



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

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## Encouraging Student Risk-Taking By Balancing Challenge and Support

One of the trickiest aspects of teaching is finding that precarious balance between adequately challenging students and providing sufficient support so that students will take exploratory risks. But how well do we as teachers provide a responsive, "secure base" for risky learning?

In many ways, the early parent-child relationship provides a model for teaching and learning. For example, toddlers are quite willing to take the risk of exploring unknown environments because they know that a trusted parent is available for assistance if any real trouble occurs. A good parent provides a "secure base" from which risky exploratory sorties can be undertaken. When there are problems in the parent-child relationship, the result often is that the child will not explore and thus will learn less about the environment.

Most of us would like to see our students behave like the secure young child, actively taking chances and exploring new ideas and creating new products. But for our students to become risk-taking learners, two conditions must be met: (1) there must be a novel, challenging, stimulating environment in which risk-taking behavior can lead to meaningful learning; and (2) the student must feel that adequate support is available so that if risk-taking leads to trouble, help will be available.

I do not want to downplay the importance and difficulty of providing demanding, challenging environments for learning. Certainly we would all profit from discussions of how to challenge students better. There is substantial evidence (e.g., student self-reports of time spent on school work) that we are not demanding enough reading, writing and thinking of our students. But in this opinion piece, I want to focus on three general ways we can improve the support available to our students when we do make demands.

**1. Availability:** Availability to students takes two independent forms: physical and psychological. We can be more available physically by simply keeping more office hours when students are not likely to be in class. Being in one's office will not automatically bring students; not even engraved invitations will bring in some students. But in too many hallways the presence of faculty members after 3:00 p.m. is a rare sight indeed. Perhaps more important than physical availability is psychological availability. The forbidding mien and unassailable intellectual superiority of John Houseman's Kingsfield makes for good theater, but it does not provide a good model for supporting student exploration and learning. It is also easy for us to send the message that our research, committee meetings, and off-campus activities are more important than dealing with students. How well our students have learned to preface their requests with "I'm sorry to bother you," "Is there sometime I could talk to you," and "I hate to interrupt you." We can do a better job of conveying approachability when we have displayed our humanity through: (1) appropriate (not condescending) humor; (2) genuine interest in students' academic problems; (3) being willing to say "I don't know, but let's find out;" and (4) using students' names.

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**2. Teaching styles:** Deep in the mythology of teaching is the notion that you must be tough with students or they will take advantage of you. Unfortunately, an authoritative teaching style that stresses high expectations, firmness about standards, and two-way communication about requirements and performance can become an authoritarian style when we are not mindful of the difference. We can be more authoritative than authoritarian when we: (1) communicate availability; (2) avoid the use of arbitrarily difficult exams or unnecessary or inflexible rules; (3) take care not to belittle student questions or contributions; (4) sacrifice "covering the material" for dealing with issues in depth and allowing students time to learn from each other and on their own; (5) abandon our need to retain our reputations for toughness and aim for a reputation for making difficult ideas interesting and understandable; (6) are as concerned with rewarding the development of intellect as we are with its demonstration; and (7) model appropriate ways for dealing with intellectual challenge without intimidating the novice learner with demonstrations of expertise or use of unnecessary jargon. Supportive teachers communicate; they don't impress.

**3. Room for Error:** Somewhere in American education (it may be the fault of psychologists, I fear), we got the idea that there is such a thing as errorless learning. We expect students to somehow get it right the first time on tests and papers. No leeway is provided for the process of trial and error. In addition, we want our students to be intrinsically motivated. But we grade everything. Our students have learned from us well; they see what we practice, they don't hear what we preach. They have come to believe that feedback on errors is prima facie evidence of a lack of ability, not a lack of quantity or quality of effort. If we want our students to take risks that lead to learning, we must find ways to provide an atmosphere in which errors are not only permitted, but encouraged as a means to an end. Some possibilities include: (1) "practice" tests; (2) use of more cooperative learning activities with peers in which students can "safely" be wrong; (3) more use of first (or even second) drafts prior to final evaluations; (4) development of learning aids such as study questions or guides; and (5) careful, gentle handling of student questions and contributions as students struggle with new ideas. Grades, as outcome feedback, need to be subordinated to informational feedback directed at the learning process.

In short, if we want our students to take risks, to be learning-oriented rather than grade-oriented, to be active rather than passive, we will need to be more learning-oriented ourselves. We control the opportunities for risk taking and we determine the level of support students will receive when they take risks. If we are willing to invest the time, we can provide a secure base for our students' explorations.

**Bruce Henderson, Psychology**