

Embracing and Reframing Research Failures: Toward More Socially Just Practices

Special Issue for *[Technical Communication and Social Justice](#)*

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What does it mean to “fail” in research? When we ask this question of our peers, we hear many stories of research failures. However, it is rare to see publications and presentations that center the idea of failure in research in technical communication. Research failures are ubiquitous, but often invisible (Sousa & Clark, 2019). Research can “fail” in the process and/or product, meaning that one may not be able to implement the ideal research design and/or achieve the ideal research outcome (Eckert, 2020). Failure can also refer to decisions made during the research process that once seemed suitable have to shift because they no longer prove to be suitable (Clark & Sousa, 2020). Research is a “wicked problem” (Wickman, 2014; Tham, 2021) due to intersecting complexities and has no single right path. Framed differently, research failures, like other academic and professional failures, are “an animating pedagogical purpose” to “(1) inform practice by retrospection, (2) transform character by affective experience, or (3) form and reform plans by illuminating constraints and desires” (Teagarden, Mando, and Commer, 2024, p. 49).

When researchers experience failure, it can be accompanied by feelings of shame and regret. Research failure can be stigmatized and stigmatizing (Clark & Sousa, 2020). Failure can be seen as a threat to an individual’s career or promotion and also as causing harm, intentionally or unintentionally to communities or organizations that research work with and for. Therefore, stories of research failure are often not shared broadly due to fear or concern that they might reflect negatively on the researcher or the research endeavor as a whole.

“Failure” in research can be shaped by structural inequities that determine whose/what questions are considered legitimate, whose/what methods are valued, and whose knowledge is recognized as worth producing. For example, Haas (2012) has “interrogate[d] how colonialism and imperialism have informed our” ways of knowing (p. 297). At the same time, decolonial work is more than metaphorical but must be “a relational, collaborative, and iterative practice that actively challenges the colonial underpinnings of knowledge production in academia” and consider actual “implications for the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples” (Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2021, p. 22). Researchers, particularly those from marginalized communities or working with marginalized communities, often encounter barriers that make it difficult or impossible to pursue the research they wish to conduct because it is deemed unimportant, unrigorous, or misaligned with dominant disciplinary practice or institutional standards (Gregory, 2019). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of social movements such as Black

Lives Matter have taught us that research is complicated and embodied work, intersecting with personal, social, cultural, and political activities (see Kill, 2022; Morton-Aiken & DeVasto, 2022, as some representative of many more similar stories).

In this sense, failure can be understood as a form of silencing, in which certain research ideas or methods are discouraged, unfunded, or rendered invisible. How can we examine how research failure is unevenly distributed (think of where/how, or under what circumstances, research would have been possible), how it reflects broader power relations in the academe, and how attending to failure can open space for more just, inclusive, and socially responsive forms of knowledge production?

Sometimes, research must necessarily fail. As feminist queer rhetorical scholar Caroline Dadas (2024) argued, we as researchers must be willing to fail when we perceive participants' emotional, psychological, or physical safety as being in jeopardy. Sometimes, research invariably fails because the conditions or context of the research subject it to insurmountable/unpredictable barriers such as legal constraints (Anabire & Chen, 2025) or a global pandemic, or the existence in the academy and resisting its ableism (Lewis, 2022).

Sometimes, we must be flexible and pivot. In published scholarship, we often remove the doubt and smooth it out in descriptions of research. But messy research contexts and messy worlds require "investigative pivots" (Johnson et al., 2021). CohenMiller et al. (2020) defined "rigid flexibility" as "maintaining a clear and unwavering goal in research with a willingness to be flexible in how it is reached" (p. 5). These stories can be shared and there are tools to do so, for example, there are different heuristics to examine research through a critical and reflective lens for decolonial research (Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2021) and social justice research (Rose & Cardinal, 2021). Creating and using research heuristics allows researchers to engage with success and failure in ways that are productive and help further knowledge creation.

For this special issue, we invite stories of research failure that challenge dominant notions of "research success" and redefine and reframe "failure" productively toward more socially just goals of what academic research can mean and what research should be valued, especially in technical and professional communication. Thus, in this special issue, we reframe "failure" productively to highlight how systems and structures foreclose possibility and sustain injustice. Failure is often a feature of attempting to change durable, unjust structures. Sharing failures can be a way to share strategies and approaches for how we navigate these unjust systems and for validating other ways of knowledge making, including failure.

Specifically, articles in this issue may address the following questions:

- How do we respond to challenges during the research process (the unexpected shifts and changes)? What are ways to pivot?
- When research must necessarily "fail" because ethics requires it so (Dadas, 2024)? When and how do we decide to step away from research due to ethical challenges,

positionality, identity, and concerns for marginalized audiences or the communities we are working alongside? How can this turn into a meaningful experience?

- How can we challenge dominant notions of “success”? Who benefits from our research? Who’s harmed by our research?
- How can we embrace failure? How do we reduce harm around failure?
- How do we think about the trajectories of our research lives? How do experiences of “failure” shape our research and professional identities?
- What cunning ways can we use to frame our research when faced with social and political challenges?
- How does research failure inform the teaching of research methods?

We invite submissions of empirical research, case studies, integrative literature reviews, workplace studies, and narratives that explore the concept of failure in technical communication.

Proposals should be 300-500 words (not including citations). They should align with the focus of the journal; submissions should approach the topic of “research failure” through (1) exploring the systems and structures that legitimize and sustain injustice and/or (2) redressing injustice and/or enacting social justice in spheres of technical communication work.

Please include

- Author name(s), affiliation(s), email(s),
- The working title for the article, article type, key terms, specific topics, methods (if applicable)
- Reader takeaways

Please send proposals or questions to the special issue editors:

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Special issue timeline

- Proposals due March 31, 2026
- Decisions on proposals - April 30, 2026
- Full drafts due - July 15, 2026
- Decisions to Authors - August 31, 2026
- Revisions - October 15, 2026
- Anticipated Publication - Winter/Spring 2027

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