

Introduction: Taking Risks

by
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The image on this cover of a mountain climber is a stereotypical picture of risk. In our culture, risk equates with daring acts that men take, putting themselves into physical danger. The danger, the speed, the adrenaline rush and admiration might tempt some to take such risks, but the prospect of becoming a paraplegic does not appeal to me at all. Even the brochures of screaming, happy rafters paddling through whitewater don't tempt me. I always contend that teaching satisfies any risk-seeking urges I might have. Hostage situations (and weapon-wielding students) aside, in the classroom anything can happen. As teachers, we can deviate from the expected. What happens next could surprise us, fulfill our hopes or send us scrambling.

Risk in the classroom can take one of many shapes. Risk can feel interpersonal. Violating students' expectations can lead them to withdraw from the program or to withdraw their affection. Most of us have felt the sting of unfavorable comparisons with other teachers. The risks can be professional: "Will I continue to be regarded as a competent teacher if students complain or my attrition rate rises?" As our own harshest critics, the risks can be personal, "If one more lesson bombs, I'm leaving the field." Negative feedback and self-criticism can lead us to choose the safety of the expected. Students may push us

to take risks we would otherwise avoid. "How will we be able to teach effectively if the topic makes us uncomfortable?" we reason. What you will find in this collection are articles by teachers who have dared to experiment, primarily in reading and writing instruction, and who write about a vision of how things could be better. They alter the format or the content of their instruction and hope that their students benefit.

The first article is Sharon Carey's. I approached her because her descriptions of class always sound a bit unusual. I thought she'd have something to say about taking risks with both content and form with her class. She, however, was more interested in finding out about her students' perceptions of risk. "We have this idea," she told me, "that it's difficult for students to come to adult basic education classes, but compared with the frightening circumstances that confront my homeless students, coming to school might seem easy. I want to know more about this concept of risk." Her article documents her findings, based on interviews with current and former students and their essay assignments.

Marie Hassett takes a different perspective on risk. She outlines the pressures on teachers to impart quantifiable skills:

Too often in the adult education classroom, although teachers may have a broad-based holistic image of what literacy is, we tend to teach only the most basic and functional skills and uses of reading and writing. Our students often struggle with a wide variety of challenges, inside and outside the classroom, and our impulse is to help them move along, master the requisite skills, earn the credential. But however well-intentioned our actions, when we teach the skills of literacy as if the ability to read a newspaper or fill out a job application is the goal of study, we deprive students of the opportunity to see reading and writing as ends in themselves. We cut them off from what has been most powerful, sustaining, and beautiful in our literary tradition, and we miss a very real chance to help students connect with other places, times and cultures that will have value to them both in the classroom and in their private lives.

Yet, she resists this pressure, taking a risk and devoting time to poetry. Using poetry is not really a risk in terms of how funders might judge the class but rather in how students will respond, since poetry is still seen as something only highly educated people enjoy.

Just as Marie risked bringing something into the class that students might not readily identify with, so did Charissa Ahlstrom. As an instructor for low-level ESOL students, she usually does a unit on family. This year she

wanted to set the tone for equal sharing, and so she decided to make gay and lesbian family constellations an explicit part of the dialogues and images around which she structured conversations and activities. She used herself and her own lesbian family as an example for modeling language structures, thereby taking the risk of making her students uncomfortable.

While some risks are the result of calculated planning, others are sparked by an outside catalyst. While Adam Ross acknowledges that it is okay to make learners uncomfortable at times, the impetus for teaching about disabilities came from a decision to do writing in a different way. Felipe Vaquerano was spurred to use a whole book with his class when he heard that author Tana Reiff would be speaking at his program.

At times students push instructors to make changes. Dianne Roy designed her entire curriculum for the year around a Civil War theme when her students suggested they wanted more class time devoted to the theme of their discussion group and annual conference. Anson Green began to read the entire book *Push* with his class once one of his students questioned his decision to copy excerpts, avoiding the graphic sections.

One reason for the focus on reading and writing, and on literature, stems from an article, "Learning to Love Reading," by Donna Earle, published in *Focus on Basics*, Volume I, Issue B, May 1997. In her article she describes students who attended class regularly but who didn't make much progress in their reading. She encourages them to read more outside of class. Her article inspired, in the fall of 1997, a Boston-region mini-course called "Hooked on Whole Books." Since then, the Hooked on Whole Books Sharing Group has met regularly. Like Donna, many of us are continually seeking ways to help students improve their reading more quickly. Two articles in this collection specifically address this question. Joanne Arnaud writes about the Read for Change fundraiser sponsored by the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. Nancy Teel describes the several approaches she has tried with pre-College-English students. While these articles are not so much about risks with content, they do present experiments in format. The drive to fly higher, faster, to teach better motivates Nancy Teel as well as Chris Luth. In Luth's article, she documents what happens when she creates writing assignments, all with visual stimuli as a starting point.

I hope you find this collection exhilarating reading. The risks portrayed may seem small on the scale of human risk and accomplishment, but each choice made has had the potential to rock at least one person's world. I encourage you to build a new picture of risk: several figures, men and women, venturing together, a bit uncertain, but daring anyway, trying to reach a new teaching and learning peak. •