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If Learning Involves Risk-taking, Teaching Involves Trust-building

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Creative acts flourish best in an atmosphere which allows the creator to take risks (Adams, 1986). The premise of this article is that learning, like all other creative acts, involves taking risks. For many students, their lack of confidence and the evaluative nature of the classroom make risk-taking a difficult step.

However, if learning involves risk-taking, then teaching involves trust-building, creating a class atmosphere which will give students confidence and opportunities enough to take risks. The question is how to build that trust. Let's examine some steps an instructor can take to accomplish that goal.

Exude organization and competence: I never worry about flying unless the pilot starts sounding nervous. The same is true in the classroom. When the students are convincing that the instructor is "in control" and knows where the class is going, they will feel more comfortable about taking risks. They will be confident that if they make a mistake or go off on a wrong tangent, the instructor will be able to bring them back on target. Therefore, the instructor must be well-organized and solidly grounded in the content such that he or she can handle any eventuality.

Model how to take risks: One way to build student confidence is to be willing to take risks yourself. A great deal of affect and social behavior is learned through modeling (Bandura, 1977). By the way you handle errors and wrong turns, your demonstrate to the students that even experts make mistakes. Therefore, being willing to consider non-standard questions or situations, being alert to and bringing in new developments in the field to which there are no "correct" answers and so on all indicate to the students that you, too, are in the process of learning.

Minimize the pain of making an error: One reason many students are reluctant to take risks is the fact that our classrooms have such a strong evaluation component. They are afraid that if they make an error in class, it will affect their grade. Therefore, it would be useful to separate the learning from the evaluating. Does everything they do have to be graded? If in-class activities are known to be "preparations" for the evaluation, but not themselves graded, students are just as motivated to use that opportunity to prepare. Evidence from the mastery learning literature has demonstrated the value of letting students "test" their learning prior to the "real" test (Bloom, 1984).

Another way to separate grading from learning is to allow students to work together on new ideas. That way their initial errors will be tempered by the responses of their colleagues before being seen by the instructor. There is a lot of work being done these days on the benefits of collaborative learning, much of it demonstrating the positive affect which results when students work together (Johnson and Johnson, 1985).

And when you do manage to separate the learning from the evaluation in the minds of the students, you should work on separating it in your own mind. How you react to student errors will be an important determinant of how they perceive them as well. If you look on them as learning opportunities and encourage the students to explore their own thinking, you will be encouraging risk-taking and building trust (Adams, 1986).

Provide risk-taking opportunities: In order to help students take risks, the instructor must build in opportunities. This means not doing all the talking yourself. Outside observers of classrooms are struck by how much work the instructor does in class and how little the students do. You must let the students do some of the work, and then stand back and let them do it, including struggling and taking wrong turns, always helping them learn something from the process. This requires not being too tied to your own agenda. There will always be an ultimate goal in mind, but there may be many wrong paths which would be just as instructive and possibly more interesting because they would reflect the students' own struggle with the task rather than your own preconceived notion of the "correct way" to do something. In the long run they will learn more from the following their own wrong path and discovering it to be wrong than from following the well-worn footsteps of the experts.

In the end we must come to the realization that it is the students who must do the learning. The teacher's task is to make that possible, not to do it for them. This involves creating a classroom atmosphere of trust and confidence where risk-taking is possible, even exciting, and then giving the students ample opportunity to take those risks by being actively involved in their own learning. It may not be as easy and as comfortable for the instructor as "covering the material," but in the long term, the learning will be better.

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