

Dangerous Language Arts: Supporting Risk-Taking, Curiosity, and Critical Thinking

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The Paradox of Safety & Risk

It is only when we feel safe that we can take risks. This paradox presents both challenge and opportunity: how can we hold space in our classrooms for challenging topics and examining multiple views, while offering our students a high level of interactive behavior?

Identifying and understanding one's positionality, one's "Gestalt" (Korthagan, 2004, p. 83) is vital. This "body of needs, images, feelings, values, role models, previous experiences and behavioral tendencies" (Korthagan, 2004, p. 83) are what shapes and guides teachers' professional identities and students' learner identities. Identity is reflected in interactions, communication choices, and many other facets which comprise and shape the classroom learning community within the institution of a school. There are limitations to what is possible for a human-*doing*, in contrast to a human-*being*, can illuminate. A human-*doing* teacher may feel they are doing everything possible to teach, but in reality are failing to move "... toward opening deeper meaning, and returning to original difficulties of Being and self: What other interpretations can be made about the story in question? What is the subtext?... what is really going on in the relationship...?" (Fowler, 2006, p. 12). It is only once a teacher can see what else is possible, through experiencing the ripple effects of doing things differently, and in ways better suited to the concrete, present learner *beings* and each human's unique "Gestalt," that they begin to understand the disconnect they have been experiencing. Teachers have the opportunity to peel back and seek to understand the layers of experience they and their students possess, and how the *beings* with these layers might come together more effectively.

If a teacher has never swum in non-institutional waters, including through their own education, how can one be expected to think differently about how production might be altered? That teacher is at the mercy of the system, and will reinforce it without thought, as that is what the system has trained them to do. A system produces what the system was designed to produce, and institutions are designed to produce institutionalization. The sturdiest systems incorporate protections for continuance to build antifragility.

It's clear that the ship of democracy could fatally clash with the iceberg that has become the institution of education. Layers of frozen policy and rigid legalism can also halt progress. It's easy to forget what education is supposed to be, since the frozen layers often distort or obscure those goals entirely. If, as Dewey (1929) suggests, "... all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race" (p. 33), then the most important work of a teacher is to become a learner, to never stop considering how one is both recipient of and participant in creating awareness around participation.

Modern cultures of silencing, cancelling, and legalism (a significant part of the iceberg) have attacked participation and altered what it means to participate. This has created far-reaching impacts, well qualified by Rempel (2022) as he presents a call to action about holding space for play: "I believe children have lost their ability to organize themselves to play in groups without adult supervision". This concern is true for children of all ages. It has also seeped into adulthood as well as evidenced by children having grown up protected with practices of safetyism and failure to trust oneself. Polley (2022) writes,

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“When you have a concussion, you don’t have good instincts about what will make you better. You want to lie in a dark room. You don’t want to be social. You want to drop out of your life. That bad instinct, coupled with bad advice makes you much, much sicker than you need to be” (p. 245)

This is representative of what happens in children’s brains when they are unable to practice taking risks and navigating challenges appropriate for their age and level of development without a hovering safety net (Dweck, 2007). Children are made fragile through an absence of challenge, because they haven’t been allowed to develop decision-making or execution strengths or confidence. The paradox continues: kids who are not enabled to take risks will not develop the strengths nor embody the trust needed to feel safe.

Responding to Safetyism

“... it is now possible for a youth, female as well as male, to graduate from high school, or university, without ever caring for a baby; without ever looking after someone who was ill, old, or lonely; or without comforting or assisting another human being who really needed help... No society can long sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations, and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings,” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 825).

Teachers possess specific ideas about what appropriate or good behavior might look like in a classroom, but these ideas may or may not be based on the realities of that classroom community. Unless the teacher dedicated time and effort to acknowledge, recognize, and support students’ access of their own and each other’s wealth of knowledge, values, and experiences, that teacher will not have the tools to perceive behavior accurately and contextually. Space must be made to share and engage with students on terms that support them and their personal narratives. Without holding that relational space, students may not feel safe or sufficiently seen to take risks, including the risks of questioning their choices, growing new or more positive habits, or pursuing challenging goals.

Many Canadian and Albertan classrooms are now considered superdiverse in composition (Alberta Teachers Association, 2024). The student *beings* who enter a teacher’s classroom bring unique identities and experiential wealth, as does the teacher *beings*; all can be learner *beings* which ‘draws’ a circle of inclusion (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018b) around the community that includes all *beings* and invites/ requires their participation. Chambers (2003) writes, understanding “... is always arrived at in relation to others: other countries, people, places, traditions, and languages” (p.239). Canada’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission (Government of Canada, 2022) have made extensive calls to action of the colonial education system and the institutions which uphold it in Canada. Change will come in degrees, a process of dismantling and reimagining as much as it may be creation or destruction. Educators must consider ways curriculum, informational gatekeeping, and authority dynamics may reinforce colonial ideals at the expense of learners’ freedoms.

If teachers are to create community space and opportunity for sharing, “... that is tolerant of difference and inviting to youth, [teachers use of] curriculum must address identity... in a way one that is invested with, rather than divested of, emotion and passion.” (Chambers, 2003, p. 280). The idea of “curriculum as poetry” (Chambers, 2003, p. 253), allows teachers flexibility and craftsmanship with implementation. It moves from the focus to a tool in service of the focus, which is the needs of the learner *beings* who are engaging, connecting, and growing through it. The empirically determined learner needs of “competence... relatedness... and autonomy...

appear to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being,” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). If teachers are to live within the tension and paradox of risk and safety, and to “teach the compassion, sense of community and emotional sympathy that mitigate and counteract the immense problems that knowledge economies create,” (Hargreaves, 2003, as cited by Kanu & Glor, 2006, p. 102), they need to be users of tools, not at the mercy of their tools.

It is easy to imagine how developing teachers become weighed down by the processes and structures of the education system and the institutional school-based, divisional, and provincial demands. It is the questioning of system, institution, and tool that is most vital to reflect to students when educating for freedom and democracy (hooks, 2017; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018b).

Responding with Antifragility

It is no longer enough to create resilience; resiliency helps one survive difficult times, but antifragility means that one is made stronger through difficulty. If teachers and students are to thrive in current contextual, cultural, and institutional times of upheaval, they will need to find opportunity to become stronger through that upheaval. Like the Jackpine pinecone which opens through stormy weather or by fire to spread its seed and bring forth a new generation, so too must teachers and students (and parents and stakeholders) accept that learning and growth may be uncomfortable processes at times. Exploring new concepts and perspectives may cause cognitive discomfort but strengthens one’s understanding and illuminates new possibilities; using empathy and compassion to imagine the emotional or social impacts experienced hones these understandings; pushing one’s physical body to new activity or skill levels broadens what is possible for one’s body-tool to accomplish. Calls for silencing suggests ideas can be so dangerous that one cannot trust oneself to engage with these. Are beliefs and values so fragile? What is there to be afraid of when considering new ideas? Surely one may consider such things without a requirement to accept or reject.

As any literature or art lover knows, one thing generally leads to another. Literacy is rhizomatic, “... spread[ing] out endlessly, filling in available spaces and sending out new shoots that can connect to any other point on the rhizome,” (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p. 25). Like a plant growing from seed into its adult form, students’ learning is also rhizomatic, and can be nurtured or impeded by feedback, their teachers’ beliefs, the forms in which they are able to show their learning, and the conditions in which they are growing.

Few students arrive at school already equipped with abilities to look beyond win/lose, black/ white, or us/them thinking. Learner *beings* who will eventually be tasked with upholding democratic process and participating in social communities as citizens require skills like conflict resolution, the ability to look for the tensions as well as common ground between polarized views, and tools to access and nurture personal, creative, and critical thinking. In many classrooms today, instead of curiosity enlivening learning, students may feel that they are being forced to endure a ‘deadening’ (Nussbaum, 2006) in order to survive and navigate the system and institutions of education.

There is another systemic consequence at play which contributes to this deadening. It can be viewed as a problem of negligence, or as successful intention, but either way, silencing is the result. This consequence is well articulated in this logical problem: “... if individuals do not have ‘endowments’ to sustain them, they cannot work on behalf of others in trying to secure a more just world; but when social conditions are oppressive, individuals cannot develop those

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endowments,” (Wood & Deprez, 2012, p. 477). In other words, if students do not have the skills to identify, demand, and enact social change, they won’t be able to help; but if they can never learn how to help because the system prevents them from acquiring this knowledge, then they will never have the skills to identify, demand, and enact social change.

This circular problem appears in many forms in the systems and institutions of education: keep teachers so busy, they don’t have time to question orders; keep students so quiet and focused on their deficiencies, they will never identify or learn to utilize their power; keep a society so polarized, that no middle ground can be found, and therefore, no systemic change enacted. Change is hard, whereas upholding the status quo can be painless, widely accepted, and well-established. There is hope. “The narrative imagination is cultivated, above all, through literature and the arts. Reliance on the arts was the most revolutionary aspect of Tagore’s and Dewey’s proposals, which used theatre, dance, and literature to cultivate the imagination.” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 391). Literature and the arts can save us. Natalie Loveless writes “... tell stories and... pay attention not only to which stories we are telling and how we are telling them, but how they, through their very forms, are telling us.” (italicized in original, Loveless, 2019, p. 24). Learner *beings* engage with literature and art, and may learn to better understand, not just the identities and fellow *beings* in their community, but also themselves as *beings* and their personal gestalt.

It’s vital that learner *beings* are not only ingesting literature and art, but also actively creating and experimenting with these forms themselves (hooks, 2017; Wilson & Peterson, 2006). The systemic and institutional pressures of standardized testing, large class sizes, massive curricular loads, and many other pressurized and influential forces are actively working against efforts to decolonize education. The idea that the expert is always external reinforces colonial ideas of required acquiescence to authority. It is only the few who can be trusted to think for all, and everyone else must accept their lot and fall in line. Is it possible to claim that Western democratic process is being upheld through education, if education is actively and only reinforcing practices of authoritarianism and autocracy?

Practices of engaging strictly in critical or evaluative work, especially in elementary and high school, kills creativity. “... most school writing assignments become evaluative rather than authentic; their questions have correct answers and require logical, text-centric argumentation rather than engaging issues that encourage students’ connections beyond,” (Lammers, Magnifico, & Wang, 2022, p. 82). Teachers find it difficult to push back when their own experience of the system has shown them success is achieved through being a rule-follower. Creating other rule-followers is perceived as the goal and definition of success. Following social and cultural norms, behaviors, and other actions of the practice of citizenship is part of what the system is working diligently to reinforce; but, if instruction of how to enact change is never included, then this is the goal of colonist education. Colonial ideas of authority will produce the skills to perceive membership in democratic society, but will not encourage nor create active, impactful democratic citizens. Colonists do not share power.

It is a worthy goal to want better. Democratic citizens believe in and want to create circumstances which allow “... students to leave... classes not just better informed, but more prepared to relinquish the safety of silence, more prepared to speak up, to act against injustice wherever they saw it” (Donaldson, 2010, as cited by Wood & Deprez, 2012, p. 482). There is power in practicing the skills required to uphold the freedoms protected under democratic governance.

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The demands of democratic society are not easily met, but holding space for play, creation, inception, sharing, relationships, and community are the antidotes to legalistic pressures (Lammers et al. 2022, p. 81). Teachers have more tools than ever before at their disposal, and the strategies that creators and writers are now using to meet the demands of the knowledge economy in our technological age are vast and wide-ranging. The need to prepare students to navigate the empirical and digital realms in which they will need to participate as citizens brings new challenges, but also new opportunities for how one might ‘transgress’ against systemic and institutional pressure and exercise one’s individual autonomy and build community connections and efficacy. “Whether the literacies user is aware or not, every literate act is either reinforcing or dismantling the hegemony present within the society in which it is produced and interpreted.” (Wood, 2002, p.2, as cited in Corrigan & Slomp, 2021, p. 159). There is power in acts of creation, inception, and communication. Empowering learner *beings* with discernment about “... the most appropriate means to convey their text – in the modality, language, and register of their choosing,” (Corrigan & Slomp, 2021, p. 159) offers the widest breadth of creative freedom and depth of support for text creators and all communicators.

Conclusion

Belief constructs and power dynamics must be iteratively examined and reconfigured to best reflect and support the needs of the *beings* in Canadian classrooms. Students do not arrive ready to question, nor does a new classroom community appear fully developed and constructed. Even though they might vocalize dislike of systemic or institutional practices (“8:00AM start time, high school? Really?”), students need to be supported with modelling and practical application of this kind of examination, and shown how to identify hegemony and how to dismantle structures of oppression when these are discovered. Ideally, students would leave school understanding that systems are a tool of service; if a tool is not serving its purpose or functions unexpectedly or problematically, it can and should be reimagined, reinvented, redeveloped, or replaced.

Addressing the paradox of safety and risk in the classroom provides actionable items to actively respond to and rebuild. Students and teachers are both at the mercy of these systems and institutions to varying degrees, which underscores the need for all learner *beings* to gain the skills needed to exercise educational freedom and reject harmful systemic or institutional practices. Democratic process cannot be upheld, and democratic citizens not truly free, unless that freedom entails and requires a questioning of the process itself. It is the responsibility of a democratic citizen to actively practice questioning and holding leadership to account for its actions. If that is never reflected in the school experience, learners will not miraculously find themselves equipped with such skills. It is more important than ever to hold mirrors up, question overreach, and hold space for consideration, questioning, and curiosity free of judgment. The creative and democratic freedoms we are upholding are much more delicate than they may appear, and it is everyone’s job to participate in the rebuilding and transformative efforts if democracy is to continue in practice and actuality instead of word alone.

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