

Taking risks – being unprepared

by Anthony Hall

Of the 12 meanings in the COBUILD dictionary for 'risk' only one or two indicate that there might be a danger to life and limb. So we are on pretty safe ground when we encourage learners to 'take risks'. But the dictionary does not succeed in offering a positive outcome as the result of taking a risk. "Something unpleasant or undesirable" is the usual definition, while "it was a risk and it paid off" features only once. Does this mean that too few teacher trainer texts are in the Cobuild Corpus, or is risk taking something that we like to preach, but rarely practise? For example, have you tried to incorporate any of the new Process Options (in past issues of "The Teacher Trainer") into your recent work? Or even the Psycho-Drama model? (Volume Two Number One).

Here's some space for you to write down how successful your process option was.

I would suggest that no preparation or failed preparation are two ways or putting yourself at risk. There can also be a positive outcome to such an apparently threatening situation.



How do school teaching and short-course teacher-training compare in terms of risks and safety-nets? In the table below I have tried to establish parallels. At one end of the scale we have non-risk elements in schools such as textbooks, and at the other, on short courses, the unknown factor of participants' personalities. Do you agree with these simplistic correspondences? Or with the order in the scale?

SCHOOL TEACHING

SHORT-COURSE TEACHER TRAINING

AGREE? Then tick here

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Textbook | Course programme |
| 2. Teacher authority | Trainer authority |
| 3. Pupil equality | Teacher equality |
| 4. Discipline | Respect/success |
| 5. Home background | Participant personality |

Have you ticked or made changes?

I wasn't joking when I said no preparation earlier. It's only when you're not prepared and know you've got over an hour to fill that you really try to build on the group's responses to whatever you decided upon as your opening gambit. And because you're having to think at the same speed as the

participants they will probably get more opportunity to talk, since they won't be trying to analyse the situation at the same time. They may even provoke you into unprepared statements which can be far more instructive, because they are formulations dependent on that one moment in time, formulations which need reappraisal or which are open to challenge, formulations which are hopefully not regurgitated buzz-words.

Have you ever had an experience of being provoked into unprepared statements?

So far I've been rather heavy on the philosophy and not concrete enough. A basic example is any activity involving matching, e.g. people to the cars they drive, or functions to exponents. This activity can easily suffer from over-preparation, from the belief that the exercise is 100% clear. Is there really only one set of correct matches? Do you leave teaching space for students to question the arbitrariness of the correct answers?

The opposite of over-preparation is under-preparation. On courses we are often members of teams and hence rely on each other's preparation. This can lead to big divergences during group work, since what seemed like explicit instructions the evening before, turn out to be interpretable. This happened to me with the skeleton story "King Caliban".* I didn't realize it was a skeleton and read it to the group as a poem, instead of expanding the skeleton into my own story. The follow-up activity consisted of a list of 50 questions on the text, from which each individual selected the ones s/he thought were worth answering, and passed them to a partner. This activity in my group lasted for over 80 minutes, whereas in parallel groups it took only twenty. When my "mistake" became known however, colleagues were unhappy that I had not completed the other activities allocated to that session. Earnest efforts were made to make sure I did not make the same mistake again!

Sometimes, doing an exercise 'wrong' in some way is not due to ignorance, as above, but due to an inability to decentre, to see the world from somebody else's point of view. What do you do if you are using published materials and you cannot see the rationale behind an exercise, or any usefulness in it?

Do you still go ahead with it? Your students may see it differently. Coupled with an instruction like "I couldn't do this, see how you get on", you are in a position afterwards to discuss the exercise seriously.

The above is an example of classroom language that I think is linked to risk-taking. Here are some other examples:

"I don't know what to do now/How shall we go on from here?"

"I've got a bit of a problem. I don't know how to organise your access to these materials."

"I've never tried/done this before."

"What would you like to do (this week/this afternoon/this session)?"

I started with Cobuild so I suppose it's good style to end with Cobuild too. What do you think about this example sentence for 'preparation'?.... "Elaborate preparations were being made to get me out of prison".

Elaborate preparation can make teaching a prison.

* "King Caliban", see p.16 "Once Upon a Time", Morgan, J. & M. Rinvoluceri. CUP (1983)