



Risk Taking in Education: A Growth Experience

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I have been a teacher for almost twenty years. Currently I teach people who are becoming teachers, but I like to tell my students that in a previous life I taught every grade from kindergarten through twelfth grade with the exception of sixth grade. As a special educator, my credential has the breadth and flexibility to allow me to teach multiple subjects and grade levels, and, over a period of time, I have done just that. Of course, every time I teach a new age or subject, I become nervous; it is a risk to move from something comfortable to something unknown. Part of the problem is that I am not innately a risk taker. I like things to be in order. For instance, my planner is set to the next school day when I leave in the evening. Despite my wish for comfort, calculated risk taking has great value for improving my practice, professional growth and effectiveness in the classroom.

During my time in the K-12 environment, I managed to navigate the waters of learning new grade level standards, learning about children at various stages of life, and learning how to work with special and general education colleagues, as well as related service providers and administrators. It was not always easy, but I had support and relied on what I had learned in my teacher preparation program. When I look back, I realize that any risks I took were calculated and the propensity for failure was minimal. Ultimately, I relied on the teacher script I had been taught and found success and comfort with that practice.

This year, as an assistant professor in the School of Education, I had the opportunity to co-teach a course with a colleague, who at the time, I did not know very well. We agreed to teach the course together and that was it. Gone were my neat rows of pens and pre-planned lessons; I was taking the biggest risk of my teaching career and it did not hit me until the ink was dry on the contract. It was an opportunity to take risks, experiment with new methods of teaching, and pass along practical advice to my students. Over the course of the term, three things occurred that, while exciting, pushed me a bit outside my comfort zone. I could not have done them without putting myself in a new, untested situation.

The first risk was that we were combining two distinct groups of students into one heterogeneous group: future content area specialists (general educators) and future education specialists (special educators). We were of the belief that these two groups of future teachers should learn, share and collaborate with each other as they work toward earning their professional credential so that once in

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the field, these skills would be practiced rather than new. Traditionally, general and special education programs have unique requirements and therefore classes do not overlap. As a result, students lack an opportunity to collaborate with those outside their credential pathway as part of their coursework. Teaching this class flashed red signs of “risk” to me, but we proceeded and moved forward with the plan.

During the plenary sessions, we discussed how we would teach about co-teaching and knew that we had to address some of the issues that might arise in co-teaching settings. We decided to take our second calculated (but scary nonetheless) risk using an unfamiliar technology. Available to us was the opportunity to work with a technology which allows instructors to create a case specific scenario to be played out with a screen projected avatar in place of traditional role play. In this instance, we decided on a co-teaching scenario where a student plays the role of a newer general education teacher and the avatar “George” plays the role of the veteran special educator. We split our class into manageable groups of students and they met George, with whom they had to negotiate a co-teaching relationship. George was ornery because the relationship had gone awry and some of the students in the hypothetical class were not successful, partly due to the breakdown of the co-teaching relationship. One at a time, students interacted with George and their classmates to work through the scenario, and together, find meaningful resolutions to the issues at hand. Students reported being scared of interacting with George and to be honest, I was filled with worry about all the things that could go wrong: the technology not working as expected, students refusing to participate, and my own ability to integrate teaching with the tool. The “What ifs?” were overwhelming and at various points, I regretted the decision to pilot this technology.

In the end, the groups cycled through the simulation, resolutions were determined, and students left with an understanding of the value of collaboration between general and special educators. At this point, we knew that we had successfully brought together two groups of students to work together toward common goals. Due to the nature of the merged class, they learned the art of collaboration across disciplines on course assignments and in class discussion. As a result of interacting with George and each other in the simulator, together, they practiced skills often neglected in teacher preparation – the art of negotiation and navigating some of the difficult conversations among colleagues that many of them will face over the course of their careers.

As a capstone to the course, my co-teacher and I decided to take one final risk: to model self-reflection and provide each other constructive criticism during our last class with students. Prior to this class, we each created two lists to share. One list noted all the wonderful aspects of teaching together and the other list was comprised of ways to refine our collaborative relationship. I had never done anything like this before in front of an audience and I was nervous. I was nervous about what the students would think, but more importantly, I was nervous about what my co-teacher would think of my reflections and was concerned about hearing her constructive criticism in a public forum. Despite shaky hands and nervous laughter, we proceeded to expose the soft underbelly of our co-teaching experience to our students hoping that they would learn from our experiences. The classroom was quiet as we shared one at a time. To be honest, when we were done, I was glad it was over.

In the end I wondered how these risks paid off (or not). I learned a tremendous amount from my co-teacher and treasure the late night talks about assignments and the hours upon hours of planning and

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negotiating. I found the experience of co-teaching and collaboration more valuable than reading about theoretical models. As for the students, when asked what they liked about this class, overwhelmingly, they responded with expressions of gratitude for being exposed to the collaboration process throughout the course, particularly with students outside of their credential program. In reflection, almost every student found value in the interactions with George; in fact, George made his way into most midterm examinations and personal reflections on the course. Many students appreciated the transparency of the instructor experience. When I think about it, the three biggest risks we took had the biggest impacts on our students and certainly on me as I look toward planning future courses.

Bringing risk into the classroom can be uncomfortable but has the potential to pay out dividends. The merged course created a collaborative experience that was reflective of their future professional experiences. The course also allowed me to experiment with a technology which I will continue to use to help students realize the benefit of working together to find classroom solutions. Working with my co-teacher helped me see pitfalls in co-teaching and the knowledge gained will help me manage collaborative relationships in the future. Finally, our students benefitted from the experience by getting to see real life modeling of a co-teaching relationship and understand the role of self-reflection in teaching.

I dedicate this paper to my co-teacher, and now friend, who inspired me to take risks with teaching and not just step, but leap, outside of my comfort zone.

About the Author

Dr. Talya Drescher is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at California State University, Channel Islands. She has over a decade of experience as a K-12 special educator in Los Angeles area public schools. Her areas of research include co-teaching in pre-service programs and the use of mixed reality simulation in post-secondary education.