7 Ways to Talk to Your Students

And Create a Positive Learning Environment

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Illustrations: David Clark

How to Communicate With Your Students

As the teacher, you set the tone for your classroom. And your language and actions determine the atmosphere of the learning environment.

One way to create a positive learning environment is to be mindful about the words and manner you use to communicate with students. Your words can convey respect, friendliness, playfulness, or seriousness. By your actions, you set boundaries that let students know what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the classroom. When students know what is expected of them, they are more likely to be relaxed and receptive to learning.

If you want students to feel free to explore and safe enough to make mistakes and learn from them, you can convey that through the words you use and the actions you take.

In this e-book, we explore the ways teachers can use words and actions to model behavior, offer feedback and praise, communicate through body language, engage in conversations, avoid power struggles, use humor, connect electronically, and handle difficult life events.

The information in this e-book comes from educators like you, who have come up with some tried and true as well as some novel ways to communicate with students in ways that invite active engagement in learning.

For example, one teacher gets her students fired up with the latest technology—she offers critiques of students’ writing via individual podcasts, which have proven irresistible to students. Another teacher uses humor to help her students relax so they are more open to learning. You don’t have to be a stand-up comic, you just want to lighten up the atmosphere.

Another way to impart calm in your classroom is through body language. For example, greeting students at the doorway shows you’re happy to see them and sets up a positive learning environment even before they sit down.

We hope this e-book will be an often-used reference tool for your classroom communications needs.

Demonstrate the behavior you want from students. Show respect and courtesy in daily interactions with students and other adults. Use words of inclusion and be aware of your tone of voice. These behaviors can enhance interpersonal relationships and promote a positive classroom atmosphere.
Model Positive Behaviors

Teachers are role models for their students all day, every day, so I take my words and actions very seriously. Modeling positive behavior—and discussing it with my students—helps me create a positive environment where students feel safe and cared for and where they can develop behavioral skills they will use the rest of their lives. Here are three ways I do that:

Show Respect
I model respect to my students by listening to them and showing them that I care about things that are important to them. I apologize when I’ve forgotten to do something I said I’d do, when I lose my temper, or when I make a mistake. I also encourage respectful behavior through classroom discussions about respect. And I praise students when they show respect.

Think Out Loud
To demonstrate how to think through a problem, I think out loud. It’s the same technique whether you’re demonstrating the solution to a math problem—where you tell students your thought processes as you’re solving the problem—or you’re talking about an everyday dilemma you’re facing.
Sometimes, I ask students to help me come up with a lesson idea. I tell them the goal and ask them to think about possible ways to accomplish it. Next, I ask them to think about the pros and cons of the ideas. We’re all thinking out loud. And then, we decide the best way and begin the work.

Show Your Human Side
To show students that their skills and interests, as well as academics, are valued, I ask them about different aspects of their lives. In turn, I share stories about my triathlons, cats, and writing. When teachers talk about their lives outside of school, it’s an opportunity to model talking in positive ways about oneself. Such stories and conversations can help students think and talk in positive ways about themselves.

Being a role model can be daunting—our students are observing us all the time—but it is also a wonderful opportunity to show students a positive way of looking at themselves. By showing respect, thinking out loud, and showing students my human side, I model behaviors I’d like to see in my students, and through classroom discussions, I give students an opportunity to learn and practice skills they will need in life.

—by Sheila Kohl

Related Link
Powerful Role Models: Seven Ways to Make a Positive Impact on Children.
Use Specific Language for Feedback and Praise

Good Job. Way to go. Excellent. Hearing these words from their teachers may make students feel good, but they don’t let students know what they did well. Instead, teachers should give students positive, specific feedback on the effort they’ve made and what they’ve accomplished. For example, “You were well prepared; it sure paid off.”

Specific Words
To encourage students, use words that describe rather than judge. “When possible, describe both the work and the process—and their relationship,” says Susan M. Brookhart, author of How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students.

“Choose words that communicate respect for the student and the work.” Here are some examples:
- Your topic sentence is clear and captures the reader’s attention.
- It looks like you did the steps out of order. Why don’t you try the exercise again?

Ongoing Progress
Teacher feedback allows students to understand their progress in learning the required skills. For example, I create a chart using the rubrics from the state and textbook curricula and refer to it to provide feedback.

I make sure the students understand the language of the rubric and what it looks like in practice. Then the students and I rate their performance in measureable terms, and they can make adjustments to improve their skills. Here are some ways we use the specific language of a writing rubric:

Student: I wrote a powerful first sentence, but I forgot to indent and my thesis could use some work.

Teacher: Yes, you caught the attention of the reader. Good effort. Your claim sentence [the sentence in which you state the point you will prove in your paper] is missing some important parts. Use your prewriting chart and research you did and add one more item to your claim sentence. I would like to see you re-write your claim by the end of this hour. We will continue to work at this together.

Correcting Students
- How to Correct a Student Without Hurting Their Feelings. www.worksheetlibrary.com/teachingtips/correctingstudents.html
- Specific Praise: How It Improves Learning www.teachingchannel.org/videos/positive-feedback-to-students
- Say No to No. www.teachingchannel.org/videos/building-student-confidence

To involve students in providing feedback for each other, I say:

Now turn to a table partner and exchange your research claim sentences. Look at the rubric and check for the three sections we are talking about. Make two suggestions to your partner on how his or her sentence can be made clearer. Use what I have taught you and your written rubric. Please accomplish this in 5 to 7 minutes.

Teachers can reinforce or redirect student learning using feedback that is positive, specific, and reflects the progress students are making. Such feedback helps students know what they’ve accomplished and what their next goals are.

—by Naomi K. Poindexter

FACEBOOK: NETWORKING WITH EDUCATORS AROUND THE COUNTRY

NEA Today’s Facebook page explores your toughest teaching challenges—and offers solutions. We’ll bring you tips and tricks for the classroom, keep you informed on the latest education news, and help you connect with others who are working to create great public schools for every student. Become a fan at: www.facebook.com/neatoday.
Use Body Language

Effective teachers use body language to communicate with students, build rapport with them, and make them feel safe and supported. “Face the student with arms uncrossed and relaxed,” says Mindy B. (on NEA Today Facebook) “and usually always smiling! Give them eye-to-eye contact, and pay attention to them! By doing this, I’m conveying the message that ‘I care!’”

“The ability of a teacher to establish positive rapport with students is a critical aspect of the teacher-learner relationship,” explains Ron Benner, a school psychologist in Bridgeport, Connecticut. “The successful teacher blends both verbal and non-verbal communication skills in establishing good rapport with students and this has a direct correlation to student achievement.”

Test your understanding of your students and how your body language affects them by standing in the doorway of the room as your students shuffle in. This close contact sets up a naturally occurring single file line that calms them before they enter the classroom and enables a positive learning environment before they even sit down, according to body language expert Chris Caswell.

From the start, command the classroom. Greet the class with a loud, clear, upbeat voice. If you look frazzled, you seem vulnerable. Lack of confidence is a red flag to students. Where and how you stand in the classroom speaks volumes, too.

- Stand up straight. Poor posture—slumped shoulders, stomach sticking out—is not only physically unhealthy, but it can convey a whole range of attitudes and degrees of interest and respect.
- Folding arms, standing behind a desk, and using barriers, “simply sends the signal that you don’t want to make contact,” says Caswell. It blocks you off and makes you appear unapproachable. Don’t cross your arms or shuffle papers that aren’t related to the lesson, and refrain from looking at your watch when a child is speaking.
- Use the whole classroom. Walk around the students’ desks to show interest, and indicate approval with a head nod. Caswell suggests leaning slightly forward and moving momentarily into their territory in a nonthreatening way. Be aware of your facial expressions (or lack thereof!). They can easily convey any number of moods and attitudes, as well as understanding or confusion.
- Smile. It conveys happiness and encouragement. Frowns show sadness or anger. Big, open eyes suggest fear. An animated face draws the listener in.
- Make eye contact. It helps establish rapport and trust, and it shows that you’re engaged and listening to the students.

Adopt different poses when you want your students to respond in a particular way.

- Your hand on your chin encourages students to think about the answer and shows you’re waiting for their answer.
- Hands out and palms up shows that you’re open to questions and answering in a nonthreatening way.
- Observe wait time—don’t stare and rush them. Appear relaxed and ready to listen.

Body language helps you get your message across. Let students know that you want to create a supportive, productive learning environment.

—by Teal Ruland

Quick Video Tips

- Fist to Five Feedback
  www.teachingchannel.org/videos/getting-instant-student-feedback?fd=1
- Attention-Getting Signals: One Spot
  www.teachingchannel.org/videos/student-attention-getting-tip
Engage in Appropriate Conversations

What’s on and off-limits to talk about with students might seem obvious, but it isn’t always so black and white. Sometimes it can be hard to avoid uncomfortable details about current events or stay away from the lurid details of wars throughout history. However, it’s important to keep the classroom a safe haven for your students, as well as build and keep their trust and respect, both in and out of the classroom. Here are some points to consider when you have conversations and discussions with students.

Politics and Persuasions
Discussing politics in the classroom requires a careful, light-handed approach. Teachers want to encourage exciting and challenging discussions, but not push their own agenda on the students. Remember, you have a captive, impressionable audience. On the other hand, sharing your own views can help put topics—like civil rights and the Holocaust—into perspective for students.

Eden Prairie High School teacher and NEA member Steve Cwodzinski told the Minnesota Star Tribune, “I think part of my job is to make people more accepting and understanding of the global world we live in. If that’s my job and that’s what they hired me to do, [then] I have to think how can I be presenting both sides of the issue on controversial issues?”

Be sure to use a balanced approach by presenting both sides to your class.

Personal Life
With over 800 million users on Facebook and millions of people on Twitter and other social networking sites, it’s more than likely you are or will be a part of the growing trend. Many teachers believe they have the absolute First Amendment right to post anything they want on social networking sites, including party pictures and diatribes about the boss. After all, they’re on their own time and using their own resources.

However, the courts say otherwise. Teacher free speech rights are fairly limited: their speech is protected only if they speak out as citizens on “matters of public concern” and their speech doesn’t disrupt the school.

Perfect Timing
There’s a time and place for private conversations with students. Don’t waste valuable class time by engaging in what should be private chats. Bring up the issue before the bell rings or after class is over.

Professional Gossip
Yes, you may think your predecessor was an incompetent old bat, but be wary of letting your students—and other teachers—know that. The Denver Post (2009) cited a study that “found gossip in the workplace tended to be overwhelmingly negative, but the insults were more subtle and the conversations less predictable,’ says Tim Hallett, a sociologist at Indiana University.” The study also found that negativity trickles down to the students, affecting their focus and lowering test scores.

And don’t even think about bad-mouthing other teachers or students to your class. You’ll lose their trust and potentially your job.

So, what topics of conversation are appropriate for teacher and students? Topics that take into consideration the ages, sensibilities, and sophistication of your students.

—by Teal Ruland

More Advice
- Social Networking Nightmares. Teachers’ Private Lives online. www.nea.org/home/38324.htm
- Beyond Emily: Post-ing Etiquette www.edutopia.org/netiquette-guidelines
Avoid Power Struggles

Disruptive and confrontational students are sometimes an unavoidable challenge. If handled poorly, these confrontations can lead to power struggles—and more disruptions.

Engage Students

Instead of giving in to a power struggle, defuse tense situations by engaging students. Provide a hook for each lesson at the beginning to keep them thinking and interested. Dr. Robert Feller from the University of Washington believes these hooks prevent potential disruptions and stimulate students' minds so they focus on the upcoming lesson.

Know Your Students

Make an effort to understand the student's background and home life. It will put you in a better position to relate to your students. “Taking the time to learn about a child's background can make the difference between compassion and callousness,” says retired teacher Diane Postman of Yorktown, Virginia. “Knowing a child is dealing with family issues or poverty can lead a teacher to make allowances or adaptations to help a struggling child succeed. This can ward off some behavioral problems and help the child to save face.”

Show Students How to Deal with Confrontation

When a disagreement or confrontation arises, show the student how to deal with it in a dignified manner and maintain the integrity of your classroom. Frank Iannucci, a math and computer science teacher from West Orange, New Jersey, says teachers should immediately stop the confrontation and arrange a time to discuss it with the student in a mature, adult manner, regardless of the age of the student, after the period. Make it a teachable moment. Demonstrate that fights can be stopped before they get out of hand.

Conversely, be aware that fighting for the last word in an argument only prolongs it. According to Christopher Perillo, a high school science teacher in Kenosha, Wisconsin, “Teachers who insist on having the last word are bringing themselves down to a juvenile level. Students will remember this and that teacher’s value will be diminished.” Letting the student get a rise out of you will only create an opening for more chaos.

Finally, if you react to everything, you’ll lose valuable teaching time. If the primary problem is one child’s problem, talk to him or her in private. As long as the student isn’t disrupting the class, it’s not worth stopping instruction to address a situation. Be sure to avoid language that will put the student on the defensive by using “I statements” to focus on what you don’t understand about the student’s actions, rather than assessing blame. React in a way that allows the student to avoid feeling embarrassed in front of his or her peers.

Read the full article—“Avoiding Power Struggles with Students”—at www.nea.org/tools/49922.htm.

—by Robert McNeely

Related Links

- When Educators Are Assaulted www.nea.org/home/42238.htm
- Student Refuses to do the work http://public-groups.nea.org/discussion/topic/show/280577

NEA.ORG ONLINE RESOURCE

Looking for new ideas? We have lesson plans and activities, classroom management tips, advice and support, and Works4Me—all at your fingertips. www.nea.org/ToolsandIdeas.html

Tools and Ideas—Lesson Plans and Advice
Use Humor

Using humor effectively can help teachers do their work—engage students and activate learning. Here are three ways to use humor in the classroom.

Create a Comfortable Learning Environment

When teachers share a laugh or a smile with students, they help students feel more comfortable and open to learning. Using humor brings enthusiasm, positive feelings, and optimism to the classroom.

Because I know that a good laugh eases tension, increases creativity, ... I will do almost anything to get the class rolling with laughter —voice inflections, exaggerated facial expressions and movements, hilarious personal stories (of which I have way too many), ridiculous examples ... and I encourage my students to do the same. —Kaywin Cottle, Speech Communications teacher (NEA Today Facebook)

Even if you’re not naturally funny, you still can lighten things up a bit. It makes you more approachable.

In Health class, we learned the cerebellum is responsible for balance and coordination. When I trip over their backpacks, I might make a joke that my cerebellum is taking a nap. —Deirdre Sexton (NEA Today Facebook)

Do what’s comfortable for you. And it will create a more comfortable environment for your students.

Fire Up Their Brains!

During her research on learning and humor, educator-researcher Mary Kay Morrison looked at brain scans that showed high levels of activity in multiple areas of the brain when humor was used in conversation and instruction. 

“We’re finding humor actually lights up more of the brain than many other functions in a classroom,” says Morrison, author of Using Humor to Maximize Learning. “In other words, if you’re listening just auditorily in a classroom, one small part of the brain lights up, but humor maximizes learning and strengthens memories.”

Watch an interview with Morrison and others—“How Humour Affects Learning.”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaG678AzVs4


Bring Content to Life

Teachers can use humor to bring content to life—through games, parody, or comical voices (or wigs or hats). Students respond to their teacher’s playfulness and appreciate the effort he or she puts into making a lesson fun. Here’s how three teachers (from NEA discussion boards) use humor to bring content to life:

Whenever I can I use puns, anecdotes, or whatever humorous things I can think of to make lessons more fun, more relevant, and more effective. We laugh everyday and it makes being in school a little more fun. —Laurie Knox

I teach French and Spanish. I have students practice vocabulary by trying to come up with funny combinations of words. Like “helado de pescado” fish ice cream. —Ann Braun

Humor must be used in the classroom. Joke, laugh, dance, sing, shout. I do it all; I think every teacher should. It helps kids stay focused on the lesson, and sometimes it even helps them remember ideas and motivates them. So stand up on that desk and tap dance while you give instructions, talk in an English accent, or sing the answers to a homework assignment.

—Pamela Matway.

Every teacher’s goal is to be effective in the classroom—to help students learn. All teachers want their students to be eager and engaged. Humor has the power to fuel that engagement.

—by Robert McNeely

More Fun Ideas

- Humor in the Classroom
  www.plsweb.com/Products-Resources/Newsletter/Newsletter-Archives/March-2004

- Best Teaching Practices: Humor in the Classroom
  www.plattsburgh.edu/offices/centers/cte/humorintheclassroom.php

- Ideas for Bringing Humor into the Classroom
Communicate Through Technology

It’s never been about the newest technology – a printing press, a computer, an app – but it has always been about the creative ways in which teachers use technology to meet learners’ needs. The challenge is in choosing the right tool for the task.

Giving Feedback

I’ve been avoiding red pens since my first day of teaching. Instead, I’m always searching for the best ways to give students the kind of feedback that makes them want to think about their work, not just correct or edit it. Here are some of my favorite discoveries:

• Individual Podcasts—When I want to start a conversation with students about their writing, I create individual podcasts. Hearing my excitement or curiosity about their writing motivates them to dig into their work. See my video demonstration. www.teachingchannel.org/videos/podcasting-to-personalize-feedback

• Screencasts—To give feedback on student speeches and presentations, I use screencasts. I create voiceovers—like the “director’s commentary” special feature on DVDs—while watching students’ recorded presentations. I use one of two programs to produce these screencasts:
  For some examples, check out my blog 5 Ways to Personalize Student Feedback. www.teachingchannel.org/blog/2012/04/24/5-ways-to-personalize-student-feedback/

Going Google

When it comes to the tool my colleagues and I can’t live without, it’s Google. Here are a few of my favorite functions that are easy to start with.

• GoogleDocs—Not only is GoogleDocs a great way to go paperless in the classroom, it also offers a fantastic comment feature that allows teachers to respond to one another’s work. And the power of real-time collaboration makes group work more productive. For example, I had student groups write soliloquies to put into Twelfth Night, and they were all able to work on a different part of the scene at the same time.

• GoogleSites—These websites offer great organizing tools. For example, these tools have allowed me to create and maintain the class website. And students can create a site template to house resources, research, and final products. See my website, Geek Like Me—Welcome to Room 506! By Sarah Brown Wessling. https://sites.google.com/site/sarahbrownwessling/home

• GoogleForms—Within GoogleDocs I can create a form, which is an online survey that collects responses in a spreadsheet. Whether I use them for formative assessment, reflections, or even organizing assessment data, these forms keep me communicating with students (and parents) in effective ways.

• Google Reader and Google Alerts—When I learned to do research, I had to go find the sources, but with Google Reader and Alerts, I can teach students how to “order research for delivery.” Of course, I’m still passionate about our libraries, but these tools are great companions for modern research.

As you delve into the technology of 21st Century teaching, do so with curiosity and confidence, knowing that one of the greatest gifts we can give our students is new ways to learn.

—by Sarah Brown Wessling

Related Links

• Cool Apps for Your Classroom. www.nea.org/tools/51290.htm


• Find out what’s in Wessling’s Delicious account. www.nea.org/tools/52048.htm#web

neatoday Professional: 7 Ways to Talk to Your Students www.nea.org/7waystotalk