Try It Out vs. Get It Right

B	elieve it or not, we get mail, and
last week’s Comp Quickread
brought more than the usual one or
two notes from China. One reader
offered a very important clarification
that is worth quoting in full:
“One quibble—or maybe less a
quibble than an extension of
something you said: I think the
problems created by students’
trying to sound “academic,” or just
plain smart, by using big words,
convoluted sentence structures,
passive voice, etc., are definitely
worth pointing out to students (not,
of course, while you
simultaneously smack them with a
rolled up newspaper and yell “Bad!
Bad student!”), as is offering them
assistance in clarifying (and
understanding) their meaning and
finding alternatives other than
“dumb it down a bit.” At the same
time, though, I think it’s important
for teachers to keep in mind that
the impulse students display in
attempting these sophisticated but
ultimately unsuccessful structures
and vocabulary choices is a good
one, and hence ought not to be
discouraged; quite the contrary.
Certainly one of the implicit goals
of academic writing is to “sound
like the teacher” (if you will), but
we can’t really expect perfect
success right off the starting block.
Nothing ventured and all that.
Writing teachers especially need to
make room in their classes for
students to experiment and take
risks in their writing without
endangering their GPAs.”

This note raises many interesting
points about the classroom spaces we
create and about our roles as
instructors. I think the most important
point is the last one, that we, as
writing teachers or as teachers in
general, need to recognize that our
students are experimenting with
words, forms, ideas, perspectives,
ways of seeing, ways of reading, and
ways of knowing. They need spaces
where they can take risks, fail, and try
again, where they can try it out
without worrying about getting it
right. And before someone accuses me
of dangerous coddling, the need for
such encouraging spaces is
acknowledged in early childhood
education, studies of creativity in both
the arts and the sciences, and literature
on management and leadership.

If given the opportunity to take
risks, students will try out different
approaches and develop strategies to
get it right. Their ability to get it right,
though, is directly related to the
complexity of the tasks we give them.
At each moment of their development
they are hopefully being challenged
with new ideas, new perspectives, new
ways of organizing and engaging with
the world and those challenges are
leaving traces in their writing. A first-
year student whose writing has been
concise and logical can produce a
spawling self-contradictory rant in
response to a question about the ethics
of downloading music. A third-year
student whose writing has been a
paragon of clarity and grace can
produce a nearly incoherent paper on
Immanuel Kant. Of course Kant
himself produced many nearly
incoherent papers on himself.

Creating classroom spaces that
support experimentation, though, is an
increasingly difficult proposition in
the twenty-first century corporate
university. The “get it right” forces are
everywhere from the expectation that
writing can be taught in a single
course to the rush to measure
everything the university does through
learning outcomes. Perhaps we should
be more concerned about creating the
spaces that enable what J. S. Mill
called each individual’s “experiment
of living.”