Exploratory Workshop on Failure (Leiden, 11-12 Mar 27)

Leiden University, Mar 11–12, 2027
Deadline: Sep 18, 2026

Dr. Basil Nelis

Exploratory Workshop on Failure.

Organizers: Dr. Merlijn Breunesse (Leiden University and University of Amsterdam) and Dr. Basil Nelis (Leiden University)

What does it mean to 'fail better', as Samuel Beckett puts it towards the beginning of his 1983 work Worstward Ho? And how can we conceptualize failure itself? Failure is generally considered to be negative if seen as an undesired outcome of an attempt to achieve success, but a growing body of literature argues that it can, and should, be valued positively. It is this positive valorization of failure that we want to explore in a two-day workshop at Leiden University on 11 and 12 March 2027.

The trend to value failure positively can be witnessed both within academia and beyond, and in domains ranging from philosophy (Reinhard 2011)––including popular philosophy (Pépin 2016)––and business (Beam 2021) to cultural history (Sandage 2005) and queer studies (Halberstam 2011). It has suggested that 'success' and 'failure' are subjective, value-laden terms whose meaning is constantly redefined in relation to each other. In fact, the very notion of failure depends on what is considered a success, and success in turn is defined by dominant social groups, whether it be in the domain of politics, economics, or culture.

We notice that two contrasting ways of valuing failure positively can be distinguished. Some consider failure to be valuable only if it paves the way for eventual success: this conception of failure is typical of a more traditional, capitalist framework (e.g. Beam 2021). Others see failure as intrinsically valuable. This latter conception of failure has notably been explored by J. Halberstam in the influential book The Queer Art of Failure (2011). For Halberstam, valuing failure positively in and of itself constitutes a form of resistance against dominant social groups and can lead to 'alternative ways of knowing and being' (Halberstam 2011, 24). Taking as a starting point these two contrasting ways of valuing failure, which we encourage contributors both to think with and to challenge, this workshop will focus on the following topics:

- Failure in academia and beyond: how is failure conceived in different domains, such as academia, business, sports, etc.? How do these definitions compare with, and complement, each other? How do they relate to concepts such as trial, risk, error, unfinishedness or incompleteness?
- The preconditions of failure: it has been suggested that failure requires certain preconditions. If

this is indeed the case, what are these preconditions?
- Failure and innovation: how is innovation related to failure and success? In what ways can failure–in the form, for example, of ‘accidents’ and ‘trial and error’–lead to innovation? Can the connection often posited between innovation and success be challenged?
- Failing in art and literature: what is the role of art (broadly conceived) in the growing trend to embrace failure? How do works of art reflect on failure and offer a space within which it can be valued positively?
- Failure and society: where do concepts of failure emerge? And how does failure intersect with dominant societal structures and norms (capitalism, gender)? If ‘success’ is defined by the dominant group, then is failure automatically associated with the ‘other’?

We welcome contributions which reflect on these topics from a range of different perspectives, including, but not limited to, the humanities, social sciences, business, public policy, artistic creation, etc. The conference will be held in English. Each presentation will last approximately 30 minutes, including time for questions and/or discussion. Confirmed keynote speakers are Prof. Dr. Stijn Bussels (Leiden University), Prof. Dr. Katharine Earnshaw (University of Exeter), and Prof. Dr. Astrid van Oyen (Radboud University, Nijmegen).

Contributors are kindly asked to submit an outline of their proposed contribution (maximum 1 A4 page), as well as a brief biography, before 18 September 2026 to b.l.p.nelis@hum.leidenuniv.nl.
We are unfortunately not able to fund travel and accommodation expenses, but we can provide assistance with finding accommodation in Leiden and shall provide lunch on both days as well as a conference dinner for the speakers. Contributors will be invited to prepare a written version of their paper for publication in a proceedings volume. During the conference, we shall also explore the possibility of publishing a companion booklet, which will be destined for a wider audience and contain illustrative anecdotes on failure stemming from the conference papers.

List of works cited:

Beam, R. 2021. Fail Fast, Learn Faster: Lessons in Data-Driven Leadership in an Age of Disruption, Big Data, and AI, London: Wiley.
Beckett, S. 1983. Worstward Ho, London: Calder.
Halberstam, J. 2011. The Queer Art of Failure, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Pépin, C. 2016. Les Vertus de l’échec, Paris: Allary.
Reinhard, M. 2017. Philosophie des Scheiterns. Jacques Derridas aporetische Schriften, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.
Sandage, S. A. 2005. Born Losers: A History of Failure in America, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

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