep the dialogue going?
4. If you don't feel comfortable posting what you have written, you could instead reflect on why that is and if there is another way you could start a constructive conversation about failures with those stakeholders.

## Activity (group) (45 - 60 minutes)

1. If the group are of one particular type (e.g., participants or staff teams) select the postcards that are of most relevance to them. Then:
   a. Ask everyone in the group to write their own text for these postcards then share them with the group.
   b. Ask them to role play a different stakeholder and think how they would complete a postcard from their perspective.
   c. Discuss how the group could make talking about these sorts of failures easier, both amongst yourselves and with your stakeholders
2. If the group is mixed (e.g., staff, participants, funders) – each participant can select the postcards that are of most relevance to them to complete individually. Then:
   a. Discuss the different sort of failures that people have experienced and why you might find it difficult to have these sorts of discussions normally.
   b. Discuss ways in which you could encourage more open dialogue to continue in the future

In either case once you have completed the activity talk about whose perspective is missing. Could you reach out to them by sending a postcard you have written or asking them to complete one and send it to you?

# STAGE 4 – DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

One way to embed these ongoing discussions within your project or organisation could be to create a FailSpace Book Club!

We have published a book and some articles about failure over the past few years **www.culturalvalue.org.uk/the-findings/**. They all include references to other interesting work about failure.

For each session of your book club, choose one of our texts and invite a group of people to read it in advance. This might be your staff team or a range of different stakeholders.

Ask everyone to come to the session having thought about the issues or questions the publication raises for them and use these as the basis for your discussion.

Here are some prompts to get you started

1) what do you agree or disagree with in the text?
2) how does it relate to your own work?
3) what might you learn from this for your own practice?

Set a time for the next meeting of the group and ask someone else to choose what to read.

Make sure you provide tea and biscuits.