Using "Slow" to Reframe Failure: Fusing Wisdom from the Slow Movement with Self-Compassion Principles to Transform Communication Failures

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Introduction

How do we define and communicate failure? Who has the power to determine what is a failure and what is not? How do our responses to failure shape our identities, opportunities, relationships, and trajectories? Is it possible to redefine and repurpose the notion of failure? These questions initiate a semester-long pedagogical approach that invites students enrolled in Introduction to Communication to challenge conventionally masculinized conceptions of failure that lack self-compassion and that discourage a growth-mindset.

Informed by key principles of the Slow Movement, including living deliberately, finding balance, and resisting busyness (Honoré, 2005; Parkins & Craig, 2006), as well as self-compassion concepts such as self-kindness and recognition of common human experiences (Neff, 2011), this semester-long focus prompts a recurring examination of assumptions about perceived failures. When applied to intrapersonal, interpersonal, team, and institutional circumstances, slowness and self-compassion can reframe evaluations of failure with more equitable interpretations–focused on collective compassion and a bigger picture point of view. Through reflective writing, speaking, and listening exercises, students process and reframe communication failures with a lens that prioritizes contemplation, holistic context, self-companionship, and openness.

Rationale

Anxiety rates are at an all-time high for the general population, and college students are no exception (Flannery, 2023; Witters, 2023). Higher education's rushed pace and prioritization of quantity over quality can contribute to students' overwhelm. High-stakes, participation-centric communication classrooms can be especially anxiety-producing spaces. Long and Neff (2018) note that such tension sometimes hinders students from fully engaging with their academic community, comprehending complex concepts, and cultivating meaningful student-instructor connections. However, participatory paralysis brought on by communication apprehension can be moderated by teaching students resilience-building skills. Embracing the concept of "slow," applying self-compassion techniques, and reframing failures as opportunities for growth can help students develop inner agency and address anxiety-related barriers to learning.

Berg and Seeber (2016) assert that slow teaching approaches afford students "time to think, absorb, debate, apply concepts, take intellectual risks, [and] learn from their mistakes" (p. 50). Slow pedagogies offer space for ideas to percolate before students are expected to make themselves vulnerable by articulating responses or making conceptual leaps in front of audiences. Because they are more intentional, explicitly slow academic practices have the capacity to impact students now and later–beyond their college years, helping them develop patience, persistence, and sustained attention. Additionally, slow procedures in the classroom can serve as a "source of knowledge construction that casts off the colonial shackles of dialectic

Western pedagogy and makes space for embodied, relational, and spiritual ways of being, learning, and existing within the academy" (Thomas & Carvajal-Regidor, 2021).

One way to slow things down, decrease anxiety, and promote well-being in the college classroom is through mindfulness-based interventions such as deep listening and discussions, contemplative reading, and reflective writing (Ramler et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2022). Supple and Cronin's (2023) Slow Looking Framework paves a way for dialogic teaching after students have immersively interacted with an artifact at different iterative levels. These levels are evoked through prompts used to guide students maneuvering art gallery spaces. Fusing elements from the Slow Looking Framework with Neff's (2009) pillars of self-compassion (mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness), the "Using Slow to Reframe Failure" approach detailed below helps students generatively rework their experiences with communication interactions that they or others consider to be failures.

Learning Objectives

By successfully completing this unit, students will be able to:
1. Identify and describe personal experiences or witnessed scenarios that, when using a traditional, masculinist lens, would be considered communication failures.
2. Apply communication concepts, terms, and theories to examine how societal systems and norms can perpetuate unhealthy interpretations of failure.
3. Define Slow Movement principles and self-compassion practices and explain how they have the potential to challenge traditional notions of failure.
4. Apply Slow Movement principles and self-compassion practices to transform communication failure narratives into narratives situated in collective accountability and opportunities for growth.

Materials

- A text that provides an overview of the communication field, discipline, concepts, and theories such as *Communication Mosaics: An Introduction to the Field of Communication* (Wood, 2017)
- Case studies or scenarios related to communication failures
- Select readings and multimedia resources (popular and scholarly articles, videos, and podcasts) on Slow Movement and self-compassion principles

Explanation

Once rapport and semester norms have been established, and once students have gained a fundamental understanding of the breadth of the communication field, they are ready for the "Using 'Slow' to Reframe Failure" unit. The intentionally scaffolded activities can be adapted to class sessions of various lengths, formats, and numbers of occurrence, though this unit was originally designed for four early-in-the-semester, in-person class sessions spanning two weeks with periodic related assignments and applications emerging over the remainder of the semester.

Session One: Defining Failure in Communication Contexts

The unit is launched by dividing students into small groups to process questions that unpack existing notions of failure. Students discuss what the term means to them, how they have witnessed failure in communication contexts, and what impacts failure has had on people and groups. The class then creates a working definition of failure that maps shared assumptions. They reflect on common communication setbacks like lack of clarity, interpersonal missteps, public speaking mishaps, exclusionary dynamics, emotional obstacles, insufficient feedback channels, and more. They generate a list identifying where breakdowns typically occur–illuminating themes of assumptions, intent, interpretation, and impact. Real-world examples like celebrity gaffes are considered. Students connect patterns across interpersonal, group, and organizational arenas to discern systemic trends. Through layered discussion, strategic reframes nudge students to question initial perceptions, unpack nuances of blame and impact, and consider alternate reception or recovery. By this session's end, reflections turn aspirational–how might failures be reinterpreted or redistributed? What might emerge if students attempted to reframe these scenarios without the term failure? Students depart seeing potential for deeper understanding and growth when communication veers from ideals.

Session Two: Introducing "Slow"
Prior to this session, select Slow Movement resources are assigned to be read/watched before class. The following are especially accessible for stage-setting in the intro course:

1. Amy Blankson's (2022) *Forbes* magazine article: "The Rise of the 'Slow Productivity' Movement"
2. Cassandra Dunn's (2023) brief essay: "Why the 'Slow' Movement is Gaining Momentum"
3. Carl Honoré's (2005) TED Talk: "In Praise of Slowness"

After briefly reviewing key takeaways from the prior session, students contemplate proactive approaches for analyzing, addressing, and discussing failures, reframing them not as defeats but opportunities for growth. In this context, the Slow Movement is formally introduced. Students note observations that emerged during their preparatory reading/watching for the class session:

1. What stands out about the concept of Slow?
2. What is compelling about the authors'/speakers' assertions and descriptions of Slow?
3. What questions emerge?

Slow Movement principles are then introduced in a more formal capacity in the form of a lecture or a handout. Students consider the benefits of practicing Slow Movement principles. In small groups, they reflect on potential applications of Slow principles to the communication failure scenarios discussed earlier. They discuss how adopting a Slow posture or attitude might change the dynamics of some of the communication scenarios.

Students then identify a current communication scenario being framed as a failure. This could be unique to their campus, their community, or an emergent situation unfolding on the national or world stage. They discuss how an application of Slow might reshape initial perceptions of failure in those scenarios. As the session closes, students are asked to reflect on the intersections between Slow principles and practices like holistic context-gathering, suspended judgment, and

collaborative recalibrating. This prompts a deeper discernment of when situations framed as failures may beckon more nuanced analysis, while also inviting the recognition that effectively shifting frameworks demands an iterative process open to evolving understanding.

Session Three: Introducing Self-Compassion/Inner Resilience
At the outset of this session, students articulate how principles from the Slow Movement can cultivate an alternative relationship with the concept of failure. Recognizing that the Slow approaches to communication breakdowns explored thus far have focused externally, we now pivot inward. Self-compassion is introduced as a tool that integrates Slow principles when processing lived experiences with perceived communication failures.

Because the term "self-compassion" can elicit skeptical reactions for some, it is helpful to invite students to verbally convey initial responses upon hearing the phrase–especially in an academic context. Students then explore Neff's (2015) "Five Myths of Self-Compassion," which acknowledges skeptics' concern that self-compassion epitomizes self-pity, weakness, complacency, narcissism, and selfishness. Neff explains that research not only dispels these myths but also shows that perpetuating such falsehoods "keep[s] us trapped in the prison of relentless self-criticism."

The remainder of Session Three focuses on defining the three pillars of self-compassion:
1. **Self-kindness** invites us to take a soothing posture of "caring and understanding" with ourselves in the midst of suffering instead of taking a harsh, critical, and judgmental stance (Neff, 2009, p. 212).
2. **Common Humanity** invites us to sense our interconnectedness with the human condition in the midst of our errors. By "recognizing that all humans are imperfect, fail and make mistakes," we opt for connection rather than shame-filled isolation (p. 212).
3. **Mindfulness** invites us to sink into the present moment–to honor our feelings by feeling them "in a clear and balanced manner" so that we do not ignore or dwell "on disliked aspects of oneself or one's life" (p. 212).

Neff (2015) notes that self-compassion is available to us when suffering stems from circumstances outside of our control **and** when it results from our own unskillful actions, failures, or inadequacies.

Comprehension is further explained in two videos used to close out the class session:

1. "Kristin Neff: The Three Components of Self-Compassion" by the Greater Good Science Center (2014).
2. "Self Compassion" by School of Life (2016).

Students end the session writing reflectively about what resonates in this initial introduction to self-compassion. Prompts include questions about which pillars feel most relevant or compelling. Students are reminded that formal definitions are only a starting point and that the ultimate measure will be discovering how self-compassion might take shape in their daily lives.

Session Four: Using Slow/Self-Compassion to Reframe Failure

After revisiting their written responses about what resonated from the prior session's introduction to self-compassion, students share aloud to collectively hear, honor, and understand a diversity of reactions, questions, and connections. They are then guided through a self-compassion meditation. Instructors determine whether they will play Neff's "Guided Compassion Meditation" (Breslin, 2021) or if they will guide their students themselves through a slightly adapted version of Neff and Germer's (2018) "Self-Compassion Break" (pp. 34-36). The first is a 21-minute recording while the latter takes about 7-10 minutes to calmly and slowly read aloud. The aim is to facilitate an initial application of the three pillars of self-compassion (mindfulness, common humanity, kindness) as students mentally revisit a less-than-ideal communication scenario they have experienced.

The exercise begins by prompting students to think of a communication-related scenario that is causing them stress. The situation should not be overwhelming to them, rather something they see as causing moderate or mild discomfort. They are asked to visualize the problem including the scene/setting, the people involved, the conversation, what is unfolding, and what might unfold. As they bring the situation to mind, they are invited to notice their body. Then they are led through an application of the pillars:

1. **Mindfulness** acknowledges that this is a moment of pain or discomfort. In this pain, they are invited to say to themselves, "This hurts," "Ouch," "This is hard," and "This is stressful." The point is to acknowledge that suffering is real and should be felt rather than dismissed or minimized.
2. **Common Humanity** recognizes that stress, pain, and discomfort are a part of life that everyone experiences. Students are encouraged to say to themselves, "I am not alone," and "This is how it feels when people struggle like I am currently struggling."
3. **Kindness** evokes the kind of support one generally reserves for a good friend. They are invited to offer themselves a physically supportive touch (e.g., a hand on the heart, shoulder, or a full-blown hug) while saying, "May I give myself compassion," "May I forgive myself," "May I be strong," "May I be at peace," and "May I know I deserve love."

After the guided session, students complete a journal-style worksheet, documenting any slight or significant shifts within. What did they notice when they were asked to be mindful of their own suffering, when they were reminded of their common humanity, and when they were invited to apply self-kindness? Was it difficult or easy? Students leave the session in quiet contemplation.

Debriefing
In a subsequent class session, students assess the unit, assignments, and the instructor's execution of introducing and integrating the concepts of slow/self-compassion. What worked? What didn't? What might be changed next time? How might issues of power and privilege be better considered in this unit? What potential barriers might students face in implementing slow/self-compassion outside the classroom (e.g., time constraints, societal pressures, internal/external resistance)? How might these barriers be addressed proactively?

Further Applications

As the remainder of the semester unfolds, students consider which communication concepts and contexts are well-suited for the application of slow/self-compassion–especially units that invite contemplation of communication failures, tensions, and breakdowns. Communication journals, essay assignments, and discussion board posts are well-suited for students to recall, apply, and cite Slow Movement and self-compassion scholarship, thereby reinforcing their interaction with the slow/self-compassion approach. An end-of-the-semester, goal-focused essay prompts students to draft a plan for continuing self-compassion habits and practices beyond the Introduction to Communication course.

Assessment

The rubric for slow/self-compassion assignments evaluates students' ability to deeply observe and make personal connections to concepts through an assessment framework informed by Supple and Cronin's (2023) Slow Looking dimensions. Four key criteria are assessed: (1) **Close Looking** (carefully examining how concepts are defined), (2) **Closer Looking** (making personal sense of concepts and what resonates), (3) **Connecting** (contextualizing concepts through background knowledge), and (4) **Slow/Self-Compassion** (relating to self and others with humanity during the reflective process).

Additionally, the rubric examines how students self-report their application of self-compassion when facing frustrations, failures, or self-judgment. Key factors include:

1. Holding setbacks in balanced mindfulness rather than sustained, shame-based self-blaming
2. Understanding mistakes as part of the shared human experience
3. Responding internally with encouragement rather than criticism

Overall, the rubric evaluates skill in utilizing self-compassion to reframe challenges as opportunities for non-judgmental self-improvement and sustained inner-compassion. Strong work displays thorough concept review, unique interpretations, contextual connections, and compassionate self-awareness through difficulty.

Conclusion

Contemplative activities integrating slow/self-compassion practices can be empowering for students when applying core course concepts to dissect past or current communication breakdowns. Carefully fusing slow/self-compassion into assignments can minimize obstacles to active learning and can cultivate peer and instructor connections. Though we cannot eliminate or even excuse all communication failures, promoting an awareness of slow/self-compassion can support student success despite systemic constraints.

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