

WOULD YOU DRINK THIS?

An Exercise in Risk Assessment

Joyce R. Walker



This water bottle had been sitting, lonely, in the corner of a classroom in Stevenson Hall, at Illinois State University, for more than a semester. One day, as we waited for class to start, someone (thanks Izzy!) asked the question, "How much money would it take for you to drink from this water bottle?"

After a lot of "EEEEEEWWWW" noises, we came up with amounts that ranged from \$10 to \$100,000. But that conversation really made me think...



How do we make decisions about the risks we're willing to take, and the rewards we are willing to take them for? What kinds of literacies are involved in this decision-making?

Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, reportedly once said, "The biggest risk is not taking any risk. In a world that's changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is not taking risks" (Tobak). Great, but I'm not sure Zuckerberg would consider drinking from a bacterially suspect water bottle as a solid risk-taking strategy. Based on the research I did on risk assessment literacies, I decided to try to realistically assess the risk involved in what I'll call "The Suspect Water Bottle Challenge."



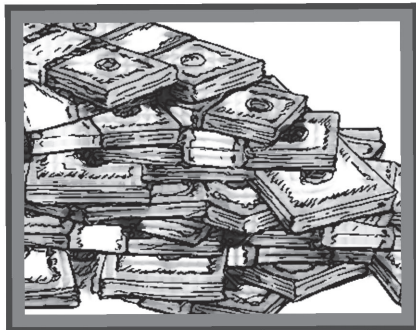
RISK ASSESSMENT LITERACIES

In the article that precedes this comic, I offered a summary of my acquisition of new literacies about **risk assessment** (as well as the difficulties in accurately assessing risk). So here, I'd like to use that information to consider my own decision-making about the sketchy water bottle. You can check out the preceding article for details and citations, if you want to learn more.

1. Decide Right NOW! (not)

Apparently, human brains have what amounts to “quick-twitch” systems for assessing immediate risk. So my new literacies tell me that if I make a decision quickly I'm likely to be more persuaded by a sense of immediate reward, or emotional connection. This means that if someone offered me a stack of money (in the moment) I might be more likely to say, “what the heck?” and go for it. But since no one in our classroom was actually offering cash, my response of “Eeeeeewwwwww!” was probably going to influence my decision-making the most. I am not really a germaphobe, but I'm also not the kind of person who is willing to eat/drink strange foods on a bet.

IF I'M TRYING TO MAKE
ACCURATE ASSESSMENTS
OF RISK, MY NEW LITERACIES
SAY,
"DON'T BE HASTY."



=



RISK ASSESSMENT LITERACIES

2.

Risk Characterization: What's at Stake?

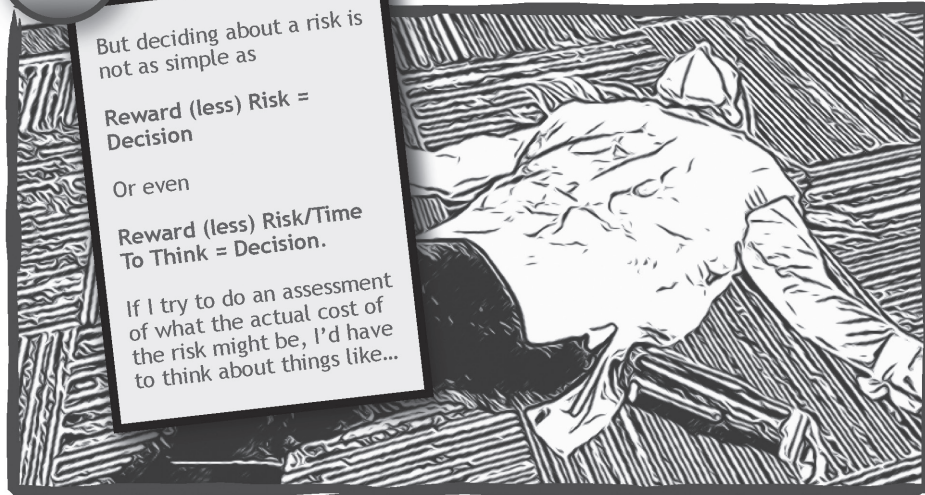
But deciding about a risk is not as simple as

Reward (less) Risk =
Decision

Or even

Reward (less) Risk/Time
To Think = Decision.

If I try to do an assessment of what the actual cost of the risk might be, I'd have to think about things like...



Risk Identification, Risk Characterization, and Risk Analysis

The climber podcast I referenced in the preceding article points out some basic aspects of risk assessment. So let's use them to look at this particular risk:

Risk Identification: Well, clearly, getting sick is the risk we're talking about here!

Risk Characterization means thinking about the possible negative outcomes of the situation, along with the likelihood those negative outcomes will be severe. I would probably not become immediately seriously ill, but according to this site I found, even drinking from your own water bottle (if you leave water sitting in it and don't clean it) can give you symptoms similar to food poisoning! And I really tried, but I couldn't even find a site that discussed the risks of drinking from a random water bottle that you found sitting in a classroom, because apparently, that's such a terrible idea that news outlets don't even bother to warn you about how risky it is.



IS YOUR WATER
BOTTLE MAKING YOU
SICK?

RISK ASSESSMENT LITERACIES

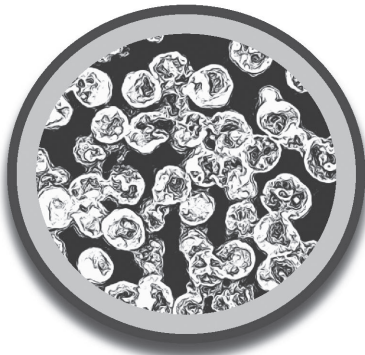
3. Doing the Research vs. Feeling the Feels

In the interests of accurate risk assessment, one of the folks in the class, Kayleen Haile, actually took a sample of the water from the water bottle (BTW, it was pretty alarming, with many floating things in it).

Her father, Dennis Haile, who is the Operations Supervisor at the Wheaton Sanitary District, looked at our sample under a microscope. His response, relayed through Kayleen, was that although he could not use work equipment to do a detailed analysis, he definitely recommended saying NO to the Suspect Water Bottle Challenge. According to him, “a person could very likely become sick” from engaging in such risky behavior.



But if I'm entirely honest here, which I intend to be, there was actually NO WAY I would have considered taking this challenge, even when I imagine a scenario where a person was indeed willing to pay me \$100,000.00 (which was the amount I volunteered in the class discussion). Perhaps, as was described in the *Hidden Brain* podcast I discussed in my article, and in the TED talk by Dan Ariely, I have just read too many scary stories about food poisoning, or people dying from attacks by brain eating bacteria. My fears related to the possible negative consequences are so strong that, even if the research revealed that it might be safe, AND someone approached me with this challenge and a big pile of actual money, I would still picture these folks (below), and they would ultimately be the deciders.



CARTOON IMAGE OF THE VILLAINS OF THIS STORY: NAEGLERIA FOWLERI. AND A QR CODE TO A CDC ARTICLE ABOUT IT.



WORKS CITED

- “Afraid of the Wrong Things.” *Hidden Brain Podcast* from Hidden Brain Media, hiddenbrain.org/podcast/afraid-of-the-wrong-things/.
- “Analyzing Risk.” *The Rope Access and Climbing Podcast*, 2 Feb. 2020, anchor.fm/ropeaccessandclimbing/episodes/Analyzing-Risk-eaj3e4.
- Ariely, Dan. “Are We in Control of our Own Decisions?” *TED Talk*, 2008, www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_are_we_in_control_of_our_own_decisions/transcript?language=en.
- Bryan, Chloe. “How Disgusting Is Your Water Bottle, Really?” *Mashable*, 9 Oct. 2019, mashable.com/article/how-often-should-i-clean-my-water-bottle.
- “General Information: Frequently Asked Questions About *Naegleria fowleri*, Commonly Known as the ‘Brain-Eating Ameba.’” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.cdc.gov/parasites/naegleria/general.html.
- Tobak, Steve. “Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg—Insights for Entrepreneurs.” *CBS News*, 31 Oct. 2011, www.cbsnews.com/news/facebooks-mark-zuckerberg-insights-for-entrepreneurs/.



Joyce R. Walker is an Associate Professor of Writing Studies who is interested in learning, literate activity, and writing through the lifespan. She has been the Editor of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* since 2010.