

Chapter Eight

SAFETY AND CHALLENGE

Safety (*n*) freedom from danger or risks, affording security.

Challenge (*n*) a demanding or difficult task; a summons to take part in a contest or a trial of strength.

Agreeing to let people only learn in a way that feels comfortable and familiar can seriously restrict their opportunities for development. (Brookfield, 1995, p. 59)

INTRODUCTION

If, as Brookfield claims, people's learning is "seriously restricted" by their working in ways that are "comfortable and familiar", then it would seem to follow that experiences that are *uncomfortable* and *unfamiliar* should enhance opportunities for the development of learning. The tension explored in this chapter emerged from my efforts to enact a pedagogy that was intended to shift both prospective Biology teachers and me away from the safety of the familiar and towards new possibilities for our professional growth. The tension embedded in this experience lies in engaging prospective teachers in forms of pedagogy intended to challenge and confront, and pushing prospective teachers too far beyond their comfort zone for productive learning to occur.

The title of this tension is drawn from the work of Korthagen et al., (2001, p. 75), who identify the importance of maintaining "the balance between safety and challenge" in learning to teach. In this chapter I consider how the tension between *safety and challenge* played out in my practice and in prospective teachers' learning about teaching Biology. I begin by considering the nature of teacher education as a conservative enterprise, including the interactions between prospective teachers' expectations of learning to teach and the practices they regularly encounter in their preservice education. Then, I describe the ways in which I sought to challenge expected notions of learning to teach within the Biology methods class and how I came to recognize the possibilities and limitations for learning that are embedded in an approach that operates from confronting and challenging others. Finally, I examine the effects of my approach in the interactions and learning that took place in the Biology methods class

for all participants. In illustrating the tension between safety and challenge within this chapter I focus particularly on the activities associated with the peer teaching experience. This is because it was through the experience of peer teaching that the tension was most strongly ‘felt’ by all participants and consequently, where my learning about teaching about teaching was most vivid and significant.

Challenging the ‘Safe’ Practices of Teacher Education

It is a well-known idea that the teacher education practices encountered by many prospective teachers tend to support their expectations of teaching, including how teaching is conducted, the roles of learners, etc. Such teacher education practices serve to reproduce the “known” and reinforce “a culture of consensus” about teaching (Segal, 2002, p. 161). Because prospective teachers’ expectations of learning to teach are rarely challenged in their teacher education, their learning about teaching, at least at university, is a relatively safe and comfortable experience (Britzman, 1991). Also contributing to their sense of safety and comfort is the way in which the normal rules of adult behaviour usually apply in this setting. Interactions between adults (particularly in western cultures) generally conform to an unspoken ‘code of politeness’ that permits honesty only in the expression of positive emotions and encourages courteous, compliant behaviour (Russo & Beyerbach, 2001; Warren Little, Gearhart, Curry & Kafka, 2003). This code then, guides the ways that student teachers and/or teacher educators speak about each other’s practice so that “push[ing] the edges of boundaries” (Russo & Beyerbach, 2001, p. 75) such as challenging one another’s views or opening up one’s practice to the scrutiny of others, is generally avoided.

Approaches to teaching about teaching that encourage prospective teachers to question the underlying assumptions of the processes of learning or engage in honest discussions about the impact of teaching on the development of learning, confront these usual rules about maintaining the status quo and are therefore unlikely to be a comfortable experience for prospective teachers, or teacher educators to engage in (Berry & Loughran, 2002). Deciding to teach in ways that challenge and confront ‘normal practices’ not only positions teacher educators in new and uncertain roles but, also disturbs existing power relationships with prospective teachers. Segal (2002) drawing from Ginsberg (1988) warns of the possible consequences for teachers and students engaging in such new practices: “Students will be placed in the position of publicly questioning the practices of instructors who may hold the keys for their projected careers as well as discussing their own actions and statements and those of their peers” (Segal, 2002, p. 160).

My ideas about learning to teach strongly aligned with the view that avoiding uncomfortable situations minimised possibilities for learning. Consequently, in the Biology methods class I chose to work in ways that did not support traditional norms of ‘polite compliance’ but instead sought to provoke and disturb prospective teachers’ thinking, so as to encourage them to try out new and unfamiliar ideas and practices. I anticipated that in so doing, these prospective teachers might begin to develop the

confidence to imagine and enact approaches to their teaching that moved beyond expected actions and routines, and that genuinely explored their own and their students' understandings of Biology.

What Led Me to See Value in Discomfort?

My belief in the value of an approach that disturbed rather than affirmed my students' expectations of learning to teach was profoundly influenced by my experiences of developing and teaching a third year Bachelor of Education subject in the teacher education program at Monash University. As a consequence of my experiences of this subject, I decided to incorporate aspects of the approach used in this subject, into Biology methods. In particular, one of the central activities of this subject involved students planning and carrying out extended peer teaching experiences in small groups. Each group was responsible for collaborating in the planning, teaching and debriefing of a forty-five minute peer teaching session.

The peer teaching was structured in such a way so as to create an environment that supported professional critique from peers and lecturers about the teaching, which then became an important factor informing prospective teachers' development of their own teaching. The environment was carefully scaffolded to provide an experience whereby the teacher educators modeled the debriefing process first, through engaging in a critique of their own teaching, then gradually built up to the students' critiquing each other through a series of small group activities based on giving and receiving feedback about teaching. The response from students about this unit was unanimously strong – they found it useful, worthwhile and challenging for their learning about teaching (Berry & Loughran, 2002). Hence the combination of positive student feedback and my own sense of the pedagogical worthwhileness of the approach to learning about teaching within the subject, led me to feel confident that these experiences and this approach would effectively transfer into other areas of my teaching, in particular Biology methods.

In the design, implementation and subsequent learning from the third year B.Ed. subject, we (teacher educators involved) recognized the importance of maintaining a balance between *safety and challenge* for ourselves and for the students with whom we were working. We wanted to help students to be critically aware of significant features of their experiences so that they could better understand their perceptions of given teaching and learning situations. We recognized that it was not just their self-esteem at stake, so too was our credibility as teacher educators. Therefore, students needed to know that we genuinely cared about them. At the same time, we wanted them to feel uncomfortable enough about their practice to begin to examine the implications of their teaching decisions and actions. Clearly, possibilities for being hurt and making mistakes were real for all of those involved (see Berry & Loughran (2002) for a detailed discussion of this work). These elements of care, credibility and challenge were essential aspects of our approach to this subject. The source of the tension described in this chapter emerged from my experiences of re-learning and re-negotiating the balance between these elements within the context of a different

subject, i.e., Biology methods, as I attempted to engage prospective Biology teachers in new approaches to learning about pedagogy.

Peer Teaching as an Occasion for Facilitating Learning in Biology Methods

During the peer teaching in Biology methods I sought to facilitate an environment in which prospective teachers could raise for themselves, and others, aspects of their experiences as teachers and learners in the situations they created. In other words, I wanted to bring to life what Shön (1983, p. 42) called “a reflective conversation” with the situation, an “on the spot surfacing, criticising, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena”. Such an approach was intended to help prospective teachers to become more powerfully aware of their own behaviours as teachers, and the effect of their behaviours and choices for learning on the learners. The situation I set up for the Biology methods students followed a format whereby pairs of students taught the class for 45 minutes. This was followed by a 15 minute debrief in which the learning about the Biology content, the approach to teaching and the students’ responses to it were discussed amongst the class. The main difference between the peer teach in the B.Ed. class and Biology methods was that Biology students were required to choose an area of Biology content to teach, whereas in the third year class, students were free to choose any content with which they felt comfortable.

Unfortunately, the peer teaching experience emerged as one of the most difficult and controversial activities of Biology methods. A number of students found the experience of teaching their peers and having their teaching debriefed, threatening and unproductive. Instead of the outcome that I had intended, whereby students might be prompted to re-evaluate their ideas about the teaching/learning process and/or their teaching approach, it seemed that for at least some of the prospective teachers, the peer teaching experience led them to maintain and perhaps even reinforce, the models of teaching they already held (i.e., teaching as telling). At least two factors contributed to this outcome: (i) my eagerness to implement this ‘confrontational’ approach, which led me to overlook important needs of the students to help them feel safe and ready to engage in the challenges of the process; and, (ii) the dynamic of the Biology methods class in which several dominant students appeared to have a negative impact on the rest of the group and hence reduced feelings of safety for some members of the class.

Group Dynamics and Feelings of Safety in Biology Methods

Several of the prospective teachers from the cohort that I followed during the year commented that Biology methods had a number of dominant personalities that impacted negatively on group dynamics. Kelly talked about “*so many dominant characters [in Biology methods] that sets up a particular dynamic*” while Andy referred to

these students as “*strong personalities*” and suggested that perhaps such a personality was a function of, “*already having that teacher’s kind of mind set*”. (I presume this meant one that was quite controlling.) When I asked Andy about the influence of such types on his or others opportunities to participate in class he replied, “. . . *if someone doesn’t feel 100 % comfortable with it, they should toughen up. (He laughs.)*” While Andy claimed that he was not unduly influenced by the dominating behaviour of his peers, there were other students who were annoyed or frustrated by it. For example, both Sue and Jacqui found it frustrating that particular class members expected their voices to be heard, yet at the same time, were unwilling to listen to others (Sue), or because of the “*nit-picking*” approach to questioning others that some took (Jacqui). The negative class dynamic was also a concern that I shared. While some of the actions I took to address the problem and minimize its impact were helpful (for example, at times restricting contributions to one per student so as to reduce the air time of dominant individuals, or providing examples of positive rather than critical language), some feelings of unease persisted between some members of the group.

Not all Biology methods students experienced the class dynamic in the same way. For instance, during our first interview, Ellie said that Biology methods classes seemed (at least initially), a “safe” place where she could not only express her ideas and opinions, but also where she could take risks and make mistakes without fear of being labeled “wrong”. This was a new experience for her, one that she enjoyed and appreciated.

Ellie: . . . it’s only been during this subject that I’ve actually put up my hand and given my opinion . . . I’ve never felt safe to do that sort of stuff in a classroom, like you’d be told you are wrong or that’s a wrong opinion to have. But you feel sort of safe in an environment where you can just chuck things out there . . . It’s sort of a safe place to make mistakes.
(Ellie Interview 1: 60–61)

When I asked Ellie to identify elements of the class that helped her to feel safe, she did not answer my question directly but, instead, mentioned the difficulty of dealing with peers who expressed a different point of view and who continued to hold steadfastly to their ideas during discussion.

Mandi: Can you think of anything that might have helped to make it safe?

Ellie: . . . I find that it’s hard when you’re having a discussion and someone’s got the totally opposite opinion to you and they’re not willing to concede anything . . . [but] . . . I think it feels pretty safe at the moment.
(Ellie Interview 1: 62–66)

Taken together, these prospective teachers’ responses offer a picture of Biology methods as a potentially risky learning environment. Concerns about the ways in which one’s ideas might be judged or responded to by peers created a sense of uncertainty for some. Their responses helped me to understand why the peer teaching experience presented a daunting task for at least several of them, in terms of the

teaching and the debriefing. In the peer teaching, prospective teachers were being asked to step outside their comfort zone, to teach and then openly discuss, their experiences as teachers and learners. To consider doing so, they needed to feel the trust and caring support of their colleagues. Even though I had previously identified caring as an essential element of this approach to learning about teaching (in particular, from my experiences of the third year B.Ed. subject), I had considered this aspect mainly from my own point of view. In other words, I needed to show caring towards the students. In my eagerness for these prospective teachers to have particular experiences in Biology methods I overlooked the importance of the prospective teachers' contribution towards the creation of a caring environment. My role lay in helping them create such an environment (through nurturing trust in their peers), so as to enable the prospective teachers to be ready, and interested, to engage in these challenging new experiences with me.

“Probably One of the Worst Classes . . .”: Discomfort and Learning in Peer Teaching

A vivid example of how the demands of the learning environment influenced possibilities for prospective teachers' learning occurred in the first peer teaching session. Robert and Jake chose to teach the group about genetic inheritance. From the beginning of their teaching session Robert and Jake experienced challenges to their authority as teachers via some colleagues' persistent questioning of their approach. The ways in which Robert and Jake chose to deal with these challenges and the subsequent effect of this experience on different participants illustrate the difficulties associated with attempting to create opportunities for new learning and the sense of personal vulnerability that accompanies learning to teach.

What follows is an account of Robert and Jake's peer teaching as seen through the eyes of one of the prospective teachers, Kellie and myself. This account begins with an extract from my initial interview with Kellie, as we discuss the events of the session and her response to them. I follow Kellie's account with my own response to the episode, and then consider the learning about teaching that emerged for both of us in the light of the tension between safety and challenge.

Kellie: . . . probably one of the worst classes . . . was yesterday. I just felt so sorry for Robert and Jake that I just wanted everyone to leave them alone. . . . I didn't think they should have started with "I'm Mr. . . . and he's Mr. . . ." "I think they should have been a bit more relaxed and said, "Okay this is what we're going to do today". Sort of more relaxed, not like we were in a [school] classroom. I felt uncomfortable straight away and when Jeff [student] asked the difference between 'genes' and 'jeans' . . . That just really pissed me off. And then I felt that people were being quite rude at some points. Like arguing . . . They [teachers] were trying really hard and like you said, they put themselves under so much pressure . . . running a discussion is very difficult. Maybe they could have tried that at the end but

not right at the start, but I felt really uncomfortable the whole way through it and I just thought, I don't want to do mine [peer teach] next week.

Mandi: Did you ever feel that you wanted to say something [to the class]?

Kellie: Yes, a lot of the time and at one point I said to Lauren, "Can you stop being so rude?" Like, in joking terms . . . At one point I wanted to tell everyone to shut up . . . I felt Jake was getting really defensive. He was getting really aggro¹. Robert was quite relaxed, but Jake was feeling he was under attack, which he was a little bit . . . I can't imagine myself ever wanting to be up there and having that kind of response.

Mandi: How does that influence what you are going to do [in peer teach]? . . . You said, "I don't want to do it . . ."

Kellie: I certainly would never want to get up and do a discussion like they did, not in that class . . . I did notice when you [Mandi] were doing the discussion [afterward] that it was the only time there was a controlled discussion. And you actually had to say to someone at one point, "No, I don't want to get onto that yet. I'll come back [to it]." And they were quite pushy about going on with it and I was thinking, I suppose that is one example of having to say, "No, just shut-up for a second." . . . I suppose that is just your experience of running a discussion compared to Robert and Jake . . . I went out of the class and was quite angry. You . . . can't treat people like that. Did you feel the same – angry?

(Kelly Interview 1: 170–230)

Kellie's anger over what occurred in the session resulted from her perceptions of inappropriate behaviour from her colleagues whose interventions prevented Robert and Jake from carrying out their plans for teaching. Kellie reported that seeing her colleagues' responses made her concerned about how she would manage her own peer teaching responsibilities. However, at the same time that this episode triggered a strong emotional response for Kellie, she was also able to articulate important aspects about teaching from her learning.

Kellie's words vividly reveal her awareness of her feelings at different times throughout the class, how these feelings were linked to the way that the class was organised for learning, and the ways in which difficult classroom situations were apprehended and responded to. Kellie clearly recognised that the way in which Robert and Jake began their teaching, introducing themselves as though the Biology methods group were school-aged students, immediately set up an atmosphere that invited corresponding school-aged misbehaviour from some colleagues, that made her feel "*uncomfortable*". She also saw that Robert and Jake's decision to begin their teaching with an open discussion had not been helpful for directing the learning in a productive manner. Some class members openly challenged the teachers'

¹ Australian colloquial expression for aggressive

authority during the discussion. Kellie saw that the teachers did little to productively deal with this situation. She linked this incident to a situation that occurred later in the session, when I was teaching the group, when I had used a particular tactic to deal with a student who had attempted, quite forcefully, to redirect the topic of discussion. Kellie recognised this tactic as one possible way of dealing with a persistent student (“. . . and I was thinking, I suppose that is one example of having to say, “No, just shut-up for a second.”). And, on the basis of these various experiences she was reconsidering how she would structure the learning to suit the context and the learners when it was her turn to teach her peers.

Although Kellie’s words reveal, to me, a powerful understanding of the teaching and learning that occurred, it is unlikely that she viewed this incident (at least at the time) as helpful for her professional growth because of the negative emotions associated with it. Kellie’s strong feelings of anger and frustration about the treatment of Robert and Jake at the hands of her colleagues preoccupied her recollection of the experience. So, even though her learning was clear to me, I wondered whether Kellie was aware of what she had learnt, beyond her feelings of discomfort? If, as Korthagen (2001, p. 75) observes, establishing “a safe climate is necessary for learning to take place” then it is unlikely that Kellie, Robert or Jake gained the desired learning from this experience, at least at the time. In managing the balance between safety and challenge, there are important differences between challenge as a stimulus for learning and challenge that is too great, and becomes a threat, with the consequence that learning is limited (ibid, 2001).

One key element in transforming this situation from a threatening experience to a productively challenging one, lay with me as teacher educator. My own response to the episode included a mix of thoughts and feelings that I explained to Kelly in reply to her question (above), “*Did you feel the same – angry?*”

Mandi: I did feel angry [about students’ behavior] and I really agonised over, should I intervene with what is going on with Robert and Jake? I was thinking, is this like when the supervising teacher intervenes with the student teacher’s class and takes control? . . . I heard Adrian saying to Robert and Jake, “Just get on with it, Just get on with it”. I thought that was sensible advice and I wanted them to just get on with it. And I wondered, “What is it my role to say here?”
(Kelly Interview 1: 231–238)

My response to Kellie highlights the inner conflict that I encountered in dealing with this situation. On the one hand, if I intervened in their teaching I would be undermining Robert and Jake’s authority as teachers, not allowing them the opportunity to learn to deal with this situation themselves. On the other hand, by not intervening, I was allowing Robert and Jake to be exposed to hurtful behaviour from their peers. (Interestingly, I had no concerns about Adrian offering advice to Robert and Jake.) In my perception of the situation, I set up a dichotomy that left me with only two ways to act. Either I intervened or I did not.

Since I imagined this kind of situation as one that might open up new possibilities for learning, for instance, that Robert and Jake might be compelled to find new ways

to deal with the events that arose, I chose not to intervene. The tension between safety and challenge then becomes highlighted as I consider differences between the extent of the risks that I was prepared for Robert and Jake to experience, and the risks I was willing to experience myself. My need for Robert and Jake to have a challenging experience led to my decision not to intervene in their teaching. At the same time, by not acting, I avoided having to find ways of dealing with this situation myself, *in situ*. My own needs for my safety overtook the students' needs for their safety. I chose a safer (and more familiar) alternative. I waited until after the peer teaching to discuss with Robert and John, and the class, what had taken place.

Korthagen (2001, p. 75) identifies that a balance between safety and challenge is achieved when there is an appropriate “. . . distance between what a student teacher is already capable of and what is required”. I learnt that establishing this balance is difficult because of the considerable skill demanded from the teacher educator not only to know about the capabilities and requirements of individuals to ‘estimate’ this distance appropriately, but in the teacher educator possessing sufficient self-awareness to know when she is acting on her own behalf or, on behalf of the students.

A further illustration of Korthagen's ideas came via an e-mail from Lisa about the difficulties of the peer teaching experience, generally. Lisa offered her thoughts about the demands associated with achieving a balance between safety and challenge, particularly given the diverse range of individual student needs, and drew insights from these experiences to inform for her own teaching approach.

Date: Sun, 17 June 2001

From: Lisa

To: amanda.berry@education.monash.edu.au

I also think as a group we don't really like these [peer teach] sessions because they are uncomfortable. I think that it's really helpful (and horrible at times) to feel uncomfortable, but I wonder where the line is between uncomfortable and an emotion that leads to switching off? Do you sense this? These sessions are really hard. I think it is really hard for a teacher to find the line between pushing to expand boundaries and pushing over the cliff into disengaged valley. Even more so because different people are different, so just like in our class, there are some that will lose the lust for learning almost the minute they are pushed, others will thrive on it and cope with much more. For me, I think that means I will try not to push too hard, and maybe I can teach the kids to push themselves to a comfortable limit (don't ask me how though – will have to think heaps more about that one).

Negotiating Acceptable Social Boundaries

Prospective teachers in the Biology methods class struggled, not only in constructively critiquing each other's teaching, but also in discussing their understandings of aspects of Biology content. This was particularly evident in situations in which the teacher or the learner's content was put under scrutiny. In the following example,

(video transcript) one of the prospective teachers, Trudy, sought to understand the meaning of the term *allele*, while Josh, the peer teacher, dealt with her questions in a way that limited opportunities for the development of both of their understandings of this concept.

Trudy: Can I ask a question? What's an allele?

Josh: An allele is the expression of, it's the physical, no, not necessarily physical . . . Do you know what phenotype is?

Trudy: Kind of.

Josh: It's a variation on a particular trait. Now let's consider hair colour . . . consider hair colour to be a trait. Everyone's got a hair colour. Any variation on that hair color is an allele.

Trudy: So is it a physical thing? Like, is it like a chromosome?

Josh: No, it's like the expression of, it's a code . . . So red hair colour is an allele. Brown hair colour is a different allele.

Trudy: So it's like the X or the Y. Male and female. Is it the X and Y? Sorry [not to understand this]! Sorry!

Josh: I haven't heard it used for male and female. It's more commonly used to refer to eye colour, number of feet. It's a different version of the same thing. So let's move on.

(Video: Week 14)

This incident exemplifies how the 'normal rules of courteous adult behaviour' inhibited these individuals' possibilities for learning. It is clear that Trudy had a genuine question about alleles that she wished to resolve. She persisted in asking Josh to try to help her resolve it. At the same time, she was apologetic about pursuing her enquiry; she did not want to challenge Josh's authority as teacher, or seem impolite in her approach. Josh, on the other hand, did not have a good explanation to offer her and the only tactic he used to assist Trudy was to provide her with several slight variations on his original answer, before deciding to push on with the lesson.

Interestingly, no other student took up the issue, nor did Josh call on other students to assist him in developing a more helpful explanation. In this situation, Josh's decision may well have been motivated by a view of Trudy's questions as distracting to his lesson plan and to his need, as teacher, to maintain control of the situation. Consequently, the possibilities for learning inherent in this situation were left unrealized. Josh did not learn any new ways of dealing with student questions, Trudy was left with the unresolved question: "*What is an allele?*" No new growth occurred in this encounter because neither student moved out of familiar zones of behaviour. The learning was restricted by the conventional practices for behaving as a teacher and adult learner. However, as evident in earlier examples, choosing to challenge oneself to behave differently as a teacher is a risky venture with unknown outcomes. Even

more risky is that teaching is a public activity, so new behaviours must be tried out (and possibly unsuccessfully at first) in front of others. This requires trust in oneself and in others that doing so is worthwhile. Many students would happily avoid disturbing or uncomfortable teaching and learning situations because their unfamiliarity with such situations leaves them feeling unsure and uncomfortable about how to deal with them (Guilfoyle et al., 1997).

There is a difficult cultural shift required in implementing approaches to learning about teaching that are based on genuinely exploring others' ideas (such as a conceptual change approach). The teacher has to be prepared to spend time exploring learners' understandings of different ideas, to believe that doing so is worthwhile and to relinquish control of the learning environment in order to work in a way that is responsive to the needs of the learner group.

Understanding More about the Relationship between Safety and Challenge

Developing one's understanding of the balance between safety and challenge is a personal, long-term process (Korthagen, 2001). As the year progressed, Lisa recognized an important shift in her thinking about the relationship between her feelings of confidence and the accompanying sense of comfort her confidence brought, and the need to continue to challenge herself as a teacher. In her first experiences of teaching, Lisa was keen to put the ideas about teaching and learning that we had discussed in Biology methods into practice. She set herself some challenging goals: to teach in ways consistent with her beliefs; to obtain feedback from her students on the effects of her teaching; and, to maintain a critically evaluative stance in reviewing her teaching efforts. The effect of trying to put all of her ideas into practice from the outset was overwhelming and, at times, undermined her confidence in her abilities as a teacher and, her feelings of comfort in the classroom. Later in the year, as her experience accumulated and she allowed herself the opportunity to relax and enjoy her teaching, she came to acknowledge that safety (in the form of confidence) was an important prerequisite for her to be able to experience challenge in ways that were helpful rather than debilitating. The importance of developing a productive balance between safety and challenge became apparent through her ongoing experiences of teacher education as she came to recognize the paradoxical situation of needing to feel both comfortable and uncomfortable in her role, in order for her to effectively develop as a teacher. In her second interview, Lisa captured her thinking about this issue:

Lisa: I think I just relaxed a lot and it was much easier and the thing that was the most challenging was trying to push myself to be uncomfortable because I was enjoying it and enjoying feeling a bit more relaxed and a bit more comfortable and I didn't want what happened on the first round to happen on the second round . . . to lose confidence. I could just see the effect that my confidence had on the students in a positive way and I didn't really didn't want to lose that for myself and also for them too . . . I think the challenge was

and it will be next year as well I reckon is to find a balance between comfort and . . . like I needed to feel some level of comfort to be a good teacher but I wanted to make myself uncomfortable to be a better teacher.

(Lisa Interview 2: 10–13)

Lisa recognised the impact of the teacher's feelings of confidence on the learner's confidence in the teacher. As her feelings of confidence and hence competence grew as a teacher, she noted a corresponding positive effect on her students. Her understanding of the interdependent relationship between learner and teacher growth also led her to make some choices about how she interacted with me.

SEEING THIS TENSION THROUGH 'ANOTHER'S EYES'

So far, I have focused on an examination of the tension between safety and challenge in terms of the ways in which *I* negotiated the balance between challenging prospective teachers and being hurtful towards them. However, it was not only me who felt this tension. Through discussions of our teaching, Lisa helped me recognize that prospective teachers also experienced this tension in their feelings towards me. For instance, in offering me feedback about my teaching Lisa worried to what extent the things that she said/wrote to me were helpful and what was hurtful. Although we shared a belief in the value of honesty in our interactions, Lisa decided that sometimes too much honesty could be hurtful, and because there were some things that may have been too uncomfortable for me to hear, she decided not to risk telling me. An e-mail to me explains her ideas:

Subject: DISCOMFORT

Date: Sat, 16 June 2001

From: Lisa

To: amanda.berry@education.monash.edu.au

Although I'd like to think that I am pretty honest, I have to admit that I sometimes hold things back if I think they will really offend her [Mandi]. Mandi has really worked to establish an environment in which it is OK to make honest comments about our learning and has really encouraged us to feed back to her. Despite this, I still hold back sometimes. But . . . does this really matter? Maybe it's a good thing. I'm a person as well as a student, so I guess I have some ability to judge what is honest and helpful and what is honest but possibly hurtful. I use my judgment to decide how much 'uncomfortable' information to give to Mandi . . . and maybe that's OK, because there must be a point when honest feedback that is hurtful becomes so horrible to receive that it's not helpful anymore. So perhaps if my students are the same, and hold back honest feedback [to me] because they don't want to hurt my feelings, I will still get some great, helpful information. After all, I probably can't deal with all the information they give me anyway, so if they selectively keep some more 'uncomfortable' information to themselves for a while, I think that might be OK.

Lisa's words powerfully illustrate the interpersonal dimensions of the tension between safety and challenge. Her consideration of the issue of "*what is helpful and honest compared to what is hurtful and honest*" in her feedback to me highlights her understanding of teaching as a personal experience. The feelings that emerged for Lisa as, "*a person as well as a student*" led her to make decisions that were based not only on the ways in which the feedback she offered might impact the cognitive aspects of my learning about my practice, but also in their social and emotional impact on me. In coming to understand her experiences, including how she might act towards me, Lisa considered the situation from the point of view of working with her own students, including their likely needs and responses. Lisa's response is a good example of the way in which I hoped that prospective teachers' experiences of my teaching might prompt their thinking about their approaches to teaching their students.

Building and Risking Relationships

The development of productive personal relationships requires knowledge of oneself; and of oneself in relation to others. My intent was to build these prospective teachers' confidence in themselves and their ideas as well as aiming to extend their view of practice, so that through growing confidence, they would be encouraged to push ahead, not simply remain comfortable with their existing practice. One of the continuing struggles that I faced in implementing an approach to teaching about teaching that aimed to challenge and confront prospective teachers' views of learning to teach was my fear that in so doing, I would jeopardise my relationships with them.

As a person who defined herself in terms of her relationships with others, I found it particularly difficult to teach in ways that aimed to disturb prospective teachers' thinking about their pedagogy. My previous experiences of implementing this approach in other subjects (3rd year, B.Ed.) were based on partner teaching with a colleague, so that stepping out to risk new practices could be supported and discussed with another teacher educator and the class. In Biology methods classes I was working alone. This led me to feel more vulnerable and sensitive to the responses of the prospective teachers.

Fear of compromising my relationships with the students sometimes prevented me from acting in ways that might have pushed them a little harder to consider the reasoning behind, or effects of, their actions as teachers or learners. At other times I worried that the actions I took may have upset the relations I had established with particular class members. Other teacher educators have also experienced these feelings as they have attempted to push their students to consider hard questions about teaching and learning. For example, Schulte (2001) noted that "Engaging students in this kind of confrontational pedagogy [is] a challenge for me, because my self-identity is often closely tied to my ability to relate to others" (Shulte, 2001, p. 7). Hence, choosing to act in a way that might jeopardize the relationships so important to teaching may well (rightly) be too great a risk for many teacher educators.

SUMMARY: WHAT DID I LEARN FROM EXAMINING THIS TENSION WITHIN MY PRACTICE?

In traditional approaches to teacher education, avoiding uncomfortable situations actually diminishes the possibilities for learning and often, such avoidance is due to a lack of the very trust, confidence and sense of relationship that is so important in teaching and learning about teaching. For me, being able to recognize and/or create potential learning situations that challenged others to reconsider their ideas about teaching was demanding and idiosyncratic. Some kind of learning intervention though needs to be explicit if genuine progress in learning about teaching is to occur as helping prospective teachers ‘feel what it is like’ to be in a position in which they do not know how to respond is an important first step in learning about practice. Yet, to act in this way entails risk.

In my readiness to create a context for prospective teachers’ learning that attempted to push them beyond the comfortable and familiar, I forgot, or neglected to acknowledge, the important role of feelings in teaching. Instead, my own desire to challenge the familiar ways of working that these students brought with them, often overwhelmed my ability to recognise and respond appropriately to their individual needs, including their feelings. I wanted to develop a pedagogy that sufficiently disturbed prospective teachers’ thinking about teaching that they had to consider alternatives to the comfortable and familiar. But it was difficult for me to know how far I could go before the disturbance intended to initiate learning actually prevented it.

Obviously, risk taking was real and different for all involved. The degree of risk varies greatly from individual to individual and finding optimum value through risk taking is itself risky business. Choosing to act in ways that challenge traditional notions of maintaining the status quo is both emotionally and pedagogically challenging. In essence, the tension between safety and challenge as it played out in my practice, illustrates that, as a teacher educator, I needed to:

- know enough about what was likely to be uppermost in prospective teachers’ minds (i.e., their needs and concerns)
- know my own goals for prospective teachers’ learning (i.e., where am I trying to move them towards)
- listen carefully to what prospective teachers say such that I could work out when there is more than the face value message being expressed (e.g., asking myself, “What messages do I really need to pick up on here?”)
- know each student sufficiently (to consider what risk might be acceptable for that person).

In addition, I needed to know about the selected Biology pedagogy so that I could help explore, challenge and support the development of prospective teachers’ Biology knowledge. It is little wonder then, that the process of learning to recognize and deal with this variety of factors was a challenging, complex and confusing process for me.