

Why Feel-Good Narratives Must End

By Leila Jancovich and David Stevenson

A version of this article appeared in ArtsProfessional on the 5th November 2020, entitled 'Why Feel-Good Narratives Must End'. It is available here:

<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/why-feel-good-narratives-must-end>

In June 2019 Leila Jancovich wrote a piece for Arts Professional calling on the arts sector to be more [honest about failure](#). This was followed, in April 2020, with a piece by David Stevenson sharing early findings from their joint AHRC funded research project on why it seems so [hard to talk about failure](#). Since then the professional cultural sector has faced phenomenal challenges due to Covid, and a recent [CEBR report](#) suggests that losing one third of the sector would be a good result for recovery. But in England, eligibility for the new Cultural Recovery Fund is defined purely in terms of the [“cultural organisations that were financially stable before Covid-19, but were at imminent risk of failure”](#). In other words success and failure are only judged in financial terms and not with reference to what the cultural offer is or who it is for. This article suggests this in itself is an example of policy failure: a failure to learn, a failure to change and failure to convince.

We have been working on an AHRC research project looking at failure in cultural participation for nearly 2 years now, during which time we have heard from hundreds of policy makers, arts practitioners and participants, through workshops, interviews and anonymous surveys. We have also recently published a free to access online [journal](#) containing a range of articles that offer narratives of failure from different perspectives and at different points in the design and implementation of cultural participation policies.

The starting point for our research was an interest in why, despite the headlines about exciting projects and policies to increase cultural participation, the diversity of people who engage in the subsidised arts in the UK has changed so little over our working lives. Or more particularly what the benefits might be in acknowledging this more openly as a **policy failure** in order to find better solutions to address inequities in regard to how different people's cultural lives are supported and valued.

A growing number of people (academics and practitioners) have challenged the way in which the 'problem' of cultural participation is understood in policy and the work of the [Understanding Everyday Participation](#) research team has provided extensive evidence in support of this position. Rather than seeing the 'problem' as a failure of certain people to participate, they site the problem as one within the cultural sector itself, in particular a persistent **failure to recognise and resource** the cultural lives people already have.

What we have found through our own research is a cultural landscape that is not conducive to honesty or critical reflection about failures. A lack of trust and open dialogue between participants, artists, cultural organisations and funders, fuelled by a fear of losing funding, future work or professional reputations encourages narratives of success as a self-defensive act of blame avoidance. But this discourages risk taking, encourages repetition of past mistakes and results in a **failure to learn** that limits significant change.

Furthermore these 'feel-good' narratives have done little to increase or even consolidate political support for public subsidy of arts and culture, as the value of spending in this area continues to be questioned in a way that, for example, spending in education and health are not. In the face of the unprecedented crisis society is currently facing, this **failure to convince** will be of even greater concern for the sector. However, we argue that the tendency to overstate impacts through uncritical narratives of success risks undermining the credibility of arguments about why state subsidies for art and culture are necessary.

This is why our work seeks to encourage explicit acknowledgement that policies and projects to support cultural participation are rarely either an outright success or failure. Furthermore different stakeholders, with differing value systems, will define 'success' and 'failure' in different ways. Yet what we found time and again was a **failure to listen** to a range of different viewpoints and narratives, leading to a tendency to overlook the truism that a policy or project that succeeds for one group, community, or organisation might fail for another.

The narratives told in our free to access [journal](#) seek to challenge this, offering different perspectives both on participation and on success and failure. Some question what makes for meaningful participation in policy making, demonstrating how tokenistic practices, that do not shift power relationships in regard to decision-making processes, do little to change the status quo. Others explore whose narratives are present or absent in defining success and failure, and show how this can significantly influence the learning gained from a project. Some look at participation in relation to artistic practice, questioning both what it is that people are being invited to participate in and why this participation is seen as desirable. What all of these articles show is how success and failure are seen very differently when defined by a policy imperative rather than an artistic impetus. They also demonstrate how the voice of the participant or the artist, are all too often missing in policy design, review and evaluation and the value in giving them a place round the table.

We therefore encourage all those working in the cultural sector to consider **success and failure as two sides of the same coin**. When reflecting on policy or practice we must ask not only what the criteria for success and failure are but also who should decide on these criteria and how will conflicting voices and narratives be included in the stories we tell about this work. If we accept that success and failure are dependant on whose perspective we are looking from then we need to be able to answer: Success and failure for whom? In what ways? To what effect?

In our previous articles we asked readers to share stories of failure anonymously. We are now asking you to share what you learnt, and what others might learn, from your experiences of failing. To support this process we are also developing some workshop tools, including an illustrated storybook and an online platform, all of which are intended to help encourage and support conversations about failure to take place between different stakeholders. To find out more, download tools or request a hard copy of the book please visit our website - www.failspaceproject.co.uk

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