

***Taking Risks as a Teacher***  
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When I was a graduate student, I was told a story about the famous psychologist Ernst Dallenbach. The story goes that Dallenbach would teach his classes by reading from yellowed pages of notes. One day Dallenbach’s class sat in stunned silence when he repeated, word for word, the exact same lecture from the previous class meeting. The simple moral of the story is that professors should update their notes, but I would like to broaden that idea. The theme of this column is that we should change how we teach even if what already do seems to be working.

There are two reasons why I think we should continually try new things. First, even if we are doing a good job, it would be surprising if we were doing the best possible job. Second is a piece of advice that I picked up at a workshop given by Doug Bernstein: Do something fun in class every day. How can we do a good job of teaching if we aren’t excited about what we are doing? How can we be excited about doing the same thing every time, class after class? As intimidated and bored as Dallenbach’s students were, I can only imagine how dull those classes must have been for Dallenbach himself.

### The Risk of Not Lecturing

Lecturing is comfortable because it is what most of us were exposed to when we were students. We can make sure that we include everything in the lecture that we want students to learn. If we do something else, we won’t have time to cover everything in the lecture.

Those are the risks of not lecturing, but what are the risks of continuing to lecture? One risk is that, as brilliant and entertaining as we may be as lecturers, students may not be learning well—or at all. In my opinion, the biggest risk is that we will lose the sense of excitement that comes from trying new things. A teacher without a sense of excitement is likely to have students who lack excitement.

### The Risk of Trusting Students

<sup>1</sup> Kreiner, D. S. (2002). Taking risks as a teacher. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001 (chap. 19). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

When we make students responsible for their own learning, we risk having them learn nothing, or even worse, learn the wrong things. What if the students are not motivated? What if they are not capable of learning on their own? What if the responsibility makes them uncomfortable?

After teaching a graduate statistics course for several years I felt that I was teaching the material very effectively. Then, while working with a student on her thesis, I realized that I had not taught her anything about communicating statistics. It dawned on me that my explaining the material was not enough, and so I abandoned the old format and placed the responsibility on the students to learn the material from the textbook, discuss it with each other, and ask me when they were not able to understand it. It is too soon to tell whether this approach is working, but it is exciting to observe the students talking about statistics rather than listening to my well-practiced lectures.

### The Risk of Being Funny

When I began as an assistant professor, I had a reputation for being a very serious person. Some students commented that I seemed unapproachable, and some said they couldn't "read me" because my facial expressions never changed. Well, we are who we are and there is a risk in trying to have a different personality in the classroom.

On the other hand, I realized that students were tuning me out because I was—in a word—boring. I made a conscious effort to loosen up and to use humor to make points. In my Research Design & Analysis classes, I introduced a feature called the Stupid Statistics Joke of the Day, which uniformly resulted in groans.

These efforts might have been a waste of valuable class time. Students might have taken me less seriously, assumed that I would be less rigorous in my expectations, and become less motivated.

These things did not happen. Instead I am having more fun and my students pay more attention in class. The most frequent comment in my evaluations for Research Design & Analysis is along the lines of "I really appreciated the Stupid Statistics Joke of the Day."

### The Risk of Class Activities

Every time I do a class activity or demonstration there is a possibility that something will go wrong, especially if I have never tried it "live" before. One day I brought a stack of magazines to my General Psychology class and had groups of students analyze advertisements in terms of classical and/or operant conditioning. Most of the groups had great difficulty with this, and I realized when the class period was over that I had ended up analyzing most of the ads for the students, so they hadn't really done much active learning after all. The next time I taught the course, I wrote short scenarios involving behavior change and asked the groups to tell me how they would modify the behavior.

I'll never forget the student who, in the middle of describing how he would condition a child to stop throwing fits at Wal-Mart, realized that he had been reinforcing his own son's misbehavior.

Obviously, numerous factors can affect how well a class activity works. Reading publications such as *Teaching of Psychology* and attending conferences where people share teaching methods can increase the chances you will discover methods that will work for you. However, if you don't try the method yourself, in your own class, you won't know whether it will be a success or a flop. When an activity does flop, or the joke you tell just isn't as funny to your students as it is to you, take the time to learn from the experience. Every time an activity doesn't go well, I make notes about how I might try it differently the next time. I have also discovered that students have learned from activities that I thought were disasters and that, after groaning at my jokes in class, students have repeated the jokes to their friends.

### The Risk of Using Technology

Technology doesn't always work, and even when it does it may not accomplish what we had in mind. Once our department acquired a digital projector, I made PowerPoint slides for every class I taught. It sure beat sifting through transparencies and writing things on the board. Students loved the fact that they could get copies of the slides in advance so that they didn't have to write everything down. On the other hand, they got sleepy because I had to have the lights in the room low in order for the slides to show up clearly on the screen. Then there was the day that the digital projector cart literally went up in smoke just as I was getting ready to start class.

It would be easier if we just didn't try technologies until all of the bugs were worked out. Of course, that will never happen. More importantly, we shouldn't be afraid either to use a technology or to stop using a technology based on what works best to help learning happen.

### The Risk of Not Having Fun

There is something invigorating about an environment where both the teacher and the student are trying to learn. If I am not trying to learn anything, then my part of that equation dissipates. I doubt that I could continue to enjoy teaching without going out on a limb sometimes to try new methods and even new courses. Not enjoying what we're doing may be the greatest risk of all.