

Teaching Tip

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Taking Risks in the Classroom

Teaching Tips is written by Dan Madigan (The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology. If you have a teaching tip to share or if you would like to comment on any of the teaching tips, please write to Dan Madigan at dmadiga@bgsu.edu

Teaching is a risky business for faculty. Imagine coming to BGSU with very little teaching experience. Brand new class. Unfamiliar students. Pressure to succeed. How could any situation like that be risk free? Or another scenario: You have been teaching for many years with success as determined by student and peer evaluations. You may even have been nominated for a teaching award. But then you make the decision to change your teaching with a method that is not familiar to the students. More group-based work and less lecture. Projects and portfolios instead of tests. Less technology, not more. Problem solving instead of just note taking. For both of the risk-takers above, there comes a time when they ask themselves the question: Is taking the risk worth all the trouble? If we are to grow as teachers, at any stage of our careers, then the answer is yes. Risk taking and good teaching are inextricably linked, and increased student learning is the ultimate result.

In this Teaching Tip, I have reprinted a short description of a presentation made by Dr. Alice Dreger at Michigan State University's Seminar on College Teaching. Comments on her presentation were made by a seminar respondent. In her comments to graduate students, Dr. Dreger said that a "teacher must take risks to breed the kind of student-teacher trust that promotes effective learning." She recommends the following tips:

- * Try new teaching approaches and assess "on time" their effect. Trust your students' opinions. Share the evaluation process with them. Put their opinions in effect when possible.
- * Be willing to stop an activity (or a class) if it's clear your students are not prepared. Engender in students a feeling that they have a responsibility to you

and to each other to be prepared as well.

- * Use creative visual props to engage students in conversation.
- * Be willing to give students space to learn.
- * Realize that you're not going to be "great" most of the time. It's okay to have a bad day.

(The following *Comments were culled from a review of Dr. Dregar's presentation and a general discussion at the Seminar*)

At the "heart" of Dreger's risk-taking philosophy is the belief that shared success and failures create trust between teachers and students. For some of us, taking a risk means not wearing a tie to work, or learning students names AND calling on them personally to help you make a point to the rest of the class. For others, taking a risk means reconstructing your course to emphasize collaborative learning, trading textbooks for provocative readings, or allowing students to submit exam questions for the final. The point is that if you are taking risks in the classroom you're doing something different from what is *comfortable* for you. Perhaps you'll choose to try something that turns out to be ineffective, or worse yet, embarrassing (There's nothing like a little shared embarrassment to create a teachable moment.). Or, more than likely, you'll try something different that has your students coming to the next class saying, "Wow! Can we try that again?"

Following are some tips on how you might take risks in the classroom:
Taking Risks With Lecture

Taking Risks with Lecture

- * Transform a passive-learning experience into one that involves your class by breaking your lecture down into 3-5 seminal points.
- * Organize your class period accordingly into 15-20 minute segments.
- * Following a five-minute introduction to the day's activities, treat each point/segment this way:
 - * Identify a problem/situation related to the main point of the segment.
 - * Give students five minutes to write a quick list of qualities that relate the problem to the main point of the segment.

- * Take five minutes to solicit responses from your students. Write them on the board.
- * Five minutes more of your comments on their remarks and on their relationship to the segment's main point.
- * Three-minute summary and analysis. Set -up of next Segment.
- * End class with an effective with a 7-10 minute summation of the day's main point's, your student's most meaningful comments, and how they all relate to the day's lesson.

Taking Risks With Discussion

- * Assign groups as soon as possible early in the semester. Use these groups as a means for addressing key points of the day's topic(s). Assign to group participants a role within the group (i.e. scribe, reporter, discussion leader, skeptic, and reflective thinker).
- * Have students stick to their roles when addressing a topic or problem. ROTATE roles regularly. Group reporters responsible for sharing information with the rest of the class.
- * Function as a "traveling facilitator," moving from group to group to assist in the activity.
- * "Give up the Chalk" regularly. Allow students to facilitate parts of the discussion.

Taking Risks with Assessment/Evaluation

- * Employ mid-term evaluations. 3-5 questions from which you can get something meaningful.
- * Share results with your students. Make small changes if necessary.
- * Ask your student in the evaluations what THEY could be doing to make the class more effective.
- * Ask your students for assistance in making up exam questions. USE the results if they're appropriate.

Resource List

Duncan-Hewitt, Wendy & Apple, Dan. A Handbook on Cooperative Learning. 2nd Edition. Corvallis, OR: Pacific Crest Software, Inc., 1995.

New Directions for Teaching and Learning. The Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series.
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Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998.

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Giroux, Henry A. & Paulo Freire. Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series. New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1992

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