

University of Dayton eCommons

Counselor Education and Human Services Faculty
Publications

Department of Counselor Education and Human
Services


8-2011

Creative Learning for Challenging Times: The Promise and Peril of Risk

Michele M. Welkener

University of Dayton, mwelkener1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/edc_fac_pub

 Part of the [Counselor Education Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Welkener, Michele M., "Creative Learning for Challenging Times: The Promise and Peril of Risk" (2011). *Counselor Education and Human Services Faculty Publications*. 72.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/edc_fac_pub/72

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Counselor Education and Human Services at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Counselor Education and Human Services Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

What Are the Risks and Benefits Associated With Allowing Students to Fail If Learning Results?

Creative Learning for Challenging Times:
The Promise and Peril of Risk

Michele M. Welkener, University of Dayton

We are in an unprecedented time when it comes to the world's complexity—never has the need been greater for students to be prepared to think for themselves and act creatively to solve perplexing problems. As an artist, faculty member and administrator in higher education, faculty developer, and researcher of creativity in college students, I am passionate about creating environments where students can exercise such skills. In the art culture, risk, experimentation, exploration, and even failure are expected routes that lead to finding one's own style, voice, and signature statement. My awareness of these expectations first began to intensify as I advanced from student to instructor of art. Early in my career when I taught introductory courses in drawing and painting I watched bright students act unsure of their efforts on the first days of class. Students would frequently confess a lack of creativity before I would even have a chance to talk with them about their work. When a pattern of these perceptions started to emerge, I began to question how and why students sometimes do not consider themselves creative and what they

must think creativity is to hold this view. Finding a dearth of empirical research on creativity in the college environment, I set out to better understand how students' views of creativity influenced their sense of self and actions. In my dissertation, *Concepts of Creativity and Creative Identity in College: Reflections of the Heart and Head*, I investigated the various definitions of creativity students held, their sense of themselves as creative or not (what I came to call their *creative identity*), and how they came to think of these things as they did.¹

The results of my qualitative study with students from a variety of majors convinced me that their creativity was often stifled by the time they reached college. Indeed, it was not even something that students gave much intentional thought to—they were puzzled by the request to reflect on creativity and its role in their lives. Despite these dynamics, I identified nine major themes from their responses related to creativity's meaning. They said creativity involves spontaneity, open-mindedness, imagination, seeing or doing something a new way, knowledge, self-investment, risk taking, emotion, and self-expression. While within these narratives students sometimes revealed a lack of confidence or familiarity with risk and creativity, they illuminated potential linkages between learning, creativity, risk taking, and fear. One participant, Taylor, provided an example of such an internal struggle and vulnerability in the learning process:

When you make yourself vulnerable to new ideas, you really just make your entire ideology vulnerable. And when I have a discussion with someone about . . . some aspect of religion, my entire upbringing becomes vulnerable, and you know, one of the biggest parts of my foundation becomes vulnerable, and that's a huge risk. . . . [One] that a lot of people aren't willing to take. . . . Being different and standing up for new ideas, or just what you believe in, requires a certain amount of creativity, I think, to just be yourself. I think it's easy . . . to be just like everyone else. And it's hard to stand up for certain things.²

Taylor's conception of learning recognizes the risk to self and one's sense of knowledge when exposed to new ideas. To be sure, the college years are (or should be) a time when one's understanding grows in depth and breadth. New information calls prior knowledge into question, different perspectives add dimension and texture to one's point of view, and one's collection of resources grows exponentially. During such explorations, it is inevitable and assumed, at least to some degree, that collegians

pursue the boundaries of new awareness, test knowledge claims, and venture into unfamiliar territory. Taylor's comments prompt us to be mindful of the empowerment and fragility that students can simultaneously feel during this period of growth. So then, what are the roles of student affairs educators when it comes to engaging students in creative explorations inside and outside the classroom? How can we assist students with discerning between purposeful risks and risks with consequences that may be too great? What conditions do we create for risk taking, and how do we help shape students' experience in ways that result in productive learning? To address these questions, I offer perspectives on learning centering on risk and creativity. Admittedly, this essay cannot comprehensively answer the aforementioned questions; instead it provides provocative thoughts and challenges to elicit in-depth conversation involving student affairs educators.

Changing to Learn/Learning to Change

Learning has always been the fundamental purpose of an American higher education, but historically, educators seldom considered risk taking and creativity as vital elements of learning. How the academy has defined and advanced learning has been in a state of flux since the origins of higher education based on empirical and practical discoveries in academic disciplines, including education, psychology, social psychology, and neuroscience. These changes can be seen most clearly in the literature that traces the evolution of thinking about teaching. Embedded in each new development in teaching is a revised conception of the features and expectations of successful learning.

Creativity, once limited to the arts and constrained in teacher-centered conceptions of education, is now often recognized in institutions' mission statements as requisite for success in our increasingly global society.

Wilbert McKeachie traced early attempts to understand the role of class size in learning, the debate about the effectiveness of lecture versus discussion, and research on teaching and technology.³ Noticeable in his survey of literature is the trajectory of the conversation about learning that moves from more teacher-centered approaches (e.g., those that rely heavily on lecture, for instance) toward more student-centered approaches (e.g., independent study, or peer and cooperative learning).

In 1995 Robert Barr and John Tagg offered a landmark contribution to the discourse in their article “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education.”⁴ They suggested going a step beyond the shift mentioned in earlier works (i.e., from focusing on instruction to focusing on students) to a focus on *learning*, which has the promise to engage educators and students. A learning paradigm assumes that students will take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Thus, in this environment, the role of student moves from passive recipient to active creator of knowledge. A faculty member’s role shifts from deliverer of content to facilitator of learning. Learning is recognized as fluid across experiences rather than classroom bound. Staff members act as educators who contribute to the achievement of student learning outcomes. These developments point to our current period in history, which is primed for building on the momentum to construct learning in new ways. Creativity, once limited to the arts and constrained in teacher-centered conceptions of education, is now often recognized in institutions’ mission statements as requisite for success in our increasingly global society.

Risky Business

Student affairs administrators have wrestled with the issue examined in this essay—risk taking—from the emergence of the profession. Since the creation of residential colleges, faculty and staff have dealt with the myriad dilemmas precipitated by students’ flirtations with risky behavior. However, just as we have transformed our ways of thinking about promoting learning over time (and need to continually do so because students and cultures change), we have undergone similar adjustments when responding to high-risk student behavior. For the various types of risks students take, it seems universities have devised measures to minimize these risks via the establishment of offices, services, or policies. Students’

risks related to breaking the law or an institution's code of conduct are met with judicial sanctions from disciplinary boards. Residential life, wellness, or specific alcohol and other drug offices, committees, and programs address alcohol risks. Often, women's centers, campus safety, and health services initiate conversations about dangerous sexual behaviors.

For many years, administrators of American institutions operated under the assumption that colleges should act in place of parents and have the authority to do so. However, over time, faculty preferred to focus on intellectual pursuits and not respond to issues outside the classroom. Student affairs practitioners became the guardians and purveyors of risk management, responsible for student discipline, overall development, community living, conflict mediation, and safety, among other central aspects of campus life. Those in the student personnel movement, much like the shift in teaching/learning theory, began to recognize the role of students in their own learning, and, as a result, transferred increasing responsibility to students for self-regulation.

While popular culture portrayals of high-risk behavior (e.g., excessive drinking, sexual indiscretion, cheating) stereotype collegiate life, and, unfortunately, measures are necessary to manage such risks, not all risk is high, nor is all risk a bad thing. In fact, risk taking can help students learn to make good decisions. Consider this scenario: A resident assistant (RA) approaches her hall coordinator to request funding for a movie and pizza party scheduled on the night of the (traditionally well-attended) homecoming football game. While the coordinator could easily doubt the student staff member's programming skills and deny her request, it would be a teachable moment for the coordinator to engage the RA in a dialogue about the benefits and consequences of such a risk. What are the learning goals of the event? Why schedule it on that date? How might the football game compete for her intended audience? Why pizza? While it may seem like an ordinary example, risk taking can be promoted through similar, brief interactions with students that require them to construct an argument yet allow them the opportunity to test their ideas (and even fail); learning will result from the experience and a debriefing process about what worked and did not (and why).

It is difficult to think about how we should guide students through the tumultuous waters of risk without placing such situations in a developmental context. Risk requires the whole person and can have a positive or negative impact on every dimension of student development. These dimensions, as identified by Robert Kegan and Marcia Baxter Magolda

include cognitive (involving the intellect), interpersonal (related to relationships with others), and intrapersonal (concerning one's sense of self and identity).⁵

Risk taking also requires the ability to tolerate ambiguity, since the outcome of the risk is unknown. Comfort with ambiguity is a developmental demand, requiring a certain level of complexity. For example, if we use the ways of knowing Baxter Magolda found in her study of college students, absolute knowers would likely take little (if any) risk in the classroom because they wish to be certain that their attempts are right according to authorities.⁶ Only in independent and contextual knowing, when students can start to see themselves as a source of knowledge, can they truly take risks and step out from under the authority's primary influence. Even so, contextual knowing, when one can begin to take ownership of or self-author one's own experience and choices, is more ideally suited for successful risk taking, as evidence is used as a tool for weighing judgments. Independent knowing, where everyone's opinions are considered equal, may be the most tenuous place for college student risk taking, as there is no such mechanism in place for calculating risk.

For all of this talk about college student risk, it is possible that students are more reticent than ever to step into the unknown. The latest generations of college students have come of age in an era marked by fear. Terrorism, economic collapse, corrupt corporate leadership, and natural disasters have eroded the sense of safety, security, and stability Americans once felt. College students frequently turn to psychological counseling to cope, as shown in a review of literature by Martha Anne Kitzrow.⁷ In *When Hope and Fear Collide*, Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton present the primary concerns plaguing college students, ranging from personal safety to finances and relationships. According to these authors, students often fear deep involvement, because "it presents a far greater potential for getting hurt, for adding to one's burden, or for personal failure."⁸ I cannot help but wonder if the rise of technology has exacerbated (or perhaps has even helped to create) some of this sense of disengagement from others and retreat from risk.

This detached stance appears reflective of the larger culture's attitude about risk as purported by sociologist Frank Furedi in *Culture of Fear*. In this text, he described the trend toward "the fear of taking risks and the transformation of safety into one of the main virtues of society."⁹ He further claimed:

The celebration of safety alongside the continuous warning about risks constitutes a profoundly anti-human intellectual and ideological regime. It continually invites society and its individual members to constrain their aspirations and to limit their actions. . . . The advocacy of safety and the rejection of risk-taking have important implications for the future. If experimentation is discredited, society effectively acknowledges its inability to tackle—never mind to solve—the problems which confront it. The restrictions being placed on experimentation, in the name of protecting us and our children from risk, actually represent the dissipation of the human potential.¹⁰

More and more, it seems risk is cast in a negative light—in a contemporary culture rife with hazards, to some, risk taking seems to evoke images of recklessness and rebellion. The problem with this perspective is that to learn, one cannot stay perfectly safe; some risk is required. A participant in my study, Sydney, provides an example as she disclosed how risk taking and creativity were coupled with her adjustment to college.

I think I've learned so many more new things, and . . . not only about like the classes I took in art history and my chemistry and biology classes, English and stuff like that—not only just in classes, but . . . living in a dorm and learning to live with other people. Just being aware of society and the people around me in relationship to myself. . . . Probably the most important aspect about creativity that I learned is the whole idea about taking risks.¹¹

Had Sydney not taken the chance to explore, she would not have fully experienced college and made connections across these different domains. Failure is possible whenever risks are taken. However, failure is certain if risks are never ventured.

Managing Successful Failure

As educators, we are obligated to help students avoid risks that will result in serious crises. Mary Rolison and Avraham Scherman explored “College-student risk-taking from three perspectives.”¹² Using a quantitative approach, they found that students who have a personality type that involves sensation seeking and those who perceive that peers are engaging in risky behavior are more likely to do so themselves. The students Jodi

Dworkin interviewed for her qualitative study described risk in terms of results, leading her to ask, “If a behavior cannot be identified as dangerous until after a negative outcome has been experienced, how can prevention efforts aimed at identifying and avoiding dangerous risk taking be successful?”¹³ This is the paradox that practitioners face. She offers suggestions to “redirect [their] behaviors, provide [them] with alternatives to dangerous behavior, encourage [them] to take precautions when participating in potentially dangerous behaviors, and prevent [them] from experiencing real crisis.”¹⁴

Failure is certain if risks are never ventured.

While it is imperative that we help students avoid dangerous risks, it is just as crucial that we encourage risks that promote positive learning and development. In my creativity study, those who viewed their creative potential as low held that a privileged few are gifted with creativity. These students’ perceptions of being deficient in creativity mediated their ability to act on it. In contrast, students who had a highly creative self-view understood creativity as a central element of their identity they felt obligated to pursue. Lacking the skills in their first years of college to take ownership of their experience, social expectations, and other external influences as well as a fear of rejection were burdens many students brought to bear on their choices, which often resulted in conforming to others’ standards.

According to another participant, Tammy, educators were guilty at times of imposing standards that limited her risk taking and creativity.

I think sometimes we get disappointed, because, I guess . . . it goes back to being restricted. [Teachers are] like “okay be creative, but this, this, and this, and you can’t do this. . . . And then I start to think, “well what’s the point of being creative?” Then . . . I just get discouraged and don’t give it my all and I really come to, “okay I don’t care,” you know, and then I’m just putting together something that will just please my teacher. . . . I end up doing what the teacher wants, and that doesn’t make me too happy.¹⁵

Fear of being penalized for taking risks was a thread evident throughout many of my conversations with students. Taking chances with grades,

especially in a competitive, global marketplace, can appear too dangerous. However, allowing students to stay safe from risk, vulnerability, and failure is doing a disservice to their learning and development, since these experiences can help shape essential competencies.

Interestingly, the word *failure* rarely appears in the higher education literature, except when referring to student attrition. Could this be because educators believe that failure is an inappropriate way of describing the process of taking unsuccessful risks that results in successful learning? Although it may be unspoken rather than explicitly communicated, many of us assume that some experience with failure is part of the learning journey. Perhaps a reason for this lack of exchange about student failure, however, has to do with educators' own bewilderment about the nature and role of risk and failure in our efforts to promote learning.

Given that learning is the fundamental charge of higher education, faculty and staff are increasingly shifting responsibility to students for their own learning, students inevitably face the promise and perils of risk, and we are just starting to understand the relationship between learning, risk, and creativity, how can we go about creating an environment that invites the kind of experimentation that can be so crucial for students' learning and growth?

Educators should strategically provide opportunities for exploration, in and out of the classroom, for students to find their boundaries and strengths and test possibilities. Since scaffolding will be necessary (to allay students' fears), starting with low-risk activities and projects will foster confidence. By low-risk I mean nongraded or formative occasions to practice building skills before moving to higher-risk learning. Intentionally targeting all dimensions of students' development will make their experience even more beneficial.

Educators should model creativity and risk-taking for students so they can understand that these components are part of the scholar's modus operandi and not limited by discipline or content. New knowledge doesn't emerge from merely supporting the status quo, so what does risk taking in the name of discovery look like? How do you decide if the consequences of failure are worth the learning involved? Sharing specific instances where we have dealt with challenges and failures will help students make their own judgments. For example, in my classes I regularly try new approaches to teaching in an effort to help my students learn. We discuss these approaches and their success (or failure) to invite everyone into thinking about how we can improve our educational practices.

Educators should provide students with *ill-structured problems*, issues with no easy or singular solutions, a developmental approach popularized by Patricia King and Karen Kitchener in their reflective judgment model.¹⁶ This kind of dilemma is the mainstay of student affairs work, which can promote creativity and risk taking and cultivate students' internalization of learning.

A developmental perspective offers us an awareness that risk management is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Levels and types of risk are not all the same and neither should be our methods for fostering students' growth—choices for interventions should be based on an assessment of their development. Going back to the formative days of the student development literature, Nevitt Sanford's emphasis on striking a balance between challenge and support helps us understand that these notions are delimited by context.¹⁷ One student's version of support may seem a challenge to another, so it is crucial to understand who you're trying to assist. Too much challenge and the student's confidence for risk taking can be dashed; too much support and his or her risks may become careless, if the student even has motivation to venture a risk. The appropriate amount of challenge and support needed for healthy risk taking is best gauged according to the student's developmental maturity and needs.

The reality of a contested issue, like the benefits and perils of risk, is that it presents a developmental challenge in the form of an ill-structured problem for educators as much as students. The effectiveness of risk as a learning aid is limited by an educator's ease with risk taking and perhaps even his or her creative identity. We learn about taking risks ourselves when making choices about how to teach students about risk. It requires us to be able to determine how to support students in the context of what we know about them and their development and perform a cost-benefit analysis. We just must be sure to temper students' risks (and failures) with our support, determining the spirit of our guidance by the potential for harm to students the risk could cause.

To encourage student risk, faculty and staff need to put learning first, even at the expense of revealing a program, event, or course's imperfections—not an easy thing to do in this age of accountability and competition for limited funds. The stakes of failure are high for faculty and staff, as they are for students. However, if facilitators make risk taking a learning outcome in their event or program designs, such efforts can reveal student progress and improve assessment results. Ultimately, educators cannot afford to avoid risk just as students cannot afford to avoid risk.

Therefore, administrators and staff supervisors must not only allow risk taking but also find ways to reward it.

While these ideas are not exhaustive, they represent a starting point for discussing the issue of risk and how we might take learning-centered and developmental action toward improving students' experiences in college. One glance at the news headlines can attest to the fact that we need to be vigilant about preparing future generations to deal with increasing complexity. If there ever was a time to embrace the ambiguity of creativity and risk, and their potential for learning, it is now. And what better laboratory for experimentation than higher education—where learning is our mission.

Notes

1. Welkener, M. M. (2000). *Concepts of creativity and creative identity in college: Reflections of the heart and head*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Miami University, Oxford, OH.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
3. McKeachie, W. J. (1990). Research on college teaching: The historical background. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(2), 189–200.
4. Barr, R. & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27(6), 13–25.
5. Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). Self-authorship as the common goal of 21st-century education. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 1–35). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
6. Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
7. Kitzrow, M. A. (2009). The mental health needs of today's college students: Challenges and recommendations. *NASPA Journal*, 46(4), 646–660.
8. Levine, A. L., & Cureton, J. S. (1998). *When hope and fear collide: A portrait of today's college student*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, p. 97.
9. Furedi, F. (2002). *Culture of fear: Risk-taking and the morality of low expectation* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Continuum, p. 47.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
11. Welkener, *Concepts of creativity and creative identity in college*, p. 149.
12. Rolison, M. R., & Scherman, A. (2003). College student risk-taking from three perspectives. *Adolescence*, 38(152), 689–704.
13. Dworkin, J. (2005). Risk taking as developmentally appropriate experimentation for college students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 20(2), 219–241, p. 235.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

15. Welkener, M. M. (2004). Helping students develop vision and voice: The role creativity plays. *About Campus*, 8(6), 12–17, p. 14.
16. King, P. M., & Kitchener, K. S. (1994). *Developing reflective judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
17. Sanford, N. (1966). *Self and society: Social change and individual development*. New York, NY: Atherton.