



Communication Tools to Motivate and Engage the Reluctant Student

When talking with a student who appears reluctant, avoidant, or even oppositional, you can use communication techniques to reduce that learner's defensiveness and steer the conversation toward positive, change-oriented outcomes. While these tools are diverse, they all allow you to avoid pointless argument or confrontation while promoting in the student an increased sense of empowerment and hope.

1

Acknowledging Student Control.

It is a simple fact that the student alone has the power to commit to--or refuse to participate in--a change plan. So teacher statements that frankly *emphasize student control* can have positive effects. First, such statements underscore personal responsibility and can thus discourage the learner from projecting blame onto others for their own actions; second, they can reduce the likelihood of a student-teacher power struggle by preemptively recognizing the student's control of the situation. Here are sample statements that highlight student control:

"We can talk about a plan to help you to improve your grades in this course. What that plan includes is up to you."

"I've offered you several ideas for getting your homework in. Which of my ideas or strategies of your own do you want to include in a learning contract?"

"One tool that students often find useful is a learning contract. Let me know if this is something you want to create."

2

Active Listening.

You can use *active-listening* strategies to signal that you have truly heard and understood the student's concerns. The two elements that make up active listening are *restatement* and *summary*.

- During the flow of conversation, you use *restatements* of what was said by the student strategically to highlight specific comments that you judge significant. For example, a student may state, "I don't like asking for help in class". The teacher judges this to be an important point and restates it: "So you really would like to not have to ask others for help." When used judiciously, restatement conveys that you are paying close attention. Restatements also selectively bring to the student's attention statements that the teacher finds noteworthy.
- *Summaries* are brief statements in which you 'sum up' a related series of student utterances. For example, a teacher may summarize a student's comments about difficulties in getting homework turned in: "So, you find that the homework is difficult to do and takes a lot of time. Plus you said that it can be hard to find a quiet place at home to do your homework."



3

Reflection.

Reflection statements give you a means of inserting your interpretation or reaction when restating student statements. Often, reflection serves to express understanding, or empathy, for the student's situation. If a learner states, for example, "I don't like asking for help in class", the teacher might convey empathy by reflecting: "I imagine that it would be uncomfortable to bring attention to yourself by asking for help."

4

Reframing.

When you want the student to consider a different way of looking at a fact, event, or situation, you can employ a *reframing* statement. If a student says, for example, "I'm really frustrated because I put so much work into studying for the test and still got a low grade.", the teacher might put a different 'spin' on that statement by reframing it: "Give yourself a little credit here-- at least you are willing to put in the effort to study-and that's a good start."

5

Positive Redirection.

In any problem-solving conversation, the student can sometimes need a nudge to move from describing the problem to generating solutions. In *positive redirection*, you can use a student statement as a starting point and then redirect-- or 'pivot'-- the student toward a solution-focused action. Here is an example of a teacher's use of positive redirection: "You just described obstacles that prevent you from completing your homework. What are some strategies that could help you to overcome these problems?"

6

Exploratory Questions.

At times, you will want to probe a student's statement further or press him or her (gently) for details. *Exploratory questions* work well for this purpose. When posing such a question, you restate what was said by the student and ask for clarification. Here is an sample: "You say I always pick on you. Can you give examples when it seems like I've picked on you?" NOTE: Exploratory questions can be particularly helpful when a student makes a statement that seems exaggerated. When a learner says "You always pick on me", for example, a follow-up question seeking specific examples can prod the student to acknowledge that these incidents may not in fact be as pervasive as first indicated.



7

Apology.

During a student conference, we may find that the learner is unhappy because he or she felt belittled or otherwise mistreated at our hands. And occasionally, that student is--right. As educators, we are human: we can unintentionally offend students through an overbearing tone of voice, singling out individuals in ways that embarrass them in front of peers, or other violations of social protocol. In these (hopefully rare) instances, we must be ready to acknowledge our fault and apologize to the student. Apologies should be delivered only when justified and genuine. Appropriately used, however, they can be of great power in reestablishing positive connections with challenging learners. Here is an example of a teacher apology: "I didn't realize until we talked that my jokes in class about your cluttered desk bothered you. I'm sorry--I didn't mean to embarrass you. Between us, let's come up with a better way to handle this issue."