

Teaching Risk-Taking in College Classrooms

By E. Shelley Reid, George Mason University, VA - ereid1@gmu.edu

Are your students too conservative?

I don't mean their politics—I'm talking about their attitudes toward ideas and actions that are new, difficult, or complicated. Many of my writing students are conservative learners: they worry about grades and want to "play it safe," they don't take time to imagine alternatives, or they have low skill or confidence levels that reduce their abilities to try new things. And sometimes my own teaching or grading practices undermine my invitations to take the intellectual risks that are crucial to student learning.

In *The Elements and Pleasures of Difficulty*, Patricia Donahue and Mariolina Salvatori note that literary scholars "light up" when they encounter a moment of textual complication; these readers see the problem as interesting and look for a way to dig into it. Less-experienced readers, on the other hand, often assume that the problem is either a deliberate obfuscation or a result of their own ignorance, and they look for a way around it. Since students in most of our classes are beginners in our fields, they may see difficult or risk-taking behaviors as having insufficient pay-off for the time invested.

To help our students, we need to request, model, support, and reward academically risky behavior: asking questions, facing difficulty, dwelling in uncertainty, and advancing untried hypotheses.

To start with, we need to directly ask for academic risk-taking behavior and identify it whenever we ask for it, so students know we perceive and value the challenges they face. Here are some more strategies to try in class.

Model risk-taking moves: I sometimes ask my students to take a safe proposition ("College basketball harms some athletes") and move it "out on a limb" in stages: What would be a riskier, less-believable statement? What would seem even loopi-

er? What would be entirely out of bounds? Having stretched to the point of sheer mania ("College basketball is destroying American families"), students can step back a notch but still consider an interesting, difficult problem ("College basketball recruiters shouldn't make high-pressure pitches"). Showing students examples of valuable risk-taking helps them move beyond a standardized-exam mind-set. Having students play with complex issues can help them develop risk-taking muscles.

Use peer-based learning: Students are more willing to reveal uncertainty and try out risky ideas with a few peers than in a full class. Faculty using Think-Pair-Share (T-P-S) exercises take advantage of this notion: they pose a question, allow a minute for individual quiet thought and a minute to discuss possible answers with a peer, and then ask for shared answers. Matching T-P-S or another peer-group exercise with a deliberately, overtly risky request—addressing a tricky problem-set, questioning a commonsense conclusion, suggesting alternate solutions—can increase both student interaction and risk-taking behavior.

Build assignments around questions: Donahue and Salvatori suggest asking students to write a "difficulty paper," an account describing how they struggled with a text and why they think they struggled. The point of the essay is not to solve the problem, but to explore the possibilities. When we design formal assignments—not just no-credit exercises—that ask students to identify and reflect on questions, problems, or complications without moving to solutions or arguments, we demonstrate our interest in question-asking behavior and support students in practicing it.

Create low thresholds and allow "soft openings": Not all students have the same level of risk tolerance. We can scaffold risk-taking behavior, beginning with risks most students can participate in (brainstorming questions) before we move to more complex tasks (proposing solutions).

Students also need space in which to perform as risk takers. When some restaurants first open, they welcome a few guests but don't advertise widely; staff can work out the kinks before scheduling the grand opening. Having students share working drafts, give mini-presentations of an in-progress project, or complete practice exams in groups presents an opportunity for risky performance. When we actively encourage, model, and support risk-taking actions at these stages, we help students take full advantage of the moment.

Reward academic risk-taking: If I engage students in T-P-S with a risky enterprise and then dismiss some of the shared answers as not worthy of discussion or I severely downgrade an essay draft because of grammatical or organizational errors, I send mixed messages: take risks, but don't screw up. Many students will decide that it's better to be safe and right than risky and wrong. It's true that on exams and major essays we cannot allow errors to earn full credit. However, we should remember that Olympic divers and skaters earn higher scores for imperfectly performed difficult moves than perfectly performed easy moves. I can create a line in my grading rubric, a section of an exam, a reflective assignment component, or a statement about partial credit that shows students how I will reward particular kinds of risk taking even if the final product is imperfect. These days, I also invite students to tell me about risks they've taken in a writing assignment: even if an action doesn't seem risky to me, I can praise the student for his or her willingness to try something that felt difficult.

Risk taking and right-answer achieving can appear to be contradictory goals for students in our classrooms. When the correctness stakes are high and no other criteria are visible, everyone plays it safe. If we want our students to take risks, we need to create classrooms in which, at least in some designated zones, risk taking is more visible, accessible, and desirable than the alternatives. ●