

ECKHART PHILIPP

## 13. RISK IS POSITIVE

### INTRODUCTION

Is the title of this chapter a contentious statement? Perhaps. Either way the response, for me is largely emotional, and divulges more about how and why I think about risk as opposed to the definition per se. Whenever the word risk is passed around in conversation it is quite often interpreted as being negative. It is a term frequently used and acted upon in a student's learning development, but how is it acted upon by a teacher? Do we ever associate our professional learning with risk? Just as we ask students to take risks so too, I would argue, we should put ourselves in a position where the end product may not be known and we are forced to challenge our current thinking.

It is in this unknown place of pushing the boundaries and taking risks that I think I am involved in what I like to call 'threshold teaching'. Threshold teaching is the place where I am challenged, unsure of the result and forced to think critically about the situation. Threshold teaching helps me to ask more about the 'how' and 'why' of what I learn rather than the 'what'. In this way, I feel as though I am actively working to advance quality teaching. So how do I recognise what it is that I need to learn through threshold teaching?

An important aspect of being a professional is being aware of one's practice in real time. That means being able to recognise and articulate the knowledge, skills and ability that underpin pedagogical expertise. It requires being consciously open to change and emotionally cognizant of, and sensitive to, teaching and learning situations and experiences. Threshold teaching then is about accepting the challenge of learning through practice as an action. In so doing, quality in teaching and learning can be discerned.

This chapter sets out to explore the nature of risk and how insights into practice from such examination influence and shape the teacher as a whole person, thus making it clear what it means to be a teacher learner.

### COUNTING THE BENEFITS OF RISK

Teachers often invite students to take risks, not only academically but also socially and emotionally. Risk taking can be confronting but being confronted by a challenge, taking a risk in teaching and learning should not be perceived as negative.

Pedagogical risk taking needs a positive environment, one in which scaffolding is readily available. Two important factors for such scaffolding include trust and

E. PHILIPP

communication. In the first instance, teachers need to be surrounded by a supportive team when they challenge the status-quo of their teaching, for students the same applies for their learning.

A risk taking initiative we provided our students with involved the opportunity for them to become the teachers of their own learning. Our students were asked (in groups) to research and present a lesson of their choice (within the concept being covered) to a target audience of students they preferred at any level from Foundation (first year of primary school) to Grade 6 (last year of primary school).

As a team, we decided to take the risk of creating a unique and dynamic learning experience that would challenge both students and teachers. Trust and communication were crucial to success. Trust can take many forms. For instance, teachers, needed to trust their belief that 'to teach something requires learning it carefully'; a belief based on their own pedagogical reasoning when reflecting on their own planning for teaching.

Given the nature of the risk-taking experience being initiated, a sense of trust was also needed from both the parents and school leadership; a trust that was based on the view that the experience was of educational benefit to students.

The value of the project was in learning more about learning and how that can influence teaching and understanding of one's own practice in particular. Both students and teachers gained powerful insights into their thinking and how to respond to some of the challenges that emerged through that learning. For example, within our teaching team we each faced different challenges. Some had concerns about loss of control, others were unsure about what it meant to teach something when there was no prescribed 'knowledge' outcome.

As a team, we discussed from the outset that critical feedback was crucial and that it needed to be framed in a professional and positive manner. As Rockoff (2011) noted, the subjective evaluations professionals give one another hold great value and build teacher effectiveness.

Although the experience was different for each teacher, and rightly so, it was greatly valued and supported by the team. The experience was therefore important for our learning and highlighted to us how, more and more these days, the expectations on teachers revolve around the need to show 'student progress', which then acts as a proxy for effective teaching. The danger that such an ever increasing shadow of compliance casts over a teacher can mean it is easier to prioritise outcomes over learning. In such a case, it is not difficult to see how that can lead to a decline in teachers empathising with students as the 'how' and 'why' of learning is overshadowed by the 'what' of the intended result.

Taking the risk (briefly outlined above) brought the how and why back into full view, for us, our school leadership, our students and their parents.

#### ZOOMING IN: RECOGNISING CHALLENGE

The difference between boredom and anxiety is what has been described as our Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, Vygotsky & Rieber, 1988). The ZPD is the place

where we learn best. It is in the ZPD where self-worth and productivity is, for most, at its zenith. It is where the how and why of my learning progresses. Yet how do I know if I am progressing in the right direction? Who assesses my responses when I am confronted with a contentious statement?

Just like students, teachers each have their own ZPD. What we know and how we respond to challenges differ and as a result, is personalised. Therefore, through threshold teaching, my learning development is different to that of another teacher. To explain that a little further, I offer the following vignette drawn from my teaching experience.

*My Teaching: A Vignette of Practice*

After the initial years as a teacher when concepts became more familiar and practice became somewhat common, it could have been very easy for me to plateau and remain in a ‘comfortable’ teacher style for the rest of my career. The comfort zone – competent enough to handle and manipulate any classroom learning to the liking of the teacher without any involvement of risk – has its pitfalls. Comfort teaching is the antithesis of threshold teaching. I think most teachers have fallen victim to delivering the same material and structure from previous years under the guise that, even though the next year’s class will be different, a teacher can manipulate it so it works; works for me that is. Where in this ideology is the student? How does this approach to teaching increase the educational capacity of the student? Does it not slow down our own learning? Our professional learning should be in dynamic harmony – building and challenging. A teaching career should not become stagnant. Professional Learning is about working on that harmony. Recognising challenge calls us to be humble and cast aside ego.

An example of challenge, a crucial element of threshold teaching that I faced in my early years of teaching, was physical classroom layout, i.e., how the furniture was used and positioned within the learning space. To begin with, the old adage of one table and chair per child weighed heavily on how I saw the physical set up of the learning space and it prevented me from seeing a different perspective. I was stuck in a singular view. Challenging that view required asking if students would still learn if the learning environment was different? That question was quickly answered.

At a school in which I worked many years ago, I was informed when I started that half the students would not have a tables or chairs. This left me both surprised and confused, not to mention anxious about how I would implement quality teaching. I was confronted by something unfamiliar – and definitely pushed outside of my comfort zone. My view of the physical set up of a learning environment was under threat.

E. PHILIPP

In this instance I could not resort to structuring classrooms as in previous years and I was forced to rethink the issue. As a result I needed to learn to implement something I did not know about before this time. It left me unsure as to what the outcome might be. As a teacher I knew how to deliver the curriculum, but in a space in which my familiarity was questioned, it challenged my capability to foster a positive learning environment.

It is this moment that I see myself involved in threshold teaching – it creates the opportunity to shift my thinking, my prior knowledge and teaching style. The core of what I know now is confronted as I am forced to address the how. So where does the support come from?

Recognition that I needed help and to make a shift in my thinking about pedagogy was the first step in facing the challenge. My professional learning need was different to other staff; it was personal. My professional learning required growth in ways that others more familiar with the given environment of the school did not. Reaching out for support from colleagues, having discussions and performing observations helped to facilitate my learning. More importantly, it helped me recognize and name what I sought in my practice through responding to my professional learning needs.

Although generally colleagues can help with professional critique through observations and discussions, it was the teachers that supported and worked directly with me on a daily basis that provided the vital feedback to help regulate my growth. Added to this is another significant factor. For risk taking to be meaningful, I think that school leaders need to be seen to be humble and able to recognise their own learning development publicly – it empowers those around them to perform in a similar fashion.

Likewise, at the personal level there is a need to make the effort to view your teaching in light of the practice of others. However, it should not be framed as some form of jousting match of ego with a winner and a loser, but an opportunity for professional growth. Observing others' teach can be confronting and eye opening but should never be viewed as a competition; it offers a personal point of challenge. It is another way of personalising one's own professional learning and informing understandings of quality in teaching and learning. All of this helped me in my challenge to learn through working in a learning environment that was considerably different to that which I had previously been 'familiar and comfortable'.

#### DOES ONE SIZE DOES FIT ALL?

If I were to say I teach mathematics it would be subjective but that I teach a student to add two digit numbers is objective. The latter has a result and a definite outcome. I am using a set of skills acquired from experience or explicitly taught from experts about

how to add two numbers effectively. Teaching mathematics however is subjective. Being in the threshold teaching zone asks me to consider whether I am merely following a set of steps to achieve an outcome or utilizing my prior knowledge to support thinking and learning and to make conceptual connections. An example of this distinction is in the use of pre and post tasks in Mathematics. These tasks may be open ended or have questions with some degree of ambiguity, as evident in [Figure 13.1](#).

Using the table to create a division equation with no remainder.  
Can you show this division equation in other ways? Use the space provided to show your understanding.


*Figure 13.1. Open ended mathematics task*

Accepting risk is part of challenge. Using activities that challenge (such as that described in [Figure 13.1](#)) leads to greater development in problem solving and thinking and asks students to really flesh out their knowledge and skills in order to find a solution. Mathematics in real life is not always black and white; although it can appear that way to students through school mathematics. But as a teacher I want to see my students' thinking, if the foundation blocks have been set in place, what can they do with them?

When first faced tasks such as in [Figure 13.1](#), most students are initially anxious. This type of question is not as straight forward as it may seem and does not quickly align with a strategy or algorithm so commonly the main focus of school mathematics. Therefore, as a teacher, using this type of task can be risky. It may lead to blank sheets of paper and foster a dislike for mathematics. So why do it? The completed sheets may return completely empty or with vast amounts of random answers in the hope that something is correct. Yet from a different perspective, the problem creates opportunity for insight to students' thinking.

When first given, I have no idea how my students will respond. Even an empty sheet can be informative. The students may simply shade part of the table and feel as though they have adequately answered the question (see sample test 1 in [Figure 13.2](#)). If so, it prompts me to ask questions such as: "Did they understand the questions?"; "Are other factors involved?"; or, "Should I formulate the questions in

E. PHILIPP

a different manner?" Regardless, the information received asks me to think more deeply and reflect on my teaching as well as giving me greater insight to their learning.

But what about the student? What have they learnt from such an exercise? Along with everything else in teaching, scaffolding is vital. Dealing with emotions that may impact on future learning is a key factor to ensuring it is done carefully and most importantly in a positive manner. In this case, although students may not be aware of it, they are starting to unravel that something.

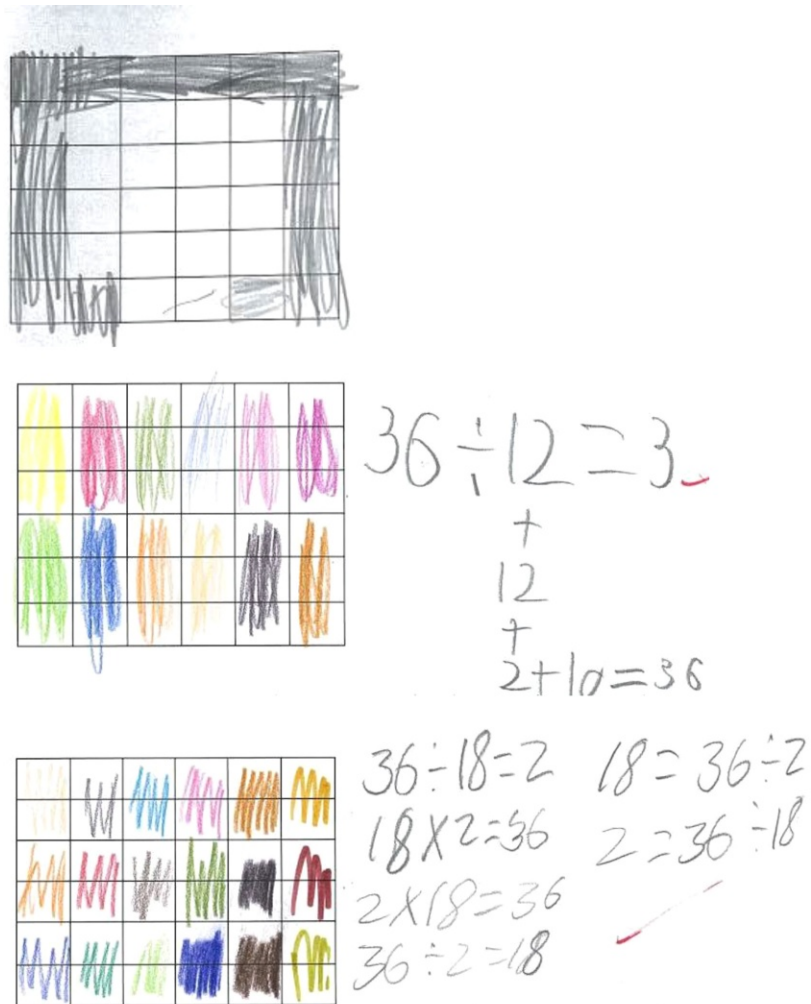


Figure 13.2. Sample tests

In my experience, most often if I were to ask a student to complete a division sum it would be something simple like  $10 \div 2 = 5$ . But does this show me they understand division as a concept or that they are progressing with their learning? Does it highlight multiplication as the inverse of division? Does it offer evidence of fact families? Fractions? Decimals? Division when the answer is unknown? The variables are many.

Some would argue it shows me a learned skill or known fact, nothing that would indicate how they learn. It reports what they have learned rather than the how or the why. Those aspects require questions such as: “How does this picture relate to division?” or, “Does it look like a multiplication array? If so, can I make a connection?” and, “Are fractions considered to be division?”

Through risk it is my hope that students begin to question, reflect and think more deeply about their learning and what division actually means. Finding the how or why takes far more time to answer than the what. This means as a teacher I have to adapt and become dynamic in my approach to teaching, not least because students will be at different stages in their reflections on their learning. The more they reflect, the more connections they make. The same applies to me.

At the end of a mathematical unit I see value in giving students a post-task exactly the same as the pre-task. Typically the idea is to see what they have learnt. But what if the student still answers the questions in a similar fashion as in the pre task? If I asked the same question twice with swift regulatory, the same if not similar response would be given, so why should I be worried if it happens in a task? Time is often the issue. We expect students to change their thinking over time but this does not always happen in a curriculum timeframe. More often than not, scaffolding of conceptual understanding is the issue, i.e. building the connections to other areas in Mathematics. Do I as a teacher transfer these skills?

### *The Demands of Accountability and Compliance*

Testing in school is more and more linked to issues of accountability and ‘student progression’. If students do not show that some learning has taken place questions about the nature of the teaching are likely to be raised. But shifts in thinking aren’t always immediate. Standalone tasks shouldn’t be seen to account for how students learn, nor be used to infer supposed ‘teacher effectiveness’.

The problem with compliance and accountability as a measure of teaching effectiveness is that it doesn’t place overt value on my understanding of how a student learns and feels about learning, yet the more I know about it, the more it influences my teaching. Knowing how they feel about learning engenders empathy and triggers emotional intelligence - which can be often undervalued in education. Yet emotions are visceral and influence not only the way we think about, but also how we do our teaching (Rajammal, 2016). The same applies to students’ learning and I would argue that we need to find ways to be conscious of their feelings, to understand them and work with them in order to better support them in their learning.



TAKING CONTROL

*To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.* (Winston Churchill)

Taking risks has no end point. There is no person to meet at the finish. It is unique and individual. It is a continual journey of improvement. I often ask, “Is my teaching changing? If so, how do I know I’m changing for the better? Am I taking risks to make that change?”

For me, taking risks is important because it helps to keep me actively thinking about learning. It encourages me to concentrate on metacognition (i.e., thinking about thinking) that is too easily overlooked or pushed to the subconscious when caught up in the busyness of teaching. Metacognition is questioning what I am doing when teaching, reflecting how my practice affects student learning and seeking to better understand how students are responding to the activities and tasks I set them. Risk taking and placing myself in the threshold teaching zone encourages an attitude of openness to the situation and to see teaching and learning in a symbiotic relationship. It ultimately fosters greater sensitivity and awareness, all of which inform my practice and, hopefully, positively influences the ways in which I work to enhance student learning.

Teaching is evolutionary, proactive and dynamic and so inevitably centres on change. Embracing change is a positive aspect of taking risks. It may be easy to point out what needs to be done, it is another matter to do something about it. Risk involves change, change involves action and ultimately it is up to me to take that action. Doing so requires me to take control and place myself firmly in the threshold teaching space, to take charge and set challenges where the outcome may well be unknown. Taking risk is an action, therefore I have an active role to play. It is not a strategy or a skill, rather a decisive choice about shaping one’s values; both professional and personal.

As a teacher I have learnt that my teaching has to be fearless and without reservation. In my experience, too many students appear to fear the unknown, the wrong answer, the idea that may come from left field, the thought that no one dares say. Contentious statements (as described in Chapter 5) are but one method to mitigate this challenge and compel students to take action. Do we need a contentious statement to compel change in our teaching? Take a risk without fear of repercussions? If schooling itself allows fear of the unknown to prevail, then, in most cases, it will follow our students into their adult life.

My teaching needs to constantly embrace risk, not fear it. My practice must model for students and that I support them to take risks with their learning. I need to empathise with students and feel what it is like to be the learner. Teacher as learner is a two way experience. It is completing the cycle of teaching through which pedagogic acts influence learning and learning similarly influences teaching: the pedagogical relationship, the heart of expertise (Loughran, 2010). This is where I believe quality in teaching and learning exists. As a professional I need to always ask myself, “Am I taking risks, or is my teaching at risk?”



REFERENCES

- Loughran, J. (2010). *What expert teachers do*. London/Sydney: Allen & Unwin/Routledge press.
- Rajammal, T. S. (2016). *Teacher effectiveness in relation to emotional intelligence and teaching aptitude among D.T. Ed. teacher trainees*. India: Ashok Yakkaldevi.
- Rockoff, J. E., & Speroni, C. (2011). Subjective and objective evaluations of teacher effectiveness: Evidence from New York City. *Labour Economics*, 18(5), 687–696.
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Rieber, R. W. (1988). *The collected works of LS Vygotsky: Volume 1: Problems of general psychology, including the volume Thinking and Speech* (Vol. 1). Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media.

*Eckhart Philipp*  
*Grade 4 teacher*