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DISASTERPIECE

Tales of Generative Failure

Case Studies - Intellectual Output 2





Tales of *generative* failures

Intellectual Output n.2

Introduction: *why collect, tell, and analyse stories of failure?*

Stories - all stories - carry an intrinsic power: **they change the person who tells them, as well as the person who listens.** Stories shape and reshape reality. Everything around us can be told, and everything that can be told—or interpreted—becomes culture: it belongs to us, it represents us. In other words, stories transform. But they do more than that: they hold relationships together, they create them, they animate them—and sometimes they destroy them. The ability to relate to others by telling, interpreting, and sharing meaning is one of the things that sets human beings apart: we can make sense of what happens, and—if we choose—we can pass those meanings on.

Of course, the opposite is also true. Stories can be turned into means to obtain something: to steer people where we want them to go, for instance, by transmitting partial, twisted, or manipulative meanings. Stories, then, are not only powerful; they can also be instruments of power. Used for harm, they really do harm. They can become tools of oppression and imposition, building distorted versions of reality that reflect only a fragment of its complexity—one single vision, one single idea. Disasterpiece! wants to use stories for good. It draws on their power—their ability to inspire and “spread” from one person to another—to support young people who are at risk of failure, or who are already living through it. Stories become a formidable tool that youth workers can use to show young people that sometimes, even when it feels like everything is lost, it isn’t.

But which stories? Stories of generative failure, of course. The people who lived them did not call them that—we proudly claim the expression “generative failure” as our own coinage—but rather “life stories,” “experiences,” “episodes.” Whatever the name, these are real events that truly happened: circumstances that looked destructive and terminal, yet—one way or another—became opportunities for growth, change, and renewal. Why? Because those who lived them did not only endure them: they began to navigate them—alone, with someone’s help, through their own resources and abilities, sometimes driven by sheer survival instinct. Sometimes, too, thanks to chance, to luck.

We collected different kinds of stories: those of famous people, known precisely because they responded to a failure, and those of “ordinary” people—often even closer and more relatable inspirational models. We did this to understand whether there is any recurring pattern in the way people learn to govern failure; and, if such patterns exist, to trace a map—paths that others might use. At the same time, we know that every life story is unique, and we have no intention of generalising, flattening, or standardising. On the contrary: the diversity of the stories and cases we



analysed proves the opposite. We want to give voice to many experiences—and to explore whether common threads exist... even if we end up discovering that they don't.

To analyse stories without flattening them into moral lessons, we used a narrative framework adapted from Christopher Vogler's *Hero's Journey*. We did not choose this model because we want to turn real lives into fairy tales, or because we believe in "heroic" transformation as a stereotype. We chose it because it offers a readable map of change. In Vogler's version, the *Hero's Journey* is essentially a grammar of transition: a person starts in an "ordinary world" (a known identity, routine, or plan), then something ruptures that stability. The rupture can arrive as an external event (a loss, rejection, failure, crisis) or as an internal clash (a limit, a truth, a conflict that can no longer be avoided). The person often reacts with resistance, confusion, or refusal—because changing direction is frightening. Over time, allies and mentors may appear, and resources become visible: skills, relationships, values, sometimes faith, sometimes a community. The journey then passes through trials and setbacks—because transformation is rarely linear—and reaches a decisive threshold: a moment of discernment and choice. The "return" is not a return to the past: it is a re-entry into life with a new orientation, new meaning, or a new way of being.

We used this framework as a model because it helps youth workers do three practical things. First, it prevents simplistic readings ("they succeeded because they were strong") by forcing attention to the middle of the story: the struggle, the supports, the turning points, the time it took. Second, it makes different stories comparable without erasing their uniqueness: the stages act like a shared language for recognising patterns across lives and contexts. Third, it links directly to practice: once you can see where a person is in the arc (rupture, confusion, withdrawal, early reorientation), you can better understand what kind of educational support is appropriate—presence, language, safe space, small experiments, or referral when needed. In short, Vogler's map helps us study failure as a process, not a moment; as a lived journey, not a verdict. To tell the stories, we have created a case study analysis sheet (**APPENDIX 1**).

One last note. This collection is not here to prove that "everything works out," or to turn failure into a success myth. It is here to offer a small library of reachable examples and generative patterns—so youth workers can accompany young people, not "fix" them, as they move, one step at a time, from collapse to reorientation.

Happy reading!
The project staff

Want more? Get in touch at disasterpieceproject@gmail.com, explore <https://disasterpiece.eu/>, our [LinkTree](#) and follow us on [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [TikTok](#).



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QUICK BOX

- This collection is the Intellectual Output n.2 of the **Erasmus+ project 2024-1-IT03-KA210-YOU-000249099 “Disasterpiece!”** and is only a small part of a generative, open-source narrative ecosystem designed to educate young people to deal with failure through the power of stories;
- if you would like to contribute by suggesting stories or telling your own, please write to disasterpieceproject@gmail.com;
- if you want to know more about the project, please visit <https://disasterpiece.eu/>.



THE STORY OF MALALA YOUSAFZAI – ONE VOICE, A GLOBAL CHANGE.

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Malala Yousafzai was born in the Swat Valley, Pakistan, in 1997. Raised in a family that valued education, Malala enjoyed school and aspired to become a doctor. However, in 2007, the Taliban took control of her region, imposing strict rules, including a ban on girls' education. Despite the growing threat, Malala continued attending school and speaking out for girls' learning rights.

The event that breaks the balance: in 2012, Malala was targeted by the Taliban for her activism. While riding home from school, she was shot in the head by a gunman, leaving her critically injured. This violent act shook her family and drew global attention to the plight of girls in Pakistan.

The first reaction to failure: Malala's family and supporters feared for her life and safety. Many questioned whether her fight for education could continue. At first, her recovery seemed uncertain, and her voice was temporarily silenced by the severity of her injuries.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: during her recovery in a hospital in the UK, Malala reflected on the events that led to the attack. She realized that the Taliban's violent response underscored the importance of her cause. Rather than allowing the attack to intimidate her, she became even more determined to continue advocating for education.

The decision: Malala decided not to let fear or violence dictate her future. She chose to transform her tragedy into a global campaign for girls' education.

What/Who triggered the change?

- Personal resources: Malala's resilience, courage, and unwavering belief in the power of education.
- Meeting with mentors: Support from her family, particularly her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, and advice from global leaders such as Ban Ki-moon and Gordon Brown.
- Chance: The widespread media coverage of her story brought international support and funding for her cause.

The battle: Malala began to use her voice on an international stage. In 2013, she addressed the United Nations, calling for universal access to education. She co-founded the Malala Fund, an organization dedicated to advocating for girls' education worldwide. Despite ongoing threats from the Taliban, she continued to travel, speak, and campaign tirelessly for her cause.



ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. In 2014, Malala became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 17. She has since helped millions of girls gain access to education through the Malala Fund and continues to inspire people worldwide with her story of resilience and activism.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Malala's experience illustrates how personal tragedy can catalyze global change. By refusing to succumb to fear and embracing her role as an advocate, she turned an attempt to silence her into a movement that empowers millions.

How was it possible to reverse the failure?

1. Malala's resilience and belief in her mission.
2. Her family and mentors' support helped her channel her energy into activism.
3. Global attention and resources amplified her voice and reach.

What lessons can we learn?

1. Even the most devastating failures can become opportunities for change with the right mindset and support.
2. Advocacy can turn personal pain into collective empowerment.
3. Courage and education are powerful tools for confronting oppression.

Malala's story is a testament to the power of resilience, education, and activism. Her journey from tragedy to triumph continues to inspire millions around the globe.



THE STORY OF MAYA ANGELOU – FINDING A WAY, THROUGH PAIN

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Maya Angelou, born Marguerite Ann Johnson in 1928, grew up in a deeply segregated America. Her childhood was marked by instability, as her parents' divorce led her and her brother Bailey to be sent to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. Despite the harshness of her environment, Maya displayed a love for literature and an early curiosity about the world.

The event that breaks the balance: at the age of eight, while living with her mother, Maya was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. After confiding in her family, the man was briefly jailed and later killed under mysterious circumstances. Feeling responsible for his death, Maya stopped speaking entirely, believing her voice had caused harm.

The first reaction to failure: Maya's muteness lasted nearly five years, during which she isolated herself from others. Teachers and family members struggled to connect with her, as she retreated into silence and used books as her only refuge.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: during her silence, Maya absorbed literature, memorizing works from Shakespeare, Black poets like Paul Laurence Dunbar, and other influential authors. Her deep engagement with language became a source of solace and power, slowly rekindling her sense of self-worth.

The decision: her breakthrough came when her teacher and mentor, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, encouraged her to read poetry aloud. Mrs. Flowers introduced Maya to the beauty of the spoken word, helping her see her voice as a force for creation rather than destruction.

What/Who triggered the change?

- Personal resources: Maya's love for language and her innate intellectual curiosity gave her the tools to rebuild herself.
- Mentorship: Mrs. Flowers' guidance and encouragement helped Maya rediscover her voice, teaching her to see words as healing and transformative.

The battle: as Maya grew older, she embarked on a journey of self-expression. She became a dancer, singer, actress, and activist. Each role allowed her to process her past and reclaim her identity. Despite experiencing racism, sexism, and personal setbacks, Maya's resilience carried her forward.



ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. In 1969, Maya published her groundbreaking memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The book detailed her early struggles, including her muteness, sexual abuse, and experiences with racism, in a candid and poetic voice. It became an international bestseller, celebrated for its unflinching honesty and literary brilliance. Maya became a trailblazer, inspiring countless readers and breaking barriers for Black women in literature.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Maya's childhood trauma and years of silence became the foundation for her creative and activist work. Through mentorship, literature, and self-expression, she transformed her pain into a source of strength and empowerment.

How was it possible to reverse the failure?

- Mentorship: Mrs. Flowers' intervention provided Maya with the support and encouragement she needed to rediscover her voice.
- Resilience: Maya's determination to overcome her circumstances fueled her creativity and activism.
- Empathy: Her experiences allowed her to connect with others, turning her struggles into universal messages of hope and resilience.

What lessons can we learn?

- Mentorship can play a transformative role in helping individuals recover from trauma.
- Creative expression is a powerful tool for healing and empowerment.
- Sharing personal stories can inspire others to confront and overcome their challenges.

Maya Angelou's journey from trauma to triumph highlights the transformative power of resilience, mentorship, and storytelling. Her life's work continues to inspire, reminding us that even the deepest pain can fuel extraordinary growth and change



THE STORY OF SYLVESTER STALLONE – FROM ZERO, TO ROCKY!

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Sylvester Stallone was born in 1946 in Hell's Kitchen, New York City. Born into a working-class family, he faced challenges early in life, including complications during birth that left him with a partially paralyzed face, slurred speech, and drooping eyelids. Stallone aspired to become an actor, but his unique appearance and speech impediment led to repeated rejections in Hollywood.

The event that breaks the balance: despite auditioning for countless roles, Stallone was consistently turned down, often told he was "unmarketable" due to his looks and voice. His financial situation worsened to the point where he could not afford food or rent, forcing him to sell his dog, Butkus, for \$50 just to survive.

The first reaction to failure: Stallone felt disheartened and humiliated but refused to give up on his dream. He shifted his focus to screenwriting, believing that if he couldn't land an acting role, he could write a story that would create an opportunity for himself.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: Stallone began channeling his frustration into his writing. He penned the script for Rocky in just three days, inspired by a boxing match between Muhammad Ali and underdog Chuck Wepner. The script became a personal reflection of Stallone's own struggles and determination.

The decision: when Stallone pitched the Rocky script to producers, they loved it but wanted to cast an established actor in the lead role. Stallone made a bold decision: he refused to sell the script unless he could star in the movie.

What/Who triggered the change?

- Personal resources: Stallone's relentless belief in himself and his story kept him going, even when faced with overwhelming odds.
- Meeting with mentors: Producers Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff eventually believed in Stallone's vision and agreed to let him star in *Rocky*

The battle: the production of Rocky was marked by a low budget and high stakes. Stallone faced constant pressure to prove that he could deliver as both writer and lead actor. Despite the challenges, Stallone poured his heart and soul into the film, drawing on his personal experiences to bring the character of Rocky Balboa to life.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. Rocky was released in 1976 and became a massive success, grossing over \$225 million worldwide and winning three Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Stallone's performance and story resonated with audiences, turning him into an overnight sensation. He was no longer a struggling actor but a Hollywood star.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Stallone's hardships, including rejection and financial struggles, became the foundation for his creative triumph. The character of Rocky embodied the perseverance and resilience that Stallone exhibited in real life.

How was it possible to reverse the failure?

- Personal resilience: Stallone's refusal to give up on his dream, even in the face of extreme adversity, fueled his success.
- Strategic risks: By insisting on starring in Rocky, Stallone took a calculated risk that paid off.
- Support from believers: The backing of producers Winkler and Chartoff provided Stallone with the resources and confidence he needed to bring Rocky to life.

What lessons can we learn?

- Failure can be the foundation for creativity and innovation.
- Belief in oneself is crucial, even when others doubt you.
- Strategic persistence and risk-taking can turn opportunities into life-changing successes.

Sylvester Stallone's journey from poverty and rejection to global stardom exemplifies the power of resilience and self-belief. His story continues to inspire millions, proving that determination and vision can overcome even the greatest obstacles.

THE STORY OF EMINEM – 8MILE OF STRUGGLES BEFORE THE SUCCESS

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Marshall Bruce Mathers III, known as Eminem, was born in 1972 in a troubled household in Detroit, Michigan. Raised by a single mother, he faced poverty, bullying, and instability throughout his childhood. Despite his struggles, Eminem found solace in hip-hop, dreaming of a career as a rapper in an industry dominated by African American artists—a significant challenge for a white teenager from a poor background.

The event that breaks the balance: Eminem’s relationships were marked by tension and failure. His on-again, off-again marriage to Kimberly Scott was fraught with public disputes, and his struggles as a father to his daughter Hailie intensified under financial and emotional strain. Additionally, his first album, *Infinite* (1996), was a commercial failure, and he faced criticism for being unoriginal and uninspired.

The first reaction to failure: after the failure of *Infinite*, Eminem fell into depression, began using drugs, and felt hopeless about his future. At one point, he attempted suicide, overwhelmed by his inability to support his family and achieve his dreams.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: Eminem channeled his frustrations and anger into his music, developing his alter ego, Slim Shady. This persona allowed him to explore the darker aspects of his experiences and emotions, turning his pain into powerful, raw lyrics that resonated with others.

The decision: determined not to let failure define him, Eminem entered the Rap Olympics freestyle competition in 1997, where he placed second. This exposure led to a life-changing moment: his demo tape caught the attention of legendary producer Dr. Dre.

What/Who triggered the change?

- Personal resources: Eminem’s resilience, lyrical talent, and unrelenting work ethic drove him forward.
- Mentorship: Dr. Dre believed in Eminem’s potential and signed him to Aftermath Entertainment, providing the platform and guidance Eminem needed to succeed.
- Chance: The Rap Olympics competition became the pivotal moment that introduced Eminem to Dr. Dre.



The battle: with Dr. Dre's support, Eminem released The Slim Shady LP in 1999, which became a massive success. However, his rise to fame brought new challenges: public scrutiny of his personal life, ongoing legal battles, and struggles with addiction. Eminem continued to use his music to process these conflicts, addressing his tumultuous relationships, including those with his ex-wife and mother, in brutally honest lyrics.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. Eminem achieved global superstardom, winning numerous Grammy Awards and an Academy Award for his song Lose Yourself from the movie 8 Mile. In 2007, after nearly dying from a drug overdose, Eminem entered rehab and rebuilt his life. He reconciled with his family, including his daughter Hailie, and made a triumphant return to music with albums like Recovery (2010), which reflected his journey of healing and redemption.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Eminem turned his struggles—poverty, addiction, and troubled relationships—into a source of creative inspiration. His raw, unfiltered storytelling resonated with millions and redefined what it meant to succeed in the face of adversity.

How was it possible to reverse the failure?

- Creative expression: Eminem used music to confront his pain and turn it into art.
- Mentorship: Dr. Dre's support provided the resources and confidence Eminem needed to thrive.
- Resilience and growth: Overcoming addiction and rebuilding relationships were key to his personal and professional success.

What lessons can we learn?

- Failure and pain can be powerful motivators for change and creativity.
- Support from mentors and belief in one's potential can transform a person's trajectory.
- Healing personal relationships is an essential part of long-term success.

Eminem's journey from poverty and failure to global acclaim serves as an enduring reminder of the power of resilience, creativity, and mentorship. His music continues to inspire and empower millions around the world.



THE STORY OF ERNEST SHACKLETON – A GREAT EXAMPLE OF...PROJECT MANAGEMENT!

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: in 1914, Ernest Shackleton set out on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition aboard the ship *Endurance*. His ambitious goal was to become the first explorer to cross the Antarctic continent on foot. Shackleton was an experienced polar explorer and a respected leader, known for his determination and adventurous spirit.

The event that breaks the balance: the *Endurance* became trapped in pack ice in the Weddell Sea before reaching the Antarctic coast. After months of being immobilized, the ship was crushed by the ice and sank, leaving Shackleton and his crew stranded on the ice with limited supplies and no means of communication.

The first reaction to failure: despite the catastrophic loss of the ship, Shackleton maintained his composure. His immediate priority was the survival of his 27 men. He quickly shifted focus from achieving the expedition's original goal to leading a safe return to civilization.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: Shackleton analyzed their dire situation, recognizing that survival depended on maintaining morale and careful management of resources. He adopted a pragmatic approach, prioritizing short-term goals such as finding shelter and securing food while preparing for the long-term challenge of rescue.

The decision: Shackleton decided to lead his men on a dangerous journey across the ice and open ocean to reach inhabited territory. He vowed to bring every member of his crew home alive, demonstrating unwavering commitment to his team.

What/Who triggered the change?

- Personal resources: Shackleton's resilience, optimism, and ability to inspire confidence kept his crew united.
- Leadership: Shackleton took personal responsibility for his team's well-being, setting an example of discipline and courage.
- Team dynamics: Shackleton carefully managed interpersonal conflicts, ensuring that the group worked cohesively under extreme stress.

The battle: over the next two years, Shackleton led his crew on an extraordinary journey: the men endured months of drifting on ice floes, surviving on seal and penguin meat; Shackleton and five crew members embarked on an 800-mile journey in a lifeboat, the *James Caird*, to reach South

Georgia Island, navigating treacherous seas; after landing, Shackleton led a perilous overland trek across the island's uncharted mountains to reach a whaling station.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. Shackleton returned to rescue the rest of his crew, who had been left on Elephant Island. Against all odds, not a single life was lost. Although the expedition failed in its original mission, Shackleton's leadership turned a near-certain tragedy into one of the greatest survival stories in history.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: the failure of the expedition became a defining moment in Shackleton's career, showcasing his exceptional leadership and crisis management skills. His ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and prioritize the safety of his crew over personal ambition transformed a disastrous situation into a tale of resilience and teamwork.

How was it possible to reverse the failure?

- Emotional intelligence: Shackleton maintained morale by addressing individual concerns and fostering a sense of unity.
- Adaptability: He shifted focus from the expedition's original goal to ensuring survival, demonstrating strategic flexibility.
- Resource management: Shackleton maximized limited supplies and maintained discipline among the crew.
- Communication: He inspired trust and confidence through clear decision-making and leading by example.

What lessons can we learn?

- Leadership during a crisis requires adaptability, emotional intelligence, and a focus on team cohesion.
- Prioritizing the well-being of others builds trust and resilience in challenging circumstances.
- Clear goals and a commitment to values can lead to extraordinary outcomes even in failure.

Shackleton's story remains a timeless example of leadership under pressure. His ability to turn failure into a lesson in perseverance and teamwork inspires leaders in all fields.

THE STORY OF AN ANONYMOUS (1) – EVOLVING WITH THE CIS-TEM

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: born in a feminised body in rural Colombia, the protagonist grew up surrounded by a matriarchal but conservative environment. As a child, he already displayed a strong will and disidentified with gendered expectations. As a teen, he discovered information about trans identities online and realised his own transmasculine identity. At 20, he moved to Buga (another region in Colombia), began transitioning socially, and started building a life more aligned with who he truly was.

The event that breaks the balance: after moving to Palmira and continuing his transition, the protagonist was increasingly involved in trans activism and eventually founded Colectivo ATHAN to support other transmasculine people. While the project gained visibility and impact, especially during the pandemic, he began to suffer severe burnout due to emotional overload, community tensions, grief, precarious work, and lack of institutional support.

The first reaction to failure: he felt defeated and disillusioned. Despite leading a successful collective, his mental health was deteriorating, he experienced emotional and economic collapse, and withdrew from public life and activism.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: how could this happen? He realised that over-identification with the role of activist and caretaker had pushed him to the edge. The system expected him to give everything without offering support in return. He had confused self-worth with productivity and leadership.

The decision: do not let destructive failure triumph. He chose to return to his hometown in Ginebra, far from activism and social pressure, and dedicate himself to healing. This decision was radical: he let go of projects, expectations, and even contact with parts of the community.

What/Who triggered the change?

- A period of emotional and physical collapse forced him to stop. It was no longer possible to continue “pushing through.” This rupture created the space for a different kind of listening—both inward and outward. Conversations with close friends reminded him that his value was not tied to constant activism or productivity. This helped plant the seed for recovery.
- Personal resources: his emotional intelligence allowed him to recognise his limits and take a step back. This ability to pause and reflect helped him reframe his experience with



compassion. Beneath the exhaustion, his sense of purpose remained, ready to be redirected. His deep connection to his purpose became the foundation for his recovery.

- Meeting with friends/mentors: Supportive friendships and chosen family were instrumental. Those who offered presence without expectations became key in his healing process. Their non-judgmental care provided a safe ground for transformation.
- Chance: Time away from obligations—especially in natural surroundings—enabled a different rhythm. Without deadlines or expectations, clarity emerged. It was during this quiet period that the idea of creating a trans and non-binary association, and even migrating, began to take shape naturally.

The battle: face to face with failure. He had to accept his limits, grieve the image of himself as an “indispensable activist,” and forgive both himself and his community. This meant confronting deep fears of irrelevance and abandonment.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. The protagonist migrated to Reus, Spain, where he began to rebuild his life with a new vision: one that centres collective well-being over individual sacrifice. He is exploring sustainable ways to support trans communities, such as through entrepreneurship and mutual aid, and is committed to caring for himself as part of his political practice.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: this transformation was possible because the protagonist embraced failure as instructive data, rather than a definition of self. He allowed himself to stop, feel, and be vulnerable. Instead of pushing through exhaustion, he chose retreat and self-redefinition. Reconnecting with land, spirituality, and care networks enabled a shift from hyper-responsibility to collective sustainability.

What lessons can we learn?

Activism requires care, not only for others but also for oneself. Overcommitting without setting boundaries can lead to burnout and breakdown.

- Going through gender transition without family or institutional support can be isolating, but it can also foster self-reliance and resilience.
- A sustainable community cannot be built on personal sacrifice alone; collective structures and mutual support are essential.
- What seemed like failure was, in fact, a turning point—a wake-up call to rethink priorities and ways of engaging.
- Learning to say “no” and to prioritise mental health is a crucial skill for long-term activism.



- Finding others with similar experiences created the conditions for recovery and re-engagement.
- The creation of a trans and non-binary association provided structure, purpose and healing, offering a healthier way to stay active.
- Moving from a model of individual struggle to one of collective care turned personal hardship into a generative force for change.

THE STORY OF AN ANONYMOUS (2) – THE HOPED-FOR JOB, SWIMMING IN WATER

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Graduating nowadays in Spain, especially in the South, does not guarantee a future; on the contrary, leaving the shell of the University makes us defenseless and at the mercy of a society that asks us to do.

The event that breaks the balance: After finishing my university studies in Historical Sciences, I found myself facing the tormented period that grips everyone at the end of university. What will I do? My ambition, my desire was to become a professor, I wanted to be able to pass on what I learned to the students, to be a point of reference for them, but after finishing university this path was far away, indeed it seemed not to exist, but step by step I am building it and I continue to walk it every day.

The first reaction to failure: I found a job first in a supermarket as a cashier, it was not what I wanted, but the job itself was not bad, but the inadequacy of the earnings and new opportunities pushed me to leave. I was hired by an advertising agency, it seemed to me a job more in line with my studies, but it turned out to be a total disappointment. I did not feel valued and decided after a few months to leave. So I found myself almost a year after graduation without a job and without apparent prospects, my dream of becoming a professor seemed far away. It was at that point that I decided to follow my father in his work as a bricklayer. I was not enthusiastic, for me it was a defeat, nothing against bricklayers, indeed I think it is one of the noblest jobs, but it has never been for me. Moreover, the other disappointment was in not having managed to meet my father's expectations, who did that job to allow me to have a better future.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: the days passed slowly, the place was very beautiful, but when you are forced to do a job that you do not feel is yours, it becomes very frustrating to face the days. It was like swimming out of the water. The more the days passed and the more impatient I was with that situation, it is not a failure to be a bricklayer, but it is not what I wanted, but I was adapting to that life and that for me is a failure. I decided to do everything possible to become a professor, therefore, I began to take steps, the road seemed long, it seemed not to exist and then I decided to start building it.

The decision: do not let destructive failure triumph.

What/Who triggered the change?

- Personal resources.

The battle: I decided to do everything possible to become a professor, therefore, I began to take steps, the road seemed long, it seemed not to exist and then I decided to start building it.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. In July I finished the job, the holidays began, I left for a trip but there was not a moment when I was not worried about my future. I applied for substitute teaching positions far from my city, I did not care about having to leave my birthplace; it was more important to reach the goal. The afternoons of August at the sea passed quickly, what did not pass was my thoughts about my future. The day of the calls for substitute teaching positions was approaching and I was obsessively checking, then I stopped, inside me dawned the conviction that I would be called that I would start being a professor and so it was. Since September I have been teaching Spanish and history in a high school.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: after finishing my university studies in Historical Sciences, I found myself facing the tormented period that grips everyone at the end of university. What will I do? My ambition, my desire was to become a professor, I wanted to be able to pass on what I learned to the students, to be a point of reference for them, but after finishing university this path was far away, indeed it seemed not to exist, but step by step I am building it and I continue to walk it every day.



THE STORY OF AN ANONYMOUS (3) – WHAT IF WE STARTED SEEING THINGS FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE?

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Fernando completed a vocational qualification in IT in 2021. His life was relatively stable, structured around education and family expectations.

The event that breaks the balance: in May 2022, he applied to several colleges to progress to a higher-level qualification but was rejected from all due to low entry grades.

The first reaction to failure: he entered a period of emotional uncertainty. Job hunting proved unsuccessful, and by December 2022 he fell into a deep depression which he kept hidden from his family.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: for months he felt lost, questioning his worth and direction. The lack of opportunities and support left him in a personal crisis.

The decision: an unexpected message from a former classmate opened a new path: a mobility placement abroad.

What/Who triggered the change?

- His friend and the OpenEurope team, who made an exception and allowed him to join the internship programme in Italy after his friend vouched for him.
- Personal resources: courage to leave home, willingness to learn Italian, and commitment to personal growth through meditation, fitness, and self-discipline.
- Friends/mentors: the friend who encouraged him, the mentors from his internship, and later the Austrian team who trusted him with new responsibilities.
- Chance: he was added to the placement group at the last moment thanks to his friend's intervention.

The battle: upon returning to Spain, he faced rejection again when trying to re-enter formal education. Instead of giving up, he chose a different path—self-studying and deepening his engagement in Erasmus+ opportunities.

ACT III: The Rebirth



The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. He led a group of young people in Austria as a European youth leader, was later offered a long-term volunteering role, and has been organising Erasmus+ projects and community events ever since. He is now seriously considering settling in Austria.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Fernando turned a deeply discouraging academic setback into a life-changing journey of personal and professional growth. By stepping away from traditional education and embracing non-formal learning and international mobility, he was able to reshape his identity, gain confidence, and find his purpose.

What lessons can we learn?

- Academic failure does not determine a person's value or future.
- Non-formal learning and international experiences can be powerful tools for transformation.
- Peer support, mentoring, and second chances are critical for youth resilience.
- Sometimes the solution is not to push harder in the same direction, but to change perspective entirely.

THE STORY OF DANIEL – WHEN HOPE LIGHTS THE WAY

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Daniel arrived in Cyprus from Uganda in 2017 to study at the Cyprus University of Technology. He received a scholarship from the Church and came in Cyprus full of hope and excitement as he really felt that he could make a change.

The event that breaks the balance: however, after a while reality became harsh. Daniel lost his excitement, and he dealt with loneliness, discrimination and racism while also needing to learn Greek to begin his lessons at the University. He shared that while going to his lessons to learn Greek, his classmates were cold towards him while also seating further away and usually hearing racist comments in the street. He stated that in Uganda there is not winter or summer and when coming to Cyprus, he wasn't used to that much heat in the summer. Additionally, in Uganda is common to greet people even when you don't know them but when he was greeting people in Cyprus everyone would look at him in a really weird way.

The first reaction to failure: all these conditions, made Daniel wanting to leave Cyprus due to the environmental & cultural shock. Everything was getting too much and felt like a peculiar experience. Everything felt different and depressive resulting in crying at home every day.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: a few months later, he thought that he could go for running. He run a quite long distance and when he went back home, he noticed that he was feeling better. He continued going for runs and continued feeling better.

The decision: Daniel expressed that running helped him to find himself again as he felt really passionate after a long time.

The battle: he had an idea of using running as a medium of positively impacting people around him, that might feel or went through what he did. So, he waited and looked for running clubs in Limassol. After he joined, he won various medals and awards while also feeling the warmth and welcoming feelings from the running club. He realized that in all the cases there is the positive and negative side of things. However, the idea of setting up something to help the community was still persistent in his mind.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. Daniel decided to establish the 'Running Fluent Initiative'. The aim of the Running Fluent Initiative is to run for a good cause and through it a lot of



actions have taken place such as getting funding, running for a lot of causes in society because they want to. Daniel utilized running as a tool for positive change. Through the Running Fluent Initiative, he wanted to bridge the gap between the locals. Various activities have been organized as there is an effort of enriching running with impactful actions such cultural activities, beach cleanups, tree-planting, and other actions that benefit society while also receiving various prizes for their contribution.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Daniel turned a really uncomfortable and harsh situation into an initiative that not only connected people but also contributed to the local community and society.

How was it possible to reverse the failure: through his passion for running and determination to help the community and society, Daniel found the power within him to establish the Running Fluent Initiative.

What lessons can we learn?

- Despite any difficulty, everyone can find the strength in them to face any challenges while also making a positive impact into society.
- Through positivity, passion and determination anything can be achieved.
- It's not about knowing everything but about starting.
- There might be people that discourage you but you should stick to your goals and passion.

This case study shows that despite all the difficulties and challenges, you need to start keep going and everything will go well using a positive attitude!

THE STORY OF MARIA MARKOU – THE ATHLETE WHICH NOTHING CAN STOP HER

THE CASE: THE FABULA

ACT I: The Beginning

The ordinary world: Maria Markou was involved in the athletic scene, especially championships from the young age of 4. She was involved with athletic Olympic gymnastics, following in track & field, swimming as well as basketball. Her dream was to become a gymnast. There were even times that she would spend up to 9 hours in the field, so she would spend most of her day there. That's where she was inspired to become a gymnast.

The event that breaks the balance: in 2009 at the age of 16 the doctors expressed that she would not be able to walk again. She was involved in an accident where her motorcycle crashed into a car. Following the accident, she was diagnosed with complete disability thus forcing her to be in a wheelchair.

The first reaction to failure: she expressed that there were times when she was in denial, as she believed that she would be able to walk again.

ACT II: The Challenge

Failure metabolisation and self-analysis: when she realized that she would never be able to walk again she tried to accept it and move on with her life.

The decision: Maria said that at times when she was in denial, she had the support she needed from her family and friends.

The battle: face to face with failure: Maria quickly realized that apart from her entourage, one of her ways to find her power again was within her. She expressed that how you view yourself will be how others will be portraying you, so if you want to be felt sorry for then that's who you will be. However, if you are a strong person which takes life into its own hands then people will not be feeling sorry for you.

ACT III: The Rebirth

The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium. Maria expressed that after the crash it was like a re-birth for her. She needed to learn everything from the beginning. In the beginning she was asked to be part of a basketball team with wheelchairs. At the beginning she was negative but since it was a team game, she thought it would be a good hobby to have where she blended it quite quickly. Following the Rio Paralympics of 2016, the coordinators of the weightlifting federation on bench wanted to create a Paralympic team, whom they also asked me to join. She became acquainted with the sport. It felt like a challenge since it was a male dominated field, and she liked difficult stuff, so



she accepted the offer. Within a year and a half, she was able to get qualified for the Paralympics. In an international competition in Dubai in June 2021 she scored a new Pancyprian score of 100 kilos where at the same time she secured her qualification at the Tokyo Paralympics where she reached the 7th place in the category of 67 kilos where she lifted 99 kilos.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

From destructive to generative failure: Maria, despite the difficulties that she faced which turned her life upside down, she was able within a year and a half to become one of the two Paralympics athletes of the island setting even bigger and better goals.

How was it possible to reverse the failure: through her determination, passion and strength Maria decided to take life into her own hands where she achieved already much and many more are waiting!

What lessons can we learn?

- Find strength in difficulties
- Believe in your self
- Be open to the opportunities that may arise.

This case study shows that even through life-changing events we can use the strengths that we have within us and achieve what we deserve!

Case Study analysis

Objective: provide a structure for collecting, analyzing, and presenting cases of failure transformed into generative success, which youth workers can use for the toolkit.

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

- a. Case study title:
- b. Country:
- c. Field of failure: (Relationships, work, study)

2. THE CASE: the fabula

a. ACT I: the beginning

- i. The ordinary world: our hero and his everyday life: the calm before the storm
- ii. The event that breaks the balance
- iii. The first reaction to failure

b. ACT II: the challenge

- i. Failure metabolization and self-analysis: how could this happen?
- ii. The decision: do not let destructive failure triumph
 1. What/Who triggered the change?
 - a. Personal resources
 - b. Meeting with friends/mentors
 - c. Chance
 - d. ...

- iii. The battle: face to face with failure

c. ACT III: the rebirth

- i. The calm after the storm: a new equilibrium

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

- a. from destructive to generative failure: how was it possible to reverse the failure? what lessons can we learn?

Notes:

- More about Vogler's journey of the hero: [Christopher Vogler and The Hero's Journey... The Outline, Archetypes and Mythical Memo - Chris Jones Filmmaker Blog](#)

EXAMPLE

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

- a. Case study title: The Resurgence of Howard Schultz and Starbucks
- b. Country: United States
- c. Field of failure: Business

2. THE CASE: THE FABULA

a. ACT I: The Beginning

- i. The ordinary world: Howard Schultz grew up in a modest family in Brooklyn, New York. His life revolved around hard work and dreams of building a better future. After earning a degree, Schultz entered the business world and eventually joined a small coffee company called Starbucks as its Director of Retail Operations and Marketing. At the time, Starbucks sold only coffee beans, not brewed coffee.
- ii. The event that breaks the balance: In 1985, Schultz proposed transforming Starbucks into a café business inspired by the coffeehouses he had seen in Italy. The company's founders rejected his vision, forcing Schultz to leave Starbucks and start his own venture, Il Giornale. While he believed in his idea, the rejection shook his confidence and left him with limited resources.
- iii. The first reaction to failure: Schultz felt betrayed and disillusioned. He questioned his instincts and wondered if his vision was unattainable. However, his resilience and determination pushed him to pursue his idea independently.

b. ACT II: The Challenge

- i. Failure metabolization and self-analysis: Schultz realized the rejection was a result of differing visions, not personal inadequacy. He examined the market potential for coffeehouses and reaffirmed his belief in his idea.
- ii. The decision: Schultz resolved to bring his coffeehouse vision to life, refusing to let the founders' rejection define his future.
 - 1. What/Who triggered the change?
 - 2. Personal resources: Schultz's perseverance and belief in the cultural appeal of coffeehouses.
 - 3. Meeting with mentors: Schultz sought advice from investors and mentors who encouraged his pursuit.
 - 4. Chance: In 1987, Starbucks' original owners decided to sell the company.



- iii. The battle: Schultz took a leap of faith, securing \$3.8 million from investors to purchase Starbucks. He merged it with Il Giornale and began transforming Starbucks into the global café chain he had envisioned. The process involved overcoming skepticism, refining business strategies, and educating consumers about premium coffee culture.
- c. ACT III: The Rebirth
 - i. The calm after the storm: Under Schultz's leadership, Starbucks expanded rapidly, becoming synonymous with high-quality coffee and a cozy café atmosphere. By the late 1990s, Starbucks had grown into a worldwide brand, boasting thousands of locations.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

- a. From destructive to generative failure: Schultz turned rejection into an opportunity to build something even greater. He leveraged his experience and connections to redefine Starbucks' purpose and scale it into a global success.
- b. How was it possible to reverse the failure?
 - i. Schultz's unwavering belief in his vision allowed him to persevere despite initial setbacks.
 - ii. Support from investors and mentors provided critical resources and guidance.
 - iii. A willingness to learn from failure ensured Schultz avoided repeating past mistakes.
- c. What lessons can we learn?
 - i. Rejection can be a catalyst for innovation and reinvention.
 - ii. A clear vision, coupled with persistence, can transform setbacks into opportunities.
 - iii. Seeking mentorship and collaboration strengthens resilience in the face of challenges.

This case demonstrates that transformative success often lies on the other side of failure, provided one is willing to learn, adapt, and persevere.

