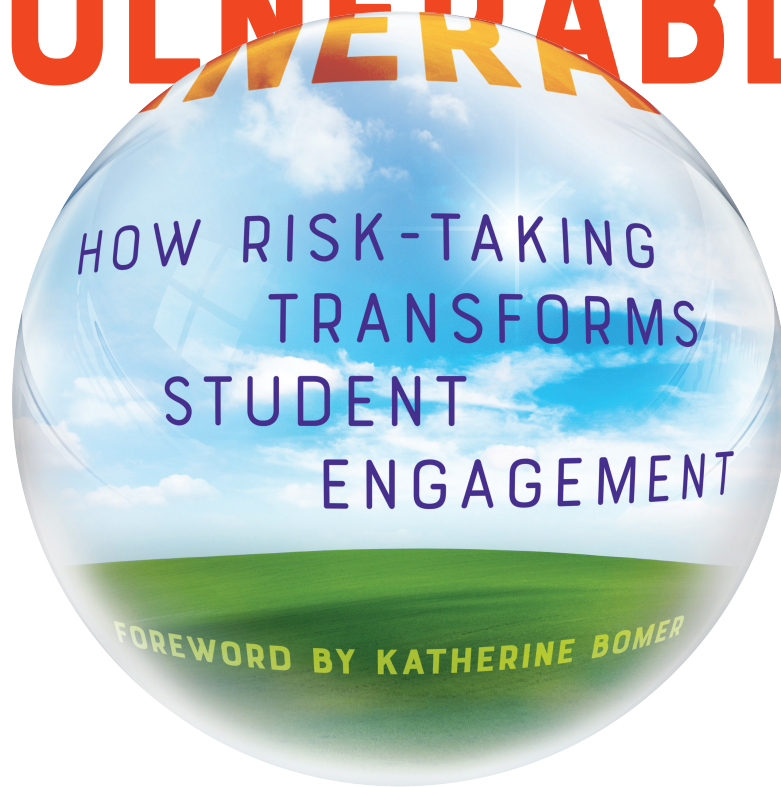


THE **POWER** OF **TEACHING** **VULNERABLY**



HOW RISK-TAKING
TRANSFORMS
STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT

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FOREWORD

THE OFFER OF VULNERABILITY AND TRUST IS PRECIOUS, SOMETHING WE AS TEACHERS TREASURE—IT HELPS MAKE POSSIBLE A RELATIONSHIP WHERE BOTH GIVER AND RECEIVER BENEFIT. IT'S A BIG PART OF THE REASON WE ALL WANTED TO BECOME TEACHERS IN THE FIRST PLACE.

—THOMAS NEWKIRK, *EMBARRASSMENT AND THE EMOTIONAL UNDERLIFE OF LEARNING*

With *The Power of Vulnerability*, David Rockower could well become our very own and much-adored Brené Brown for teachers. In his clear, honest, and beautiful prose, he tells the story of his personal journey toward becoming a more responsive and empathetic teacher—more willing to admit mistakes and doubts, to apologize (without defense) to his students, and to take risks in his classroom, like sharing early drafts of his own writing about emotional experiences or doing personal identity work before inviting students to have difficult conversations about race, equity, and white privilege. David argues convincingly that vulnerable teaching is not only liberating for the teacher, but actually results in more eager, engaged learning in students. He provides a remarkably rich road map, reinforced by testimonials from students, colleagues, and guardians about the power of vulnerability, and he guides us step-by-step through actions we can take to become more vulnerable, more human, and therefore, more effective teachers with our own students.

Frankly, I admire the risk David takes to write a book about vulnerability, a concept that is, like the varied tastes and textures of fine wine, hard to describe, to pinpoint, but something that you know when you taste and feel it. Every teacher remembers a time—perhaps during an impromptu discussion following a traumatic event, or when everyone burst into laughter over a pigeon seeming to admire its reflection in the window, or when a particularly moving passage in a read-aloud book caused many in the class to cry openly, or when a student

beamed after hearing a specific, heartfelt compliment about their writing—when they feel that tingling in the skin and change of air in the room that says something real and true was just born. We can't plan for those moments because they can only happen inside trusting relationships, in the midst of living together in the classroom. They happen when we open our hearts, and when we are honest about what we think and feel. They happen when we look closely and listen deeply to our students. They are often the moments (sometimes the only moments) that students remember about our time together, even years later.

For those who might think the scenarios I just described are not the purpose of education, that school exists to teach children those practical, hard skills that will get them into college and lead to lucrative careers, think again. The days of silent students perched in rows, performing in obedience to the lesson and the textbook are over. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, educators knew that the technologies, workspaces, and challenges of the twenty-first century require different ways of teaching and learning that incorporate so-called soft skills such as compassion, conversation, collaboration, and critical perspective-taking. During the lockdown, everyone—teachers, kids, and their families at home—had to learn new ways of doing school in virtual spaces. There were plenty of bumps on that road, on everyone's part, but the adults and kids who got through it best were those who could admit how hard it all was and ask for help. As we came back to be in community with one another inside school buildings, we knew we needed to build rituals of caring and constant checking in on one another so that we might heal after such physical, emotional, and social disruption. But the truth is, we always need those qualities if we want to create safe, vibrant learning spaces. Thankfully, David's book bears out the benefits of a more vulnerable teaching stance, and it overflows with possibilities for structures and activities that fashion and foster a joyful community. The classrooms and school that David describes are places where students feel seen, heard, and especially, necessary. Students learn how to talk to each other and read each other's work to cheerlead and offer constructive suggestions. They learn how to navigate brave conversations about crucial topics. Students take on leadership roles that have genuine impacts in the school community and beyond.

We need to understand, of course, that vulnerability is not a curriculum kit we can purchase—it's not a canned unit we can pull out every October. As David points out, the readiness for extreme vulnerability will vary according to the

students in each classroom. Instead, we must authentically nurture an atmosphere of trust and compassion, bit by bit. It might begin, as it did for David, in our own storytelling or with a frank piece of writing. Just as we model how to structure an essay, how to experiment with line breaks in a poem, or how to cite sources in a paper, we can demonstrate how to write honestly, with specificity and voice. From there, we can practice any of the myriad ways David offers for exploring and exhibiting vulnerability in teaching and learning: writing conferences, critical conversations, identity presentations, whole-school community meetings, and quarterly schoolwide talent showcases. It is especially helpful to learn that timing matters when deciding to showcase vulnerability. Boundaries are necessary so that people will not experience emotional harm, and David teaches us how to build relationships that can sustain some difficult truths.

What shines brightly throughout David's book is how much he loves teaching, and how much he loves his students, and I believe that if we all felt and behaved this way, we would make a better world. But for anyone who might worry that love is beside the point, or that a vulnerability discourse feels frivolous in the face of standards, tests, and evaluations, I suggest heading straight to the Appendix to relish the samples of David's students' work that should satisfy any anxiety about fulfilling achievement goals. As a fellow teacher of writing, I know we can only realize this confident, richly textured, and engaging quality of writing when students feel safe, seen, and cherished in their classroom. Indeed, this feeling of trust and caring is precious, for us as well as for our students, and isn't this what called us to teaching?

—Katherine Bomer



INTRODUCTION

TEACHING AND LEARNING AS A VULNERABLE ACT

**ONE LOOKS BACK WITH APPRECIATION TO THE BRILLIANT
TEACHERS, BUT WITH GRATITUDE TO THOSE WHO
TOUCHED OUR HUMAN FEELINGS. THE CURRICULUM
IS SO MUCH NECESSARY RAW MATERIAL, BUT
WARMTH IS THE VITAL ELEMENT FOR THE GROWING
PLANT AND FOR THE SOUL OF THE CHILD.**

—CARL JUNG

With a dry throat, shaky hands, and hammering heart, I stood in front of my fifth-grade classmates, anxious to get out of the spotlight. I'd rehearsed my speech at home, but no amount of practice could prepare me for the twenty-five eleven-year-olds whose judging eyes bore through my chest. The teacher thought she was being helpful when she said, "David, try to relax. We are all friends here." This made things worse, as it brought even more attention to the fact that I was nervous. I stumbled (and mumbled) through the presentation, then hurried back to my seat. I'm sure there were some sympathetic smiles that I misinterpreted as smirks. But several classmates openly mocked my fear, which turned my embarrassment into anger. I do remember our teacher praising many of the presenters who followed for their composure, their loud, confident voices. Each compliment stung, reminding me how I was not good enough. Needless to say, that classroom was not an emotionally safe space for me. The classroom culture was competitive, and the teacher attempted to use fear as a motivational tool. Thankfully, the next school year was much different.

At the end of our sixth-grade year, each student was to deliver a long presentation on a topic of our choosing. Baseball was my life at the time, and the


Philadelphia Phillies were my favorite team. I decided to research the history of baseball and bring in my personal passion for the Phillies. I can still remember the giant note cards and how I'd repeatedly sharpened my Ticonderoga pencil to make sure each word was legible; the Phillies poster with Steve Carlton and Mike Schmidt, one holding a flaming baseball, the other a flaming bat; the royal blue V-neck sweater I wore; the smile on my teacher's face as she cheered me on throughout the presentation. I actually enjoyed the process, and I was beyond proud of myself when it was over.

How could two presentations, one year apart, result in completely different emotional responses and experiences? This was not a simple lesson in learning from a fifth-grade flop and "trying harder" the following year—I prepared equally for both assignments. Each required me to take a risk, to complete a task that made me uncomfortable. But one occurred in a competitive, divisive environment, and the other took place in an emotionally safe space.

I never thought I would become a teacher. I generally disliked school and did what I had to do to get by. But there were teachers along the way who inspired me and made me feel important. Everything that was bad about school—the mindless work, the bullying, the focus on compliance—all but disappeared when I was under the care of my favorite teachers. Though those classes could be boisterous, the learning environment was authentic. It was messy, frustrating at times but engaging. It often seemed more like home, where I felt empowered to speak my mind, push back, and share my frustrations. In those classrooms, I was able to be myself, or at least, mix it up with other people my age, people like me who were trying to figure out what they really believed in, what drove them to actually *want* to solve a math problem or pick up a book on their own.

My favorite teachers all had one thing in common: They were risk-takers. They would stop a lesson to talk about what was on our mind; they grappled with ideas alongside us; they played four square and laughed with us during





recess; they looked us in the eye and apologized when they messed up; they showed us who they were outside of the classroom; they were flexible with the curriculum; they got to know us and found something beautiful in every student. When I decided to become a teacher, I wanted to harness everything those teachers taught me about being human. I wanted my classroom to be a second home, and I wanted the work to matter. Unfortunately, it didn't happen as quickly as I would have liked.

The first time I taught poetry, I was nervous. I had little experience with the genre and didn't have anything worth sharing with my students. Honestly, I wanted to get through the unit because it felt uncomfortable. So I set up stations. At each station I had directions and examples. Station 1 was concrete poetry; station 2, acrostic poetry; station 3, limerick; and so on. This was brilliant! Students could teach themselves; all I needed to do was move around the room, encouraging, asking questions, and helping them generate ideas. This required some preplanning but once things got going, there would be little to no risk on my part. The unit turned out just fine. The kids wrote sterile, risk-free, predictable poems. There was no voice, no heart, but I was pleased, because, hey, they wrote poems. I could check that box off my curricular to-do list. Thankfully, that new-teacher acceptance of surface-level learning didn't last.

Each school year, I nudged myself toward more authenticity in the classroom. As I grew as a teacher, it became too painful to simply go through the motions, checking off boxes. If I didn't feel energy from the students, if I saw tired, compliant eyes, I became restless. And at some point, I realized that the required change was not the tweaking of lesson plans, but rather the revealing of myself as a human being who did all the things I was asking them to do in school. I needed to show them that I wrote and read and struggled to find engagement in school. I needed to reveal what went through my head when staring at a blank sheet of paper. How did I organize

my thoughts before writing? How many times did I tear up a draft and begin again? How often did I abandon a book—sometimes because I didn't like it, and sometimes because I didn't understand it? It was time to stop acting like a teacher who knew all the answers, and time to start revealing the fallible adult in the room who grappled with self-doubt, who wrote bad poetry, who sometimes still struggled to focus.

A few years later, with the poetry unit looming, I knew I needed to do more than create stations. I made a commitment to write my own poetry. I cringed as I wrote, revised, and edited. I kept every draft. It wasn't great, but it was real. I wrote about some of my failures and successes in school, specific moments on the playground that I'd never forget. I wrote one poem about the time I ran away from home when I was seven years old—when I filled my backpack with granola bars, grabbed my pillow, and made it to the end of the block before stopping to consider where I might go. I wrote about sitting down on the curb while pondering my options. And I wrote about running home to hug my parents.

When I read those poems aloud to my students, I remember being surprised at how exposed I felt. I was sharing part of my life, but I was also revealing my attempt at this particular art form. I felt uneasy because these were not particularly good poems, and I didn't want to model something, well . . . *bad*. But the response from my students was unexpected. They asked questions and wanted to share their own stories: "Why did you run away?" "What did your parents do when you got back?" "Hey, I did the same thing, but I made it all the way to the park!" I showed them my drafts and how I struggled with trying to say what I wanted without sounding forced or cliché. I explained that we'd be writing free-verse poetry and that they didn't need to worry about rhyming. They should focus on revealing memorable moments. "Take us into some of the big and little events from your life," I told them. Show us the color and condition of your sneakers from third grade, invite us to hear the sound of your best friend's laugh.

And that's when the students began writing their own poems—for themselves, about themselves. They were (as Jacqueline Woodson defines poetry) finding "joy and urgency in tiny spaces" (Ray 2006, 205). For the first time, they were writing from the heart. They wrote about how the stitches of a well-worn baseball made them feel alive, how the smell of coffee in the morning reminded them of their father, how shelter from an August thunderstorm brought them the same

comfort as a hug from their grandmother. For the first time, the writing was real, and I was done with stations.

Reflecting on this experience, it's clear to me that my willingness to be vulnerable, to take a risk, to not only show them my own struggles with the craft of writing but also let them see that I was afraid to share, opened the door for my students to engage in real learning.

We routinely ask our students to take emotional risks in school. Their mere presence in a room with twenty-some classmates guarantees moments of discomfort and uncertainty. And we know that when these moments occur in an environment that is grounded in acceptance, care, and support, we increase the chances for positive student growth and meaningful learning. Student risk-taking in school is inevitable and important. How, then, can we ask our students to take risks when we, as teachers, do not? If students learn best from modeled behavior, shouldn't teachers be required to lean into uncertainty alongside students?

I played it emotionally safe for my first few years of teaching. It was scary enough to be responsible for the well-being and education of a classroom full of students—the idea of revealing my own fears, doubts, successes, and failures was not even on my radar. But it should have been. I was asking them to write personal essays, argue, persuade, and share their art with others. All of these tasks require emotional risk. In time, I learned that to help my students discover what matters most to them, and to use those passions as catalysts to impactful learning, I needed to step up, lean out over the edge, and take the leap into teacher vulnerability.

