



Caution or Risk? Exploring Creativity in an Unorthodox Way

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“Creative risk taking is essential to success in any goal where the stakes are high. Thoughtless risks are destructive, of course, but perhaps evermore wasteful is thoughtless caution, which prompts inaction and promotes failure to seize opportunity.” —Gary Ryan Blair, Author, Speaker, Strategic thinker

Creating innovative teaching methods can be a challenge. How do you keep your students involved and interested? As a junior high teacher I have: colored my hair purple, worn two different colored shoes, played a historical character throughout the school day, erupted into an operatic aria, shared pomegranates with the class and a variety of other ideas. I have included such instructional methods as: modular instruction, docudramas, simulation games, lecture, group work or cooperative learning, active learning or guided inquiry, role-playing, and class discussion, just to name a few.

My goal was to inspire the students to participate in making many of the decisions about what, how, and when something was to be learned. Yet, the basic question remained: how much I should help a student and how much the student should help himself.

This question was evident with a seventh grade student named Johnny. I needed a creative way to motivate Johnny. He was doing absolutely nothing in the class. His cum folder revealed he was capable of doing the work. He had been an “A” student until the fourth grade. In spite of my never-ending comments to, “Get to work,” as well as the phone calls to his parents, he was unbelievably surprised that he was failing my class.

I alerted him to the possibility that he would ultimately fail the semester unless he chose a different course of action. When I asked how he was doing in his other classes he replied, “Fine!”

Upon investigation, I found he was failing two other classes. A conference with all of his teachers was held with Johnny and his parents in attendance. It was agreed that Johnny’s one goal would be to complete his work in class. Johnny signed the contract. His parents were supportive and it seemed Johnny was eager to make an improvement. However, after two weeks of constant reminders, notes and phone calls home Johnny had not made any effort to follow the contract. I was frustrated and low on patience. “Lord, please show me a way I can make a difference in Johnny’s life.” I prayed.

There was no immediate answer from God; however, as I gave more of my attention to the other students I began to relax. One idea began to germinate in the garden of my mind. It was a creative risk that was so preposterous I dismissed it immediately.

But after careful thought, I seized the opportunity with a plan. I contacted Johnny’s parents to explain my idea. They were reluctant at first but gave me permission to

proceed. I alerted the principal and school counselor. They had never heard of such a plan but they were also supportive since Johnny's parents had agreed.

- Without any emotion I told Johnny that it was clear that he had chosen to fail. I would respect his decision; however, I needed to make his choice in compliance with school policy. (I made that up). Therefore, I was going to give him a new contract: a Failure Contract. The statements of the Failure Contract included:
- The contract was only for my class.
- Johnny would not participate in class.
- Johnny was not to complete any work in class or at home.
- Johnny was not to work or help in any group activities. (He was an exceptional artist and his skills were often in demand by the other students for group projects)
- Johnny would sit comfortably in the back of the classroom and do nothing.
- I would not remind, reprimand, or nag Johnny about participating in class.
- The contract was in immediate effect and would be reviewed in two weeks.
- After two weeks, the contract could continue or could only be changed, but only upon mutual consent by Johnny, his parents, and me.
- Johnny would be responsible to explain his lack of participation to the class if he or I were questioned.
- Johnny would understand that his semester grade would be an "F."

All parties involved signed the contract. Naturally he bragged to the other students about his special contract. I explained to the class that Johnny had chosen to not participate in class at a great cost. If they had questions about the great cost they would need to talk to Johnny. That was it.

I was polite, kind, and smiled to acknowledge that he was following his Failure Contract. Whenever he would start to get involved with other students or open a book, I reminded him he needed to get back to work at his seat and do nothing. After the first week, he seemed bewildered and confused. He missed the interaction with his friends. After two weeks, we held a conference. I explained that we would be starting a new project with group work. Did he want to participate or continue his Failure Contract? Johnny was eager to work with the other students.

I explained that it would be extra work for me to include him and I would have to write another contract. I continued in my explanation that the Failure Contract seemed to work very well, except for the fact he was getting an "F" grade. If he wanted to fail, this was not the best decision for him to make.

I could tell he was absolutely dumbfounded by my response. He never had a teacher talk to him the way I was confronting him. It seemed that the more I let go of my expectations with Johnny, the more he chose a course of responsible action. Finally, with the encouragement of his friends and the prospect of using his artistic skills Johnny chose to cancel his Failure Contract. I was thrilled at his decision but maintained my composure.

Johnny never returned to the Failure Contract and he passed the class with an above average grade. In retrospect, I remember that this creative, unorthodox approach gave me peace of mind and put the responsibility where it should have been, on Johnny.

I share this experience not to encourage educators to rush out and promote Failure Contracts. This story is meant to encourage educators to open the window of creativity in the full arena of educating children. You may never wear purple hair or create a Failure Contract. But make no mistake; God can spark creativity in your classroom in a most unusual way.

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