

Creating a Culture of Risk-taking

A tool to foster experimentation and risk-taking.



A Teaching Tool to Promote experimentation and risk-taking

Children learn when they try out new ideas — experimenting, testing hypotheses, making mistakes, and trying again. Use this tool to foster a classroom culture that normalizes risk-taking, making mistakes, and experimentation by regularly making them visible to the class and celebrating them.

Facilitate a conversation to unpack the meaning of the term “risk-taking” or “making mistakes.”

At the beginning of the year, facilitate a conversation to explore students’ assumptions, perceptions, and associations related to terms like risk-taking, play, making mistakes, and failure. Ask, “What comes to mind when you think about the word, [risk-taking]?” Record students’ responses on a large piece of paper on the wall. At the end of the discussion, ask learners what they notice or wonder. 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.)

Share examples of risk-taking to explore the relationship between risk-taking and learning.

Choose a thought-provoking video, image, or artifact that shows humans or animals taking risks to ground a conversation with learners about play, learning, and risk-taking. Possible video clips include:

▶ Human Risk-taking

- ▽ Choose one or more excerpts from a 16-minute film of Swedes deciding whether to jump off a 10-meter diving board (The New York Times; Jan. 30, 2017). Available at: https://youtu.be/5QMIljSnt_E.
- ▽ A six-minute YouTube video of learners in an Anji Play kindergarten (China) jumping off a plank placed on top of an oil drum. Available at: <https://youtu.be/cuksYrro7Cc> (video by Anji Play; Jan 9, 2018)
- ▽ Two YouTube video 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: <https://youtu.be/aM4mDJYDgBE> (video by Our Stories; Jul 23, 2020).
 - ▶ Student and Teacher Retelling the Story: <https://youtu.be/B3yuE8jFkwc> (video by Our Stories; Dec 14, 2020).

▷ **Animal Risk-taking**

- ▽ A one-minute YouTube video of a crow using a bottle cap to slide down a snowy roof: <https://youtu.be/3dWw9GLcOeA> (video by Aleksey Vnukov; Jan 12, 2012).
- ▽ Choose one or more excerpts from the 50-minute YouTube wildlife documentary, "Animals Like Us: Animal Play": <https://youtu.be/WImKDJuaCmU> (video by Best Documentary; May 5, 2016).
- ▽ A two-minute YouTube video of lion cubs playing amidst their pride: <https://youtu.be/TeCkm-BEZ-8> (video by Discovery; Jun 4, 2015).

Show students one or more of the above clips. Facilitate an open-ended conversation (perhaps along with some writing), 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? Learning and play?
- ▷ What are your own examples of taking risks? What did you learn?

Model risk-taking and making mistakes.

Many playful teaching practices and strategies require some experimentation and risk-taking on your part — trying a new lesson, letting learners lead their own learning, inviting children to co-construct rules, and more.

- ▷ Model risk-taking and experimentation 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.

Use language, routines, and rituals that normalize 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 (or 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 or 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., “oopsies,” “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. Conversations like the ones above can happen any time of year and be revisited over time.
- ▶ It is perfectly normal for children and adults to experience some anxiety when trying something new. Name the anxiety and reassure learners that feeling anxious shows they care about what they are doing.
- ▶ Collaborate with one or more colleagues to try out this tool and compare results.

More than One Way

- ▶ Create, or ask students to create, [License to Hack Cards](#)³ that say, “This card gives me permission to make as many mistakes as I need to.” or, “This card entitles me to try and fail in order to learn.”
- ▶ Your students’ home culture influences the culture of your classroom. Encourage families to promote experimentation and risk-taking by asking them to model and normalize risk-taking and making mistakes at home. Share some of the language you and your learners have developed. Collect creative mistakes from family members to make a book entitled, “Our Families’ Most Creative Mistakes”.
- ▶ As part of a family event, share and discuss the “Beautiful Mistakes” wall in the classroom. Invite families to set up a “Beautiful Mistakes” wall at home.

Notes

- ¹ **Cracking Open Words** is an Inspiring Inventiveness tool, co-developed by the Opal School (US) and Project Zero. Available at: <http://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: <https://openingpaths.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Making-Meaning-Routine-Ron-Ritchhart-CoT.pdf>.
- ³ **License to Hack Cards**: <http://pz.harvard.edu/resources/license-to-hack-cards>