

Taking Risks in Your Teaching

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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

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Often in workshops when I'm speaking about the process of implementing change—deciding what to change and how to change it or considering whether to add a new instructional strategy—the question of risk lurks in the choices being considered. When attending a workshop or program that offers a range of instructional possibilities, teachers typically respond to some favorably. I see it—they write down the idea, nod, or maybe ask a follow-up question to be sure they understand the details. Not all the ideas presented get this favorable response. Occasionally, the response is overtly negative. But more often there is no response. The idea doesn't resonate.

When I ask participants to look over their notes (I love teaching faculty because they do take notes) and share what criteria they used to select the new ideas they're considering implementing, the responses are pretty nonspecific: "I liked it." "It's something I think I can do." "I can use it when I'm teaching X." I think they are really saying, "This approach fits comfortably with who I am and how I teach." We first gravitate toward instructional changes that mesh with current practices and the content we teach. We choose them because we can see ourselves doing them.

And I think that's a legitimate criterion, especially for less-experienced teachers. You need to construct a solid base of instructional practices that work for you, given your content and the students you teach. But when you're an experienced teacher, sometimes you want to move beyond the comfortable, easy to implement, I know-I-can-make-it-work alternatives. Instructional risk-taking has merit. Anytime we do things outside our comfort zone, we do so

with a heightened sense of awareness, greater mental acuity, and, yes, more fear. The possibility of failure is a reality when we're doing something that we haven't done before. But the possibility for new insights and new levels of understanding is also a reality.

Any instructional practice that is new to you, such as group testing, giving students a role in creating a classroom policy, or getting students involved in assessment, is not just a new activity that requires attention to a new set of implementation details; it's a practice that shines light on fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. It raises questions, challenges what we believe, and enables us to consider how aspects of teaching and learning look when viewed from a different perspective. Maybe our beliefs can't change, or maybe the practice doesn't fit with a particular educational philosophy, but isn't it better to have at least considered it or tried so we can say with authority that it's at odds with what we believe?

What worries me is that those new strategies that we don't write down or consider are initially rejected, not because they don't fit with our educational philosophies, but because they feel risky. We haven't done them and can't see ourselves doing them, or we hide behind our suppositions that students won't like the new approach. ("I don't use group work because students tell me they hate it.")

Are some instructional approaches just too risky? Can teachers take on something they really shouldn't be trying? Of course. I do worry that teachers sometimes try to implement too many changes at once; although, as my good colleague Larry Spence regularly points out, some teachers need to throw out the syllabus and reconstruct the course from the ground up. There are times and circumstances that merit much change. There are also times that merit making a change that feels risky. Teachers committed to career-long growth and development need every now and then to throw caution to the wind and sail into class with an instructional approach that takes them into new, uncharted waters. Chances are the prevailing winds will lead them and their students to a place of rich learning.

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