ACADEMIC ENGLISH

PEN0065
TRIMESTER 1, 2020/2021

QUESTIONS
READING PROJECT
(30%)

Instructions: Read the text and answer the questions that follow.

The learning opportunities hiding in our failures

1 Successes enjoy more attention than failures. We celebrate stories of triumph, and pore over them to extract the reasons why things went so well. Industries package the lessons and share them as tips for 'best practice', while after-dinner speakers regale their audiences with the steps they took to glory. By contrast, if they are not buried completely, failures, and those who perpetrate them, are more often seen as sources of shame or ignominy.

2 However, it is often the errors, missteps and outright flops that contain more useful practical information on how to do things better, if only we were more willing to share and study them. That is according to Ayelet Fishbach and Lauren Eskreis-Winkler, psychologists at the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago. The researchers believe that we often fail to learn sufficiently from when things go wrong. "Take bad business decisions, which we make because we don't learn from others' and our own failures. We similarly often ignore signs and we don't pay attention to failures and don't bother to learn the lesson for how to succeed," says Fishbach.

3 Previous research had already exposed our unhelpful aversion to information about ongoing or future failure – a problem dubbed 'the ostrich effect' by Thomas Webb, a psychologist from University of Sheffield. Whether we are trying a new fitness regime, building a company website or planning for a looming pandemic, the human inclination is to put our heads in the sand once we have embarked on our path. Rather than monitoring our progress to check if we have gone off track, we grit our teeth, continue and hope for the best.

4 Now Eskreis-Winkler and Fishbach have added to this literature by focusing on our reluctance to pay attention to failures, both our own and others, after they have happened. In their recent paper, the researchers asked dozens of teachers to recall a specific time they had been successful at work and a specific time that they had failed. When they asked the teachers which story they would choose to share to help other teachers, nearly 70 per cent opted to share their success rather than their failure. The same thing happened when they asked hundreds of online volunteers to think of the times they had succeeded at staying focused at work, and of the times they had failed. The majority were more reluctant to share their failures than successes. The aversion to sharing failures remained true even when the researchers asked the volunteers to share with their 'future selves', suggesting there is more to this bias than wanting to make a good impression on strangers.

5 Eskreis-Winkler and Fishbach believe a key factor is that many of us simply do not realise how informative failures can be. To test this experimentally, they created a task designed to model real-life situations in which the key to success is avoiding mistakes. They wanted to see if volunteers would avoid sharing their failures even though they were more informative than their successes.

6 For the task, dozens of online volunteers opened two mystery boxes from an array of three, for the chance to win money. One box contained 20 cents, another 80 cents, while the last was an empty box that would cost them to lose a cent. Next, they had the opportunity to share information about one of the boxes they opened to help

the next participant in the game. As an incentive, they were told this other player would soon have the chance to reciprocate by sharing information with them. Crucially, the researchers contrived things so that each volunteer always opened a losing box and the 20-cent box. This meant, objectively, that it was always more useful if volunteers shared their failure, that is, the location of the money-losing box, than their relative success, the 20-cent box. Sharing the failure would allow the next player to dodge it, while sharing their success would still risk the other player opening the losing box. Yet, Eskreis-Winkler and Fishbach found that, across several studies, between one third to half of the volunteers chose to share success over failure, even though sharing failure would have been more beneficial to the other player.

7 The researchers uncovered more evidence for the way we overlook the value of failure in a follow-up experiment. Online volunteers guessed the meaning of ancient symbols, choosing from two possible answers for each one. For one set, the researchers told the participants there was no time to give them their results. For the other, the researchers told them they had answered everything incorrectly. What is particularly revealing is that when the researchers asked the volunteers which set they knew more about and could help other people with, 70 per cent of them opted for the set for which they had received no feedback, rather than the set for which they knew they had failed so badly but which, due to the binary forced-choice format, they now effectively knew all the correct answers.

8 As with the money-box task, the problem again seemed to be the volunteers' ignorance of how informative failures can be. Then, when Eskreis-Winkler and Fishbach nudged another group of volunteers into appreciating that learning they had got all the answers wrong meant that they now knew the correct answers, this increased their willingness to share their knowledge about the symbol set they had failed on.

9 The new findings suggest many of us could benefit from simply being made more aware of the lessons hidden in our failures. She adds that it can be hard to learn from failures because they hurt your self-esteem, and you need to infer the correct answer. "So not only do you need to pay attention; you need to pay extra attention because it's harder to learn from failure," she says. Of course, thinking about your errors and failures can be demotivating, especially if you are a perfectionist or feeling low in confidence.

10 To face up to your mistakes and learn, it's important not to be overly harsh on yourself. "Many are critical of themselves when they experience challenges," Webb says, "but if they were able to respond with self-compassion by recognising that failure is a natural part of being human, then it is possible to remain motivated, and part of this will be a cultural shift toward accepting apparent failure."

11 Webb is right that there are broader cultural lessons here. While we quite rightly see failures as a negative, we have much to gain from a wider cultural shift that reframes them not just as sources of shame or regret, but also as richly informative learning opportunities. "I'm fascinated with a growing trend of companies holding 'screw-up nights', which are consequence-free opportunities for employees to step up to the mic and talk about the mistakes they've made on the job," says Fishbach. It takes courage to admit when you got things wrong, but if more of us could do it, we would all benefit from the lessons learned.

Adapted from Jarrett, C. (2020). The learning opportunities hiding in our failures. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200616-the-learning-opportunities-hiding-in-our-failures

Instructions: Answer each of the questions below.

1. How is our human inclination explained by the "the ostrich effect"? Explain the connection by using your own words. (3 marks)

2. What is this "bias" referred in line 34 and how was this bias proven by the researchers? (3 marks)

3. State if these statements are facts or opinions. Justify your answers with your own words.

   a. Yet it is often the errors, missteps and outright flops that contain more useful practical information on how to do things better, if only we were more willing to share and study them. (1 mark)

   b. Crucially, the researchers contrived things so that each volunteer always opened a losing box and the 20-cent box. (1 mark)

   c. To face up to your mistakes and learn, it's important not to be overly harsh on yourself. (1 mark)

4. Which behaviour of the ancient symbol volunteers were "particularly revealing"? What did their behaviour reveal? (3 marks)

5. What is the main idea of paragraph 1? (1 mark)

6. What is the main idea of paragraph 9? (1 mark)

7. State if these statements are true or false. Justify your answers with your own words.

   a. The online volunteers mentioned in paragraph 4 refused to divulge their failures because they wanted to impress others. (1mark)

   b. If the volunteers in the money box task pointed to the empty box, it would definitely have helped the other players to pick the box with a coin. (1mark)

   c. Many people tend to be kind to themselves when they experience failure in life. (1mark)

8. What is the author's purpose? Elaborate on your answer. (2 marks)

9 What is the author's tone in this article? Provide support from the text for your answer. (2 marks)

10. What is the author's point of view in this article? Elaborate using your own words. (2 marks)

11. Who is the author's intended audience? Justify your answer. (2 marks)

12. What is the "cultural shift" that Webb mentioned in paragraph 10? (1 mark)

13. What is the bias demonstrated by the author towards the "cultural shift" mentioned in the last paragraph? Justify your answer. (2 marks)

14. Provide evidence from the article that proves that the "cultural shift" is taking place. Justify your answer. (2 marks)

END OF PROJECT