

## Sarah Anderegg

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**From:** Jonathan Eldridge  
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Dear College of Marin Faculty:

A special Halloween edition this week—the attached article, “4 Classroom Lessons From Haunted Houses,” looks at how profound learning happens in moments of ‘pleasurable disquietude.’ I’d love to hear your thoughts.

All my best,

Jonathan



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# 4 Classroom Lessons From Haunted Houses

What research on “recreational fear” — the fun of being scared — can teach us about learning in the college classroom.

By [Sarah Rose Cavanagh](#)

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Life is full of uncertainty. Full of terrors — both those that are unfolding in our present moment and those that lurk in the realm of possibility. Given that we’re constantly buffeted with moments of real anxiety, why on earth do so many people sign up to be frightened by artificial, fictional fears in [horror movies](#) or haunted houses and forests? That question is the focus of a growing body of research. It is the study of “recreational fear,” and its insights shed light on much more critical issues for faculty members: How do we challenge students without harming them? How do we both encourage intellectual growth and respect mental health?

**Recreational fear.** A [group of psychologists](#) in Denmark took an innovative approach to understanding why some people seek out terrifying experiences. Rather than invite a random sample of participants (who, after all, may or may not be horror fans) into an artificial lab environment, they set up shop in “haunted houses” to study this behavior in the wild.

[In one experiment](#), participants wore heart-rate monitors as they walked through a haunted house called [Dystopia](#), and reported their levels of fear and enjoyment at several points. The house was an immersive, live-action theatrical horror production consisting of 42 thematically connected rooms.

The researchers video-recorded the goings-on at three separate locations where jump scares took place — a mad scientist kicking over a metal bucket and reviving a zombie who jumped out; a half-pig/half-man chasing people with a loud chainsaw; and a cluster of zombies grasping at the attendees from underneath a stairwell. The research team samples heart rates specifically from these junctures.

Self-rated fear was associated with large-scale elevations in heart rate in a straightforward, linear way: The more fear, the more heart pounding, and vice versa. However, the researchers found that fear and enjoyment had an upside-down-U-

shaped relationship: Small or large doses of fear were not terribly enjoyable, but in between those experiences was a very enjoyable level of arousal. There was also an inverted-U relationship between enjoyment and modest fluctuations in heart rate, indicating a pleasant degree of small elevations of heart rate.

How does this research relate to teaching? I'm certainly not suggesting you turn your classroom into a haunted house and scare the hell out of your students (though it could be a lot of fun for all involved). But we teachers could learn a few lessons from the study of recreational fear: specifically, from the benefits of small deviations in emotions and physiology that shift people temporarily outside their comfort zones — but not too far — in settings where they feel secure, surrounded by friends, and interpreting the situation in a playful way.

Turns out, the same characteristics behind recreational fear are ones that support learning and engagement in the college classroom.

**Lesson 1: No one goes to haunted houses alone.** Obviously, recreation ends where true danger begins. If risks are real, pleasure halts. No one wants to be chased by actual zombies, pig-men, or anyone with a machete. Most of us do not even want to talk to clowns.

The educator and writer [John Warner](#) drew [a parallel](#) between safety harnesses on amusement-park rides (another form of recreational fear) and psychological safety in the classroom. Would the frantic debates about safe spaces, he asked, simmer down if we just called safety “security” instead?

Part of a feeling of safety in a threatening situation involves whether or not you have social support at hand. People don't climb onto haunted hayrides alone. They go with someone whose arm they can clutch, who will laugh at them when they jump too high, who will reminisce afterward over burgers or beverages. Recreational fear is a social experience.

[So, too](#), is [learning](#).

In a qualitative interview study I conducted (with my honors student Jasmin Veerapen and other collaborators), students frequently spoke of a feeling of “relief” in courses that they felt were their best learning experiences. Their relief seemed tied to classes in which:

- The atmosphere was intellectual but warm.
- The instructor demonstrated interest in individual students and their lives.
- Their contributions to class discussions were met with encouragement and kindness.
- The course work was largely communal. By that, I mean the instructor solicited student contributions, the students worked together on tasks, and the classroom atmosphere was lively and interactive.

Establishing this environment of support opens you up to then take advantage of another lesson we can learn from haunted houses.

## **Lesson 2: Profound learning occurs in moments of “pleasurable**

**disquietude.”** That is one of my favorite concepts from my early study of literature. A common essay prompt was to identify how a given work created a fission born of the combination of enjoyment and discomfort, a healthy confusion born as one’s expectations and ideas about the world rub up against a new way of thinking or knowing. In my personal reading history, the most transformative work of pleasurable disquietude was Toni Morrison’s [\*The Bluest Eye\*](#). It is not a pleasant read, but it completely broke open my conceptions about the world. I was unmoored but glad for it.

We can see pleasurable disquietude in the research on recreational fear — that sweet spot of fear and arousal, just enough but not too much. This sweet spot is physiological in nature: elevated heart rate, sweaty palms, a body prepared for action.

A team of physics educators used the term “epistemic vexation” to describe how feelings of joy in learning can commingle with confusion and frustration. In [a case study](#), they followed the intellectual journey of a student they dubbed “Marya,” and worked closely with her over a semester to understand that uncertainty and feelings of not-knowing are not monsters to be conquered but instead part of the very process of learning physics. Epistemic vexation can motivate students to embrace uncertainty.

In both haunted houses and college classrooms, enjoyable experiences and new learning may be tied to *just the right level* of arousal and [uncertainty](#) about the world. How do we as instructors design our classrooms so that students hit that just-right level? It may have a lot to do with encouraging students to frame their uncertainty (and the attendant arousal) as *exciting* rather than scary.

**Lesson 3: Anxiety and motivation use the same physiological systems.** In the novel [\*These Violent Delights\*](#), a character reflects on the commonality between panic

and motivation, how the arousal feels so similar: “Anticipation was almost indistinguishable from panic. The speed of his pulse, the tightness in his tendons — the anatomy of it, by any objective measure, was the same as the anatomy of fear. The difference lay in the sense of purpose, which reshaped the nervous tension into something electric.”

This fictional character is onto something. For it is true that anxiety and motivation tap into many of the same [underlying physiological systems](#). Unpleasant forms of anxiety arise when two things are true: You perceive that you are under threat and that you don’t have the resources to cope with it. If you instead perceive that you are being *challenged*, and you have the resources to rise to that challenge, you feel [motivated rather than anxious](#).

People high in anxiety also tend to be high in something called [uncertainty intolerance](#), meaning they feel that the experience of uncertainty is something terrible to be avoided. So walking into the Dystopia haunted house thinking that it is going to be a terrifying, miserable experience is unlikely to yield pleasurable disquietude. And students walking into a classroom thinking that their entire future hinges on their performance in this course are similarly unlikely to leave feeling motivated to embrace uncertainty (i.e, epistemic vexation).

How do we help students appraise the work of the classroom in such a way that their uncertainty yields epistemic vexation rather than anxiety? The answer can be found in another link between haunted houses and college classrooms: the importance of a sense of play.

**Lesson 4: We learn our strengths by facing our fears.** Like the haunted house, the classroom is a setting where one is safe to practice being challenged, where the stakes are low and community is high, and yes, where occasionally having fun may yield better risk-taking and more learning. The slow development of new skills and abilities will assist students when they [confront real challenges in the world](#), and this practice works best when the instructor routinely pushes them a bit beyond the day before.

Intriguingly, [play](#) in the animal kingdom (including that of human children) has a lot in common thematically with recreational fear. Intentional reversals of power, kidnapping, tackling, and jump scares are as common to kittens and red pandas as they are to teens in haunted forests. Play in the animal kingdom is [also all about learning](#) — about practicing in a safe setting how to respond to future uncertainty.

Play helps us embrace uncertainty, [tolerate discomfort](#), and face challenges rather than shrink from them. To be motivated rather than anxious.

**What does all of this look like in the classroom?** I wrote about this in detail in [my latest book](#), *Mind Over Monsters: Supporting Youth Mental Health with Compassionate Challenge*. But for our purposes here, what I call “compassionate challenge” means building learning environments characterized by safety, belongingness, and playful appraisals — and then nudging students into epistemic vexation and a bit of challenge. In short:

- **Aim for an enticing brew of pleasurable disquietude and epistemic vexation.** Take a page from the physics professors and their [case study of Marya](#): Instead of basing your learning goals on the mastery of certain concepts, set goals based on “refinement of thinking.” These physics professors emphasized devising plenty of low-stakes assessments (again!), offering credit for effort rather than correct answers, giving [frequent and immediate feedback](#) in class using [clickers and polls](#), and having explicit conversations about emotions, confusion, and uncertainty as part of the process of doing science. If we shift students’ perception of challenging coursework — from “I am facing threat, and unable to cope” to “I am facing challenge but have the resources to cope,” we may be able to direct this powerful energy away from anxiety and into motivation.
- **What’s desirable is the sweet spot in the middle.** Maintain a sense of play but always remember that the haunted-house goers were displeased by heart-rate changes and fear that were too extreme. Pleasurable disquietude and epistemic vexation arise in circumstances in which you feel confused but not lost, provoked but not outraged, unhoused but not adrift. These sensations arise in settings where students sense that there is not too much at stake, where they are experimenting and testing, where mistakes are encouraged and not dire. One of the most powerful moves we could make to decrease stakes and increase motivation for playful experimentation is thus in our grade policies — how we [assess](#), [give feedback](#) to, and [grade student work](#).
- **Create a warm learning environment.** Whether you call it safety or security, the climate of your classroom [matters](#). You [create that climate](#) by how you word things on your syllabus and assignments, by the support you offer to those with limited resources, by fostering interactions between students, and by designing frequent, low-stakes assessments that propel students’ learning and help them develop [a sense of competence](#) (as opposed to basing their entire grade on two terrifying exams).
- **Emphasize that your students are not alone.** Approach your class as a community of learners rather than a series of individuals (and include yourself as one of the learners). Seeking out student contributions — via co-creation of assignments and syllabi, [annotations](#), and other forms of active learning — are all great methods to

build relationships between students and between you and your students. Think about how to invite [all student voices](#) and [perspectives](#) into the conversation.

Students need opportunities to risk vulnerability, to play, to embrace uncertainty — in an atmosphere of safety and belonging. They need a compassionate challenge.

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