

Risk Taking

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The aspect of Intellectual Character on which school will focus more closely in the coming half term will be 'Risk Taking'.

Risk taking is having the courage to take a chance rather than choose the easy option. Positive risk takers try new challenges and push themselves to develop new skills, even when success may not be guaranteed.

'The biggest risk is not taking any risk. In a world that is changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is not taking risks.' – Mark Zuckerberg

Risk taking does not come easy to self-conscious adolescents who fear failure and public embarrassment most of all. Teenagers often suffer from FOSO (Fear of Standing Out), at a time of low mental toughness when they don't want to be seen as different.

Just a Few Minutes of Courage ... a case study for pupils who think twice about stepping forward

'Good afternoon, Year 10. This is Mr Slack and he will be taking part of today's lesson to teach you all about the topic of energy'

These were the words of the usual class teacher of the group, Mr Smith, a wonderfully confident and experienced teacher who had made it all look effortless in previous weeks when I had been privileged to sit in the back of his class, watching him teach as my subject mentor. The pupils were used to good lessons.

I was standing in front of a Year 10 class, my first year 10 class, in fact the first class that I had ever taught. It was at this point I realised what an epic mistake I had made in taking my teacher training course in the first place, agreeing to this first teaching practice in Durham, and thinking that I knew enough about 'energy' to fill the next 20 minutes of the lesson. My legs, which had served me so well for the first 23 years of my life, were visibly shaking at the knees. My heart, understanding the enormity of my potential failure, was thumping the inside of my chest in an attempt to escape the impending doom. My stomach had, all of a sudden, irrational ambitions of becoming a gymnast and was flipping into cartwheels. After a pause of just a few seconds, which seemed like a few excruciating minutes of profound anticipation, my brain tried to take control over the internal chaos in an otherwise silent room. 'My name is Mr Slack' The group erupted in a fit of giggles, my brain had forgotten to take control my voice and the words had come out in a bizarre and contradictory oscillation of squeak and resonant choke. The room quickly went quiet, eager to pounce on the next instalment of agonising embarrassment. I coughed to clear my throat. 'My name is Mr Slack, and I'd like to talk to you about different types of energy.' Thankfully, my voice held true.



I leapt up on to a chair to stand tall above the class. A bizarre decision given I now brought even more attention and scrutiny onto my seemingly insane actions. Mr Smith's face, eager to promote an air of control and calm on my behalf, betrayed him, as his mouth dropped and his eyes widened. The pupils fell silent in an awkward moment that served to brighten the imaginary spotlight shining on me, and the beads of sweat appearing on my forehead started to become visible. 'What's just happened?', I asked, keen to blunder on. 'You've jumped on a chair,' came the response, followed by another fit of giggles. 'Fantastic!', I interrupted, 'But what about my position?'. I looked around and identified a pupil who seemed sympathetic to my plight with the look of pity on her face and I pointed at her. 'You've moved higher', she responded as I jumped down onto already shaky knees and stumbled like a baby giraffe. Another fit of giggles. 'If this is about energy, sir, then you've got too much' exclaimed one pupil. At last, I had something that I could work with 'Yes, exactly' I exclaimed, 'that energy and the potential to fall off the chair is called potential energy.', and I set off walking across the room in an attempt to demonstrate kinetic energy and lead into the next bit of the explanation. My lesson had stumbled out of the starting blocks but I was moving forward now, and I used the momentum to keep going as the pupils started listening to my words.

Before I knew it, the lesson was over. I was done. I'd managed the whole class as they moved around the room to show kinetic energy, we'd all jumped up and down to show conversion from kinetic to potential, and we'd even put definitions in our books. Twenty of the most frightening minutes of my life had successfully concluded. Mr Smith was smiling! I felt like I'd climbed Mt Everest (not just my chair) having also run a marathon whilst successfully negotiating world peace. It was exhilarating and I had done it. My first ever lesson.

Even better the next day, I taught another lesson. And the following day another lesson. And I noticed that every time it got a tiny bit easier. My voice didn't always squeal when I introduced myself to the class, and I got a little bit more confident. The experience still wasn't entirely comfortable. My knees still shook a little and my heart definitely raced, but I always reached the end of the lesson in one piece ... alive. Each evening, when I reflected on the lesson of the day, I congratulated myself. Not for teaching great lessons about physics – I was nowhere near that level of competence, but on being brave.

There is a wonderful scene in the movie 'We Bought a Zoo'. A boy is too embarrassed to tell a girl that he likes her. He asks his Dad for some advice, who says, 'You know, sometimes all you need is twenty seconds of insane courage. Just literally twenty seconds of embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it.' The boy's twenty seconds of courage got him the girl. My twenty seconds of courage got me jumping on the chair in that first physics lesson.

Maybe for you, it takes it takes twenty seconds of courage to raise your hand and admit that you don't understand something in a lesson. It could take twenty seconds to attend a drama audition, or take the spider that you found in the bath outside, or stand up for someone being picked on, or to apologise when you got it wrong. All of these twenty seconds lead to amazing things like friendship, a spider free shower, a better understanding of physics. But the real amazing thing is knowing that you can be brave.

'There's something liberating about not pretending. Dare to embarrass yourself. Risk.'

Drew Barrymore

Jason Slack
Headmaster

