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The 'dead-bucket': An inexperienced conservators guide for evaluating setbacks

1. Introduction:

In a 2005 article on the role of error in scientific research, Jutta Schickore - who teaches in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Indiana University - notes that while ‘learning from our mistakes’ is an acknowledged aspect of scientific inquiry, many authors will ascribe what she calls a ‘negative epistemic role’ to errors, shortcomings, or faults[1]. This kind of role in our understanding has colored the vocabulary people often use to describe setbacks: They are imagined as regressions, deteriorations, or potentially insurmountable obstacles for productivity. But what isn’t being *produced* when we are given pause by these situations? What does one fail to achieve by making a mistake, specifically at an early stage in one’s career? We hope that in this paper we can reconsider the intellectual and educational role of setbacks and limitations in conservation practice – particularly in its nascent stages - as positive, constructive, even essential, experiences. Here we intended to evaluate setbacks - also referred to as mishaps, errors, accidents, mistakes, short-comings, or perceived failures - for an audience of, primarily, less experienced conservators.

The discussion is distinguished for this audience by two observations. The first is that we have less experience on which to draw to resolve or contextualize our setbacks. As a result, we may not recognize or anticipate our limitations or mistakes as part of a process and instead imagine them as detrimental and yet inevitable. The second distinction is that we are relatively new to our discipline. Our methods and knowledge are just beginning to evolve and there is a certain amount of self-awareness that needs to be cultivated in order to buttress a person’s professional methodology. We must learn to ask ourselves: Can I solve this problem? Do I need to learn something new? Is my approach too narrow? Is it not narrow enough? Learning to ask the right questions and to make appropriate assessments is essential. In this light, setbacks can be reinterpreted in relation to our learning goals, personal working methods, and on-going professional development.

So what, precisely, are these ‘dead bucket’-type situations? The title for this paper originated with a question from someone outside the profession asking what a conservator does if they feel they cannot fix the problem. Is there a receptacle for objects beyond the limits of treatment or those which we may have injured beyond conceivable repair? What happens when we make mistakes? Here we will use examples drawn from within our cohort at the UCLA/Getty Master’s program in the Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic

Materials (Class of 2014) to illustrate a few of these moments. The following represents three categories of setbacks: those related to observations and judgment; those related to personal limitations; and those inherent to the material at hand.

Before relating these stories, however, we would like to offer a few caveats. The first is that this work is intended as an introduction to an imprecise topic. The vocabulary and criteria we use to describe these situations and their evaluations are not fixed, nor should they be. We believe that each of us will have to define the value of a setback for ourselves. Our second qualification is that we acknowledge that our perspective is distinctly colored by the North American graduate educational model and conservation community in which we are being trained. In this model, students will often work one or a series of 'pre-program' internships in museums, collections, or with private practice conservation labs before being admitted to one of the academic training programs for a graduate degree in conservation. The setbacks discussed here are taken from both these pre-program experiences and our graduate study.

2. Observation and judgment: Questions of space and time

The following are two examples of setbacks related to observation and judgment. Alternatively, we might say these are illustrations of essential considerations in conservation related to space, time, and our relationship to objects.

The first story comes from the treatment of a ceramic Jaina figurine, originally assigned during fall of 2011, to be completed by that December. After the initial assessment, the object was seen to be the victim of an over-zealous application of a clear, shiny consolidant from a previous treatment. There were no active salt problems at first - only evidence of past spalling - and it was assumed that the previous treatment had included desalination.

There are seasonal winds in the Los Angeles area that start in November, called the Santa Anas; these winds can lower the relative humidity in a loosely regulated environment to 10-15%. Coupled with occasional rains, our winters are subject to highly variable humidity and as a result, salt began to effloresce on the surface of this object. Its appearance initially went unnoticed because it had been sitting on the student's bench where she had been working on it, looking at it continuously, for weeks. The salt bloom was eventually pointed out by a professor for another class who was not in constant visual contact with the object. Halfway through her

initially proposed treatment she needed to begin again, reassess, and design a new treatment that included desalination. This, of course, is not an uncommon scenario in conservation.

This can be explored as a setback because it meant that the student, who was attempting to complete an assignment within a prescribed period, had to forfeit her logistically calibrated treatment for a new one. It can be argued, however, that it was the parameters of the project that limited the student: if she had moved the object or had the time to put it away and come back, surely she would have noticed the bloom before it had to be pointed out. The situation provides an indication of the complex relationship between our observations and our proximity to an object, which can be defined spatially or temporally. Time is an especially exaggerated dimension for many of us in US training programs because of the pace of study in a two or three year graduate degree. Considering the pressures on conservation professionals throughout their careers, however, it might be observed that this is something to which we might become accustomed.

A sense of physical space can also be a crucial factor for setbacks related to observation and/or judgment. One student, working as a pre-program intern in a museum, was transporting a painted wooden sculpture on a cart through a doorway when she miscalculated the height of the doorway in relation to that of the object. The object knocked into the upper door jamb and suffered minor damage (which was later repaired). This mistake might be attributed to a lapse in concentration, parallax, or the student's humanity. As with the above story about salts, this example is not meant to illustrate something novel, rather it indicates the sensitivity of our working methods to issues of space and time. Was the student in a hurry to get through the door? Why did she fail to anticipate the collision? It can be observed here that body awareness is crucial; that our spatial relationships with objects have to be cultivated; that the physicality of materials is not negligible. The success of our working methods is dependent on relationships that are developed between one's self, the object, and the dimensional and gravitational environment. These types of accidents are common enough and they should be used to refresh our sense of space and handling techniques.

While they are best avoided, there is positive value in these types of setbacks. These are opportunities for learning about ourselves as conservators and for acknowledging and evaluating the influence that our physical contexts of space and time have on our judgments and observations.

3. Personal limitations and the cultivation of self-awareness

The second category of setbacks concerns a failed awareness or acknowledgement of personal limitations.

An eighteenth-century porcelain figurine was given to a student as a pre-program intern with instructions to remove excess adhesive from a previous treatment and repair the poorly aged fills. It was late morning, just before lunch when the student turned to look at the clock because she was hungry and she was waiting for lunch. Turning back towards the figurine on the table, she knocked it off the table and damaged it considerably by creating several new breaks, in addition to reversing some previous joins. She was devastated by the incident but she learned what we all eventually have to learn: what to do when you break something. This includes filing damage reports and taking pictures, but there is also something essential we can explore about ourselves as workers. There is also, as anyone who has severely damaged an object knows, a period of emotional recovery that should be weathered before the work can recommence.

This particular setback was specifically related to the student's failure to accept or anticipate her personal limitations. At what point did she realize she was too distracted to be working with an object? The damage is regrettable and we are not advocating the sacrifice of objects for educational purposes but again this setback has played a positive epistemic role in the student's development because an awareness and understanding of the self within the role of conservator has been developed. Personal, physical, even emotional factors are actively shaping the relationship between the self and the object and this informs the ways in which we act on our responsibilities and expectations.

This accident arose from a momentary lapse in concentration but this lapse could have been anticipated when the student realized she was no longer giving her full attention to the object and its safety. This is something one can only learn from experience or, at least, by openly acknowledging the complexity of navigating the individual - emotional, metabolic, etc. - landscapes that shape our methods and execution thereof.

4. The limits of intervention: Learning key decision-making skills

The final example presents a new platform for learning about limitations: those inherent to the object. This particular story is most closely related to the question of what a conservator does when we cannot – or should not - fix something.

An earthenware tripod bowl was given to a student in our program in fall of 2011 with an assignment to retreat the object: take it apart, clean it up, and put it back together in an improved state. The object had been subject to a very liberal application of an unknown, dark, and shiny adhesive. The student attempted to reverse the previous joins but after four months of tenting, testing, prodding, and poulticing, she came to the realization that continuing treatment was doing more damage to the object than good. She had arrived at what she felt was a limit to interventive treatment: the adhesive was fixed and further attempts at removal would affect the remaining original polychrome. The object was physically and chemically stable, though unattractive, and it was returned to the lending institution relatively unchanged. The proposed, and *assigned*, treatment was unsuccessful but the student instead learned something crucial about decision-making and the ethical imperative to do more good than harm.

This was a setback for the student in terms of completing a treatment on a ceramic object, which was the goal of the class. But it was, as the other examples have been, a critical moment for the re-interpretation of a perceived failure. Sometimes we cannot fix or improve the state of an object and that is all right. In fact, acknowledging this is part of our role. But each of us has to learn to recognize these moments by rigorously questioning ourselves and our methods, while investigating and re-evaluating our experiences, gradually, as we collect them.

5. Literature review and a call for action

Where does the conservation community-at-large stand on the topic of setbacks? Do we as a profession often acknowledge and accept our faults, failures, and errors? Other than what is implicit in much of our information trade - via blogs, forums, or journals - there are a few examples of authors dealing explicitly with setbacks in the field.

However, these efforts do not include *Recent Setbacks in Conservation*, a journal with four issues that was produced by a group of Canadian conservators in the years between 1985 and 1993. This journal is a joke: articles included proposed techniques for freeze-drying waterlogged objects in space and administering lobotomies to conservation professionals in order to make them more efficient. While this publication adds little to this discussion, we want to

acknowledge and even applaud the willingness of the authors to laugh at themselves and introduce a bit of levity into our profession's body of literature.

A few recent papers and presentations, particularly two by Michele Marincola - one given at the American Institute for Conservation's Annual Meeting in 2010 and one from the 2011 ICOM-CC meeting, co-authored by Sarah Maisey - have examined our responsibility to discuss our short-comings as a profession. In the 2011 ICOM-CC paper, the authors observe that other professions - including medicine and aviation - have mechanisms in place for reporting professional errors. They also write that setbacks are 'far from being manifestations of incompetence, errors and mistakes arise out of the very mental processes that allow us to function effectively' [2]. This echoes Shickore's reconfiguration of the epistemic role of setbacks where she says, viewed positively, 'they become the object of systematic exploration and discourse', a factor in the constant process of re-definition that should be inherent to our discipline [3].

Limited other work has been done on this subject and it seems we are only beginning - and perhaps this is a function of, as Jonathan Ashley-Smith has called it, the 'adolescence of our profession' - to examine the critical role that mistakes, failures, limitations, and setbacks play in defining our responsibilities to both objects and our discipline [4]. Fortunately, adolescence is all about testing boundaries and cultivating self-awareness.

In conclusion, we would like to propose a forum for sharing our setbacks and mistakes in order to better define and understand them. We do not know what this will look like but we know we would like to avoid self-recriminations, complaints, or public shaming. By sharing and evaluating our setbacks, we might at least cultivate a vocabulary for dealing with and learning from them. The solution will almost certainly be based on-line. Perhaps a confidential, non-punitive reporting system? Or a series of mediated, anonymous forums?

Finally, we are interested in broadening the general discourse in this profession to include not only our success stories - innovations, treatments, and achievements - but our vulnerabilities and responsibilities as well. It is our hope that we can continue this conversation and eventually, encourage a more acute and publicly accessible awareness of setbacks within the conservation community. We welcome suggestions and hope that this paper will be received as part of the beginning for a long, productive discourse amongst our peers and throughout the conservation community.