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* and the *Making Meaning Routine*.)

**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/5QMljlSnt_E](youtu.be/5QMljlSnt_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/cukkYrro7Cc](youtu.be/cukkYrro7Cc) (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/aM4mDJYDqBE](youtu.be/aM4mDJYDqBE) (video by Our Stories; Jul. 23, 2020).
  - Student and Teacher Retelling the Story: [youtu.be/B3yuE8jFkwC](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/hn00jCneYUq](youtu.be/hn00jCneYUq) (video by Viralno; Feb. 2, 2017).
- Choose an excerpt from the fifty-minute YouTube wildlife documentary, "Animals Like Us: Animal Play": [youtu.be/WlmKDJuaCmU](youtu.be/WlmKDJuaCmU) (video by Best Documentary; May 5, 2016).
- A two-minute YouTube video of lion cubs playing in their pride: [youtu.be/TeCkm-BEZ-8](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](www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/cracking-open-words)