
The Language of Encouragement in the Classroom

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Encouragement : enabling a child’s confidence and ‘courage’ as a learner.

Dreikurs et al (1982) have argued that encouragement is paramount (sic) in building a child’s self-confidence, learning ability and commitment to the learning process. He attenuates the word *courage* (from *encouragement*) with respect to the way we enable students to take the effort of ‘learning risks’, to find self-motivation from the affirmation and encouragement of significant others, and in the teacher’s continued and sustained enabling to help them to learn from their ‘failure’ as well as their successes.

When we help a child to build their sense of confidence as a learner, we are also enabling them ‘to belong’ in constructive and cooperative ways – we strengthen their positive sense of self in relationship to others.

Conversely, when teachers frequently criticise and negate a child’s effort it breeds discouragement (we can all, no doubt, remember our own schooldays with *some* of our teachers ...).

Take the common example of a teacher commenting on a child’s writing ...

“Yes you have used some interesting examples of adjectives of comparison here *but* your writing is very messy. Why can’t you write more neatly...? If only you would try harder. Is it so difficult ...? You know you should write more neatly ...”

When we give encouragement we don’t need to add these kind of negative caveats eg “OK you’ve marked the line where to cut the wood, *but* you’re not holding the saw properly are you? How many times have I told you? No wonder you’ve cut the wood crookedly ...”

It is likely that it is only the last bit that is heard by the student – and remembered – by the student; particularly with a child who feels inferior in their writing ability, or using a saw or ...

“No, that’s not the way to do it!” (how many times have I heard *some* teachers say that when I was at school?) Conversely I can recall instances of encouragement that gave me feedback and consequent confidence.

I recall, in a woodwork class (as a student), my teacher saying, “ ... if you put your index finger on the handle of the saw it’ll help stabilise it; it won’t jar as much. Do you want me to

show you?” He was *always* encouraging; never “No you don’t do it like that!” or “What did I say, weren’t you listening?” “Come on (big sigh), give it to me I’ll show you ...” I owe much of my confidence in using woodwork tools to this teacher.

I recall in an English class one of my teachers encouraging me in my writing.

I remember, for example, him giving me a quiet reminder about the difference between wrapped and rapt; I’d miscued (wanting to mean *rapt*, spelling it as wrapped ...). He quietly reminded me (a few times) about how ‘tricky’ English spelling can be. I owe my developing sense of confidence in expressing myself in writing to this very supportive teacher. He always *acknowledged and affirmed the effort* in what I was trying to express, convey and communicate. He showed both interest in and encouragement in my natural struggle as a learner.

Some teachers tend to over-qualify any ‘praise’ they give with the ‘but ...’, ‘if ...’, ‘why ...?’ “You’ve *finally* finished nearly all your maths work today. Now *why can’t you work like that all the time?!?*” Or the teacher that puts an immediate cross against the wrong maths work, or the large red circle around incorrect spelling, or punctuation ... then adds, “You weren’t concentrating were you?” or, “You haven’t made any *real* effort here have you, look how many you have got wrong.” “If *only* you would concentrate ...”. Even if that is true it doesn’t help if a child *frequently hears it when expressed that way* ... When a teacher adds such unnecessarily qualifying caveats (like this) it negates the actual encouragement comment for some children. It is possible to ‘mark’ a student’s work and give accurate, meaningful and helpful feedback about incorrect work in a way that doesn’t unnecessarily minimise or negate a student’s effort and motivation.

The way we *physically* mark children’s work can also unnecessarily discourage a child. I’ve seen children’s workbooks covered with red markings, circled words, crosses ...

Careful marking (with brief margin notes – or endnotes – for feedback) still gives dignity to the student’s effort to *their work*; it is their effort that we are seeking to affirm and build and, hence, enable their on-going learning journey.`

What encouragement seeks to do is to initiate and engage a student’s self-awareness about, and meaningful understandings – even ‘assessment’ – of *their work* (or behaviour). Children

know when our feedback and encouragement is genuine. As Dreikurs notes, “Children are keen observers and they know who is sincere and who is not. When anyone tries to put up a front, most children will sense this and resent or ridicule it.” (Op. Cit. p 93).

Encouragement also needs to be distinguished from ‘praise’. When we encourage our students it will help when we :-

- Focus on *their* engagement and effort (regarding their work and behaviour). We do this quietly (without patronising), often as an ‘aside’ in class time (as well as in class workbooks/papers etc). Older students may get embarrassed by *overtly* public praise, particularly praise that centres *on* the child or uses overblown adjectives : “You were great!”, “That was *brilliant ... fantastic ... marvellous ... awesome ...!*” All these global descriptions give no meaningful information feedback to the student. They also over-focus on the student as the ‘good’ or ‘brilliant’ one.
- It is also important to *talk with the student about their work* so that *they* can be more self-reflective; even very young children respond well to this. Instead of ‘that’s a great (or marvellous, or brilliant or awesome) picture ...’ We talk with them about the features, colours, images, characters, and the contrasts in their artistic expression. We also talk with them about how we have noticed what they enjoyed about doing their work; *how* they developed their ideas, concepts (etc); *how* they decided to pursue a learning task in a certain way ... My colleagues and I call this ‘conversational encouragement’.

I still hear some teachers say things like “You are the best student I’ve ever had ...”, “You’re the best at ...”, “ ... so good at ...”, “That’s a great drawing ...” Praise like this, however well meant, focuses on the child in terms of ‘how good *they* are ...’ or ‘how good *they* are at something’. When such comments are said, particularly in other children’s hearing it can breed natural resentment and unnecessary comparisons (as when only the *best* essay is read, and when only the *best* art work is shown, or when the highest score is noted ...). Praise, in this sense, can actually be manipulative of the student’s feelings and an overly competitive sense of self. “You are a good boy/girl for ... (or because) ...”. As Ginott (1971) noted in his writings on praise and encouragement – *supportive* praise recognises and affirms a student’s effort, allowing

a student to begin to understand and *fairly* evaluate *their* work/behaviour. This kind of 'praise' *encourages and motivates* rather than 'judges'.

The teacher is not the sole *validating* person in the student's sense of work. Nor are students simply 'good' because they get correct answers (or conversely 'bad' because they get incorrect answers ...).

I've worked in a number of art classes as a mentor-teacher. In one such class (in a prison school for young female inmates) I chatted with a student about her 'gothic' drawing (the theme of the unit of work). The students were using a range of soft lead pencils. She had drawn Buffy ('the vampire slayer') walking towards a castle archway ... in profile; the moon casting its long shadow ..., dark scudding clouds overhead ... I asked her how she managed to get the moon looking so bright with just soft graphite pencils and white paper. She began to explain what she was attempting to do. I then asked her how she had worked out where to place the shadow in relationship to the moon, the archway and Buffy ... She again, shared her thoughts ... This chat was relaxed; in no way strained. I asked her what was happening to the character in her art work ... I briefly noted how much I had enjoyed art when I was at school ... We chatted like this for some minutes and the student next to her said, "Hey Bill, can you look at my work too?"

My colleague (who I'd been team teaching with) noted later (over coffee) that she had not heard me say once that the student's work was 'great', 'wonderful' or 'brilliant'. She had also noticed the students clearly enjoyed, and were encouraged, and evidenced confidence by *talking with them about their work*.

It was the teacher/student conversations that *enabled the students to be self-reflective*. In this sense the student is able to see the effort in *their* work; it is affirmative and 'evidential'.

In one of my Humanities classes :-

"The way you have described loneliness in the character is very clear, very moving – particularly when you contrast how she is feeling with what's going on in her relationship

with the other characters such as ... in reading this you can sense the loneliness of the character even though the word lonely isn't being used ..."

Descriptive feedback – as encouragement – can become a more constructive and helpful 'norm', than the use of praise. If we do give a spontaneous (and genuine) 'Wow!', or 'Great' it will help to – at least – add *why* we were 'wowed' or thought what the student had done in work/behaviour that was 'great' or 'brilliant' ...

Even a 'well done' is more appropriate than 'great' ... it can also help, of course, to add what was 'well' about what was 'done' ...

While we need to help students with errors, we can do this constructively without over-focusing on a child's struggle, or failure; particularly past failures.

"You've really got that idea – now – of how to multiply decimal fractions. The last few questions were a bit tricky though; I can see how it might have been more difficult to do this. Let's see how we can go back and have another look ..."

'By using that sharp pencil Michael, you're able to get an accurate reading with the protractor on those obtuse and acute angles.'

'The way you've set your chart out, Shaun, makes it easier for me to read what the steps in the experiment are ... particularly for someone who's not a science teacher ...' (I said this to a student when I was mentoring in a science class recently – and I meant it).

'The way you've carefully labelled your diagram makes each part of the process really clear and how the steps progress and link-up ...'

'There's been some difficult words to remember this week, Elise; you've made an effort to use them (and their meaning) in your writing on this topic ...' (here the teacher shares a few specific examples as reminders ...).

'Those are interesting adjectives, Ahmed; see how many ways you've been able to describe that box ...' (this to a student where we were discussing adjectives of size, comparisons, shape, colour etc). "Not only a yellow box but a *bright* yellow box ...", "So ... you've got not just a big box but a *gigantic* box ..."

If a student rejects (or seems to reject our feedback/encouragement) eg : the student says something like, "Anyway I think it's rubbish (my work)", or 'attentionally' putting their hands over their work and, with the attentional grin adding, "Can't see my work, it's not good – no, don't look !!" It will not help to 'over service' what may be a form of attentional

behaviour . “Oh it *is* good; your work *is* good. I *really* meant it. Please don’t say your work is rubbish ...”. Students know (as we all do ...) when they *really* did make an effort, or whether what they did was done well (or as well as they *were able to* ...).

It’s enough to say, ‘I meant it’ and walk away (at that point) to work with another student.

You can always address the work later when giving written feedback and ‘marking’.

Encouragement also reassures and strengthens *one’s belief in one’s ability, effort, progress* ... as Malala Yousafzai has said, “Encouragement makes you believe in yourself.” (in an interview on ABC television [Australian Broadcasting Commission] 2014).

Mutual respect

Dreikurs (et al) frequently affirms that, “Mutual respect is based on (the) acceptance of the equality of human beings, independent of individual differences, knowledge, abilities and position.” 1982 (p 69 Op. Cit.).

Respect :-

- Means respecting the essential dignity of the individual.
- Is based on *equality and mutuality of rights*; this is at the core of the UN Charter on the rights of the child (and on human rights generally). Respect is intrinsically related to fundamental human rights. Within school communities these rights are the basis for building supportive and co-operative classrooms and schools. Respect also doesn’t mean we ascribe some kind of false ‘virtue’ to someone when it is not deserved, nor does it mean an artificial deferential esteem. It is more to do with basic civility, manners and co-operative social courtesy, and – most of all – about the way we treat others. These are understandings even young children can be taught, encouraged and can understand. Conveying respect to our students also *enables* a student’s self-respect (Rogers, 2011).

For a sustained discussion on respect within the teacher-student/s relationship see Rogers 2011.

In being aware of, and considering others’ rights, we (in effect) affirm and acknowledge our own rights. We can stand up for our rights – firmly and respectfully

without trampling on others' rights. The teacher's modelling of mutual respect is essential in building a rights-enhancing and rights-protecting school community.

- Respect means recognising the equality of difference (in gender, race, background ...).
- Respect also means that even when we need to discipline a student we do not imply we 'reject' them as a person. This is probably the most challenging value we seek to hold as teachers. It means we can (and should) balance firmness with kindness; assertion without holding grudges. It means (and this is also very difficult) starting each day afresh with the student as it were; particularly when we've had to utilise behaviour consequences.

I would further argue that we don't have to *like* all our students (some students will be much easier to like than others ...).

Respect is concerned with and directed to our *behaviour towards others*; the way we *treat others* ... It is pointless *trying to force ourselves to like* a student whose behaviour (at times) can be not just annoying but even obnoxious or worse ... Respect is about *a mindset and one's behaviour towards others* – more particularly perhaps towards the 'unlikeable'. This key feature of the concept of inter-personal respect is also important for children. We are not asking our students to 'like', (or pretend to like) every single fellow student; 'liking' is related very much to preferential, social, behaviour.

Our feelings (naturally) come and go with the vagaries of mood, chance, digestion (!), circumstance, the amount of stress we are subject to ...

In our day-to-day relations with our students we do not easily (or merely) give in to feelings of like/dislike; we seek to behave to the other respectfully.

Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Stoic philosopher said,

“In the morning when thou risest unwillingly, let this thought be present – I am rising to the work of a human being.” Meditation V

(in *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius : Meditation V*. Harvard Classics

1980 (trans : George Long) Grolier Press, Connecticut (p 222).

- The conveying of respect (not excusing a student's distracting/disruptive behaviour) is an essential pre-requisite in addressing and resolving behaviour issues and initiating repairing and rebuilding and restitution.

- Respect derives from fundamental rights. Rights also *entail* responsibilities and rules. Good and fair rules give protection to rights (of all members of the school community). Such protection, though, needs consciously respectful leadership by all teacher leaders in the school community. It also requires our ‘relaxed vigilance’ particularly with respect to any issues of harassment.

See : Dreikurs, R.; Grunwald, B. and Pepper, F (1982) *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom* 2nd Edition New York : Harper and Row

Rogers, B. (2011) *You Know the Fair Rule and much more* 3rd Edition Melbourne : ACER Press. In the UK London : Sage Publications.

Rogers, B. (2015) *Classroom Behaviour* 4th Edition London : Sage Publications.

Biography

Dr Bill Rogers is a teacher, education consultant and author. He conducts in-services and seminar programmes across Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the U.K. in the areas of behaviour management, effective teaching, stress management, colleague support and teacher welfare. He has also worked extensively as a mentor-coach in classrooms; team-teaching in challenging classes in Australia and the U.K. Bill Rogers read theology at Ridley College, Melbourne; then psychology, philosophy and education at Melbourne University and went on to major in Education. {He is a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators and Honorary Life Fellow of Leeds Trinity University and Honorary Fellow at the Graduate School of Education, Melbourne University}.