

Creating a Culture of Risk-Taking

Conversations, norms, and routines that normalize risk-taking, making mistakes, and experimentation

Facilitate conversations to unpack the meaning of terms like “risk-taking” and “making mistakes”

- ▷ Ask, “What comes to mind when you think about the word [risk-taking]?”
- ▷ Record learners’ responses on a large piece of paper. Afterward, ask them what they notice or wonder about.
- ▷ Revisit the page from time to time to see if new insights or questions have emerged. (See also [Cracking Open Words](#)¹ and the [Making Meaning Routine](#)².)

Discuss examples to explore the relationship between risk-taking and learning

Choose a provocative video, image, or artifact that shows humans or animals taking risks (see suggested video clips on the next page). Then facilitate an open-ended conversation about play, learning, and risk-taking, using one or more of the following prompts:

- ▷ What do you notice? Point to what makes you say that.
- ▷ Where did you see play taking place? Where did you see learning taking place? What makes you say that?
- ▷ Does everyone agree? Who has another point of view?
- ▷ What is the connection between learning and risk-taking? Between learning and play?
- ▷ What are your own experiences of taking risks? What did you learn?

Use language, routines, and rituals that encourage risk-taking and mistakes

- ▷ In collaboration with your learners, develop classroom norms or rules that highlight risk-taking and experimentation, e.g., “We take risks (or make mistakes) to help ourselves and others learn.”
- ▷ Create a “mistake of the day/week” ritual, in which you and the children nominate, record, and celebrate mistakes and the learning that follows. For example, ask children at the end of each day/week, “What was a helpful mistake you made today/this week? What did you learn?”
- ▷ Invent playful language with children to describe unexpected or surprising moments of learning from mistakes or risk-taking, e.g., “oopsie,” “beautiful mistakes,” “do-overs,” etc.
- ▷ Ask two students to serve as “risk observers” to record notable moments of risk-taking or mistake-making to revisit with the class. Discuss when and where risk-taking and mistake-making seem to support learning.
- ▷ Start a “beautiful” or “favorite mistakes” wall, either in or outside the classroom.
- ▷ Facilitate a brainstorming session to harvest ideas about a question or problem, with a ground rule that you cannot critique another person’s idea.



Tips for Using This Tool

- ▶ Creating a culture of experimentation and risk-taking is an ongoing process.
- ▶ Model risk-taking and making mistakes in your teaching (perhaps even making mistakes on purpose!). Be transparent when trying something new or unknown. Talk through making a mistake out loud—how you feel about it, what you learned, and what you might do differently next time.
- ▶ It is perfectly normal for children and adults to experience anxiety when trying something new. Name the anxiety and reassure learners that feeling anxious shows they care about what they are attempting.
- ▶ Suggested video clips about risk-taking:

Human risk-taking

- ▽ Choose an excerpt from this 16-minute film of children and adults deciding whether to jump off a 10-meter diving board (The New York Times; Jan. 30, 2017). Available at: youtu.be/5QMljSnt_E
- ▽ A six-minute YouTube video of learners in an Anji Play kindergarten (China) jumping off a plank on top of an oil drum. Available at: youtu.be/cuksYrro7Cc (video by Anji Play; Jan. 9, 2018).
- ▽ YouTube clips from the British TV show “Educating Yorkshire,” in which a student overcomes his stammer with the help of his teacher.
 - ▼ End-of-Year School Speech: youtu.be/aM4mDJYDgBE (video by Our Stories; Jul. 23, 2020).
 - ▼ Student and Teacher Retelling the Story: youtu.be/B3yuE8jFkwc (video by Our Stories; Dec. 14, 2020).

Animal risk-taking

- ▽ A two-minute YouTube video of a crow using a bottle cap to slide down a snowy roof: youtu.be/hn00jCneVUg (video by Viralno; Feb. 2, 2017).
- ▽ Choose an excerpt from the fifty-minute YouTube wildlife documentary, “Animals Like Us: Animal Play”: youtu.be/WImKDJuaCmU (video by Best Documentary; May 5, 2016).
- ▽ A two-minute YouTube video of lion cubs playing in their pride: youtu.be/TeCkm-BEZ-8 (video by Discovery; Jun. 4, 2015).

Notes

1. **Cracking Open Words** is an Inspiring Inventiveness tool, co-developed by Opal School (U.S.) and Project Zero. Available at: www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/cracking-open-words
2. The **Making Meaning Routine** is from the book *The Power of Making Thinking Visible* by Ron Ritchhart and Mark Church. Available at: openingpaths.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Making-Meaning-Routine-Ron-Ritchhart-CoT.pdf