



# Introduction: Taking Risks and Developing Leaders

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As a collection, this set of cases profiles teachers who resolutely believe that students best learn the content of a course by engaging with each other and the teacher. To do that, students must step up and step out of past behaviors that are conventional and passive. Teachers must do the same. Unfortunately, institutional and instructional barriers prevent many students and teachers from making this kind of transformation. The chilly climates created by these barriers can be warmed by rethinking and rebuilding classroom structures.

Organized alphabetically, the set of cases illustrates a range of teaching assignments, undergraduate and graduate, in three of the seven University of Wyoming colleges. Donna Amstutz, adult education and technology, and Kent Becker, counselor education, teach graduate courses in the College of Education master's and doctoral programs. Dominic Martinez directs minority recruitment for the University of Wyoming and teaches in the University Studies first-year program. Mark Ritchie, from the art department, offers the perspective of someone who teaches in a studio setting and who advises many undergraduates seeking graduate school entrance. Julie Sellers teaches Spanish to sophomore and junior-level students who come to her classes with a wide range of language skills and experiences. Sally Steadman, from the College of Engineering, teaches freshmen and sophomores and advises several student groups, most of them focused on increasing the participation of women and minority students who are greatly underrepresented in

the profession. These six teachers were selected from fifty-two University of Wyoming instructors who were nominated by students for their success in warming up chilly classrooms. The last chapter of this book contains a description of the nomination and selection process as well as an overview of the inquiry methods used to produce the case studies. In order to disseminate the information in this book as widely as possible, the project also features a CD-ROM and website. The CD can be found in the back pocket of this volume and includes video clips from the interviews as well as a resource section. To access the website, go to [www.uwyo.edu/ctl](http://www.uwyo.edu/ctl).

The six cases illustrate how teachers and students take risks that challenge conventional teaching and learning structures. By taking risks, students also develop leadership qualities central to successful learning over a lifetime. While taking risks and developing leadership are common goals for students in undergraduate and graduate programs, these goals remain elusive for students hindered by chilly classroom climates. Put another way, within current structures, the students who most need to take risks and develop leadership skills are least likely to do so.

Bernice Sandler, senior scholar in residence for the National Association for Women in Education, coined the descriptor *chilly climate*. Sandler was interested in creating more positive learning climates for women. In this project, we have expanded Sandler's original concept to include students who are different or feel different by virtue of many factors, such as age, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. These students frequently find that potential educational success is undermined by entrenched teaching practices and higher education's sometimes immutable structures. Teachers can help them to succeed by modifying instructional factors such as class organization, discussion strategies, office visits, assignments, lectures, and readings. We wanted to understand better and document such factors in a set of case studies that would feature teachers in different disciplines at different stages of their careers who teach both undergraduates and graduates.

## Taking Risks: Teaching Against the Structure of Predictability and Safety

Most teachers want students to take intellectual risks that lead to deeper, richer learning and a more independent, self-determining life. Many students, however, appear to learn passively. They dutifully take notes in a lecture class and memorize the notes for an acceptable performance on a test, but they fail to make important connections that create a foundation for continued learning and for transfer to other classroom settings. Such students are anything but self-determining.

Teachers value independence for a variety of reasons. Many teachers are, themselves, self-determining learners. For them, the structure of academic disciplines makes sense. Because it makes sense, core principles of the disciplines might be less difficult to learn. Such teachers have made a career by focusing on disciplines that engage both mind and heart. They stay current with the literature as a matter of course. On their own, often with their own money, they join formal disciplinary organizations and regularly attend conferences. It's not surprising, then, that teachers value the independent learner who engages in class work by reading critically, asking good questions, and becoming involved in authentic work of the discipline. Teachers also value student self-determination because the burdens of teaching are lessened. Students know what to do, and do it well, with minimal prompting or coaching.

The students who nominated teachers for the Warming up the Chill project identified specific features of instruction that helped them learn what it meant to be more successful and self-determined. They recognized teachers who provided ample feedback and demystified academic procedures. Above all, the teachers were generous with their time, especially time during which their relationships with students built trust and confidence in learning. All of the teachers profiled in this book start small and in the same place to create trust. Each takes the time to learn names and establish relationships. Sometimes, the relationships extend beyond formal classroom boundaries. For students who may experience chilly classroom climates because of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background, a trusting relationship with the teacher emerges as central to

developing confidence in learning. Perhaps more importantly, and central to the collaborations described below, students must know and be able to trust class colleagues. For this reason, the teachers profiled in this book expect students to work collaboratively with their fellow students.

From this clear-cut but necessary beginning, a classroom community takes shape. The teachers build a climate for learning and taking risks by creating opportunities for students to practice using their voices in ways that are new and demanding. Students communicate with the teacher and each other, and they participate in events outside of the classroom boundary.

In these six cases, getting personal goes beyond learning the names of students. For Dominic Martinez and Kent Becker, it often means getting to know students and their families in their home settings, and it means demanding that their students personally confront their fears or uncertainties about people with a different gender or sexuality or from a different race or class. For Mark Ritchie, it means establishing enough trust in a classroom so that his students can engage in the substantial critiquing process common in the visual and performing arts. Although Donna Amstutz, Sally Steadman, and Julie Sellers represent vastly different disciplines, they all illustrate in their chapters how conventional classroom assignments can create distance and anonymity, failing to establish personal and emotional connections for students. They believe that such assignments create barriers for student learning, and they offer persuasive arguments that emotional and personal connections lead to deep or internalized learning. Sally shows how standard engineering homework assignments or classroom exercises frequently contain gender bias. Donna and Julie show how textbooks can unrealistically depict entire categories of people or even exclude certain classes altogether.

Sally Steadman maintains that women learn differently from men and that minority group students learn differently from majority group students. All six authors in this book show how we all learn differently, affected by the variables of opportunity, motivation, time, and prior experience. The better teachers know students, the better teachers will be able to tailor reading selections and create assignments that are both worthwhile from disciplinary perspectives and engaging to students of varying ages and many backgrounds.

## Learning to Be a Leader Through Collaboration: Teaching Against the Structure of Student Roles

Just as the six cases demonstrate how building relationships creates opportunities for risk-taking, they also show the value of collaboration in leadership development. The structure of schooling, especially in its grading systems and its emphasis on individual achievement, often becomes a barrier to one of the fundamental goals of a student: to grow into and think of oneself as a learner for life rather than as a good student in a one-semester course. How might students imagine being a civil engineer? A dual language teacher? A counselor? An artist for life? Just as important, what will it be like to work in an office or organization that values teamwork and collaboration? What kind of preparation in a classroom setting must students experience in order to become confident, self-determined learners? How might collaborations develop into leadership roles?

Again, the authors of these case studies start with small steps. Sally Steadman and Donna Amstutz convinced deans to replace individual desks with comfortable chairs and tables to facilitate collaborative learning. Dominic Martinez rearranges furniture and asks his students to find alternative spaces for class meetings. As these teachers build trusting relationships, they ask students to begin playing unfamiliar roles, such as teaching other students in problem-solving sessions, becoming elected class leaders responsible for evaluating the teacher, publicly critiquing each other's work, or assuming unusual speaking or acting roles. To assist students in these unaccustomed roles, the teachers become mediators and facilitators, often meeting one-on-one with students outside of class to provide additional support. One outcome of this leadership development is a distinct change in the classroom climate, where students talk with one another more as colleagues than as fellow students.

To supplement this classroom work, the case-study authors demonstrate a remarkable commitment to creating extracurricular leadership opportunities for their students. They travel with their students to conferences. They help to find funding for student research projects, international travel, and student productions. They help both individual students and groups to seize opportunities for leadership roles on

campus. In these extracurricular roles, they model the collegiality and collaboration that they are asking their students to rehearse in the classroom.

The authors of these case studies confirm that the quality of the student-teacher relationship connects directly to the quality of the learning. An institution like UW offers numerous leadership opportunities for students, many of them separate from academic programs, such as student government, service organizations, religious institutions, and political parties. Students experiencing chilly classroom environments may be less likely to participate in co-curricular activities. Or, if they do, membership likely focuses around a restricted purpose that is far removed from their academic life. For all students, but especially those affected by chilly classroom climates, it's a distinct value to rehearse leadership in a classroom setting and be mentored by a teacher who connects academic, personal, and career goals.

## Recommendations

Together, the six cases exemplify how instructional and curricular connections, created through relationships, warm up chilly classroom climates for students. The lesson of this project is clear: learning requires risk-taking. Students who already feel disadvantaged in a university setting because of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background are unlikely to take additional risks. These students need support to take necessary risks. Relationships are central to learning because students need the personal attention, which builds confidence and promotes leadership development.

Based on the case studies, we conclude with four specific recommendations that can be implemented by individual teachers. We also advocate discussion about the recommendations at program and curricular levels. If the teachers profiled in this book have made a positive difference in the lives of students, we can only imagine and celebrate the effects of department-wide initiatives.

**1. Get personal, teacher to student; insist the same, student to student.** Teachers in this collection make a commitment to learn student names and background information quickly. They know who's driving

into campus for an evening class, who is sick, who might have demanding family obligations. They ask that students learn each other's names. These teachers are successful in persuading students that their interest is neither trivial nor infringing on privacy. Course syllabi and other classroom materials reinforce the difference getting personal makes.

**2. Take the risk of starting with what students know, including personal experiences. Create assignments that build on student knowledge and prior experiences.** The cases exemplify how the teachers build assignments that ask students to create connections between past learning and the content of the course. The assignments serve multiple purposes. They provide the teacher with information about students' knowledge, including writing abilities. The assignments reinforce the teacher's insistence that knowing names and something about each other is meaningful. Such assignments enable students to create personal connections with the content of the course. Finally, immediate feedback on these assignments enables students to make appropriate adjustments and practice self-determination.

**3. Create opportunities for in- and outside of class collaborations that show the real work of the disciplines, authentic engagement, and leadership development.** In this collection, the most powerful examples of learning come from assignments, projects, and events that provide students a glimpse into the discipline. Student engagement in learning increases by participating in conferences, critiquing one's own work and the work of others, and completing a project that has meaning outside of a classroom context. The teachers in this collection take considerable time, energy, and care in developing worthwhile, meaningful assignments that develop leadership.

**4. Be vigilant in book and instructional material selection.** For students susceptible to chilly classroom climates, instructional materials often distance, alienate, and discourage. All too frequently, the examples, charts, and graphics in textbooks unrealistically feature some classes of people and completely exclude others. If there's a way to choose a book that's more inclusive, do so. If not, create ways for students to critique the textbooks as they learn from them, or ask students to participate in efforts to find other materials.

