



## Teacher Communication Tools to Motivate

Teachers communication is a powerful means to boost academic performance. Instructor comments have the ability to boost confidence, focus attention, and engage reluctant learners. Four prime tools in the teacher communication toolbox are change talk, praise, growth-mindset statements, and wise feedback.

**Change Talk.** Change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2004) is any statement (or partial statement) that expresses hope, interest in making positive changes, a willingness to try new strategies, or other positive attitudes. When people focus on their own 'change talk', they are more likely to develop and successfully carry out plans to make positive changes in their lives.

Elements of student change talk are often intermixed with expressions of uncertainty, frustration, and doubt. Teachers who are effective listeners listen for 'change talk' (Miller & Rollnick, 2004). In a low-key manner, the educator can then draw attention to that positive change talk, reinforce it, have the student elaborate on it, and thus increase that learner's optimism and confidence (Miller & Rollnick, 2004).

For example, in a teacher conference, the student may say, "I want to do better in this course but the work is so hard!" The student's statement includes both positive change talk (the goal of performing better in the course) and a limiting factor (the work is difficult). In conversation, the instructor can strategically draw attention to the student's change talk ("I want to do better in this course") through restatement: e.g., "I am hearing that doing better in the course is important to you" or "So if you could find a way, you would like to do better in the course, right?" This encourages the student to focus on a plan for change rather than on roadblocks preventing change.

**Praise.** Praise is a type of positive coaching comment. It pinpoints for the student the specific academic or general behavior that is noteworthy and also conveys teacher approval of that behavior (Burnett, 2001). Praise can be thought of as a kind of verbal highlighter, prompting (and reinforcing) the student to engage in *more* of the praised behavior. Praise statements are most effective when they target effort and accomplishment, not general ability. Effective praise consists of two elements:

- **DESCRIPTION.** The teacher describes in specific terms the noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior to be praised.
- **APPROVAL.** The teacher signals approval of the student's performance.

Here is a sample praise statement:

- **DESCRIPTION.** "Russell, today in class, you wrote non-stop through the entire writing period."
- **APPROVAL.** "I really appreciate your hard work!"

**Growth Mindset Statements.** Research shows that there is one crucial factor that greatly impacts motivation and academic engagement: whether a student possesses a 'fixed' or 'open' mindset (Dweck, 2006). Students with a *fixed mindset* view intelligence, or general ability, as having a fixed upward limit. Viewed from this perspective, effort plays only a minor role in intellectual accomplishment. In contrast, students with a *growth mindset* see intelligence as 'malleable': they have faith that increased effort will result in more effective learning and accomplishment. When fixed-mindset students are challenged by academic tasks, they can easily give up, while, growth-mindset learners interpret academic struggles as "an opportunity for growth, not a sign that a student is incapable of learning" (Paunesku et al., 2015; p. 785).



In their day-to-day communication with students, instructors have many opportunities to craft encouraging statements about schoolwork that can help fixed-mindset learners adopt a more positive, growth-mindset view. These statements contain 3 elements:

- **CHALLENGE.** The teacher acknowledges that the learning task is difficult—but frames that challenge as an opportunity to learn.
- **PROCESS.** The teacher identifies the specific process that the student should follow to accomplish the academic task.
- **CONFIDENCE.** The teacher provides assurance that the student can be successful if the learner puts in sufficient effort and follows the recommended process.

Here is an example of a growth-mindset statement that an instructor uses to encourage a student to continue on an independent reading assignment:

*"Sarah, please keep reading. You still have 10 minutes to work on the assignment."*

- **CHALLENGE.** *"Your reading assignment has a lot of advanced vocabulary."*
- **PROCESS.** *"If you get stuck, be sure to use your reading fix-up skills. Remember, it's also OK to ask a neighbor or to come to me for help."*
- **CONFIDENCE.** *"Use your strategies, and you should get through the reading just fine."*

**Wise Feedback.** Some students—particularly those with a history of academic underperformance or failure—may misinterpret critical instructional feedback as a sign that the teacher lacks confidence in and is negatively biased toward the learner.

An effective way for teachers to reduce the tendency of at-risk students to discount evaluative statements as biased is to format those statements as 'wise' feedback (Yeager et al., 2013). The teacher structures written or verbal feedback to include these 3 elements:

- **FEEDBACK DESCRIPTION.** The teacher describes the nature of the feedback being offered.
- **HIGH STANDARDS.** The teacher emphasizes and explains the high standards used to evaluate the student work.
- **ASSURANCE OF ABILITY.** The teacher states explicitly his or her confidence that the student has the skills necessary to successfully meet those standards.

Here is an example of wise feedback that a teacher wrote on a student writing assignment:

- **FEEDBACK DESCRIPTION.** *"Your paper met the basic requirements of the assignment but needs work. Please look over my comments. You will see that I give detailed feedback."*
- **HIGH STANDARDS.** *"The expectation in this class is that you will take your writing to a level suitable for college or business communication."*
- **ASSURANCE OF ABILITY.** *"Your past writing assignments have shown me that you have the skills and motivation to use my feedback to revise and improve this paper."*

## References



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