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Students Who Challenge Us

Eight Things Skilled Teachers Think, Say, and Do

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Among the many challenges teachers face, often the most difficult is how to engage students who seem unreachable, who resist learning activities, or who disrupt them for others. This is also one of the challenges that skilled teachers have some control over. In my nine years of teaching high school, I've found that one of the best approaches to engaging challenging students is to develop their intrinsic motivation.

The root of intrinsic is the Latin *intrinsicus*, a combination of two words meaning *within* and *alongside*. It's likely that our students *are* intrinsically motivated—just motivated to follow their own interests, not to do what we want them to do. Teachers' challenge is to work alongside our students, to know their interests and goals, and to develop trusting relationships that help students connect their learning to their goals in a way that motivates from within.

How can teachers do this? It's helpful to consider this question in three parts: What skilled teachers think, what they say, and what they do.

What Skilled Teachers Can Think

What we think guides how we view the world, including how we view challenging students. Developing and maintaining three mind-sets will help teachers maintain their equilibrium in the face of behavior or resistance to learning from certain students that would ordinarily knock us off balance.

1. Remember that authoritative beats authoritarian.

Being authoritarian means wielding power unilaterally to control someone, demanding obedience without giving any explanation for why one's orders are important. Being authoritative, on the other hand, means demonstrating control, but doing so relationally through listening and explaining. Studies of effective parenting have found that children view parents who use an authoritative style as legitimate authority figures; such children are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior. The opposite is true for children of authoritarian parents (University of New Hampshire, 2012).

It's not too much of a stretch to apply this finding to teachers and students. As you interact with students, frequently ask yourself which of these two styles you use. Do you want to always lead with your mouth—or with your ears? Bring this authoritative-authoritarian question to bear on your classroom practices. In terms of instruction, are you always the sage on stage? Do you have students periodically evaluate your class and you as a teacher—and seriously consider their feedback? Do you explain to students why you teach the way you do? When a student's behavior is causing a problem, do you control the behavior at any cost, or do you try to find out what's going on with that student? Opting for the authoritative style will make students more likely to respect your authority—and probably more eager to cooperate.

2. Believe that everyone can grow.

Many teachers are familiar with Carol Dweck's distinction between a "growth" mind-set and a "fixed" one. When we have a growth mind-set, we believe that everyone has the inner power to grow and change. We see mistakes as opportunities to learn. Holding a fixed mind-set leads us to believe that people's traits—such as intelligence—are immutable. A mistake on the part of someone we believe is unintelligent seems to validate that belief.

Which mind-set we hold makes a tremendous difference. In one study, a researcher measured teachers' mind-sets at the beginning of the year. In classes led by teachers who showed fixed mind-sets, few students with learning challenges advanced academically during the year. But in classes taught by those with growth mind-sets, many previously low-performing students made gains (Dweck, 2010). Teachers with a fixed mind-set tend to immediately and permanently place students into categories. They place the primary responsibility for overcoming learning challenges on the students. Those with a growth mind-set consider responding to a student's challenges to be the joint responsibility of the student and the educator.

Teachers aren't superhuman. There are some things we cannot accomplish. But we must ask ourselves whether we too readily write off students who try our patience as "incapable," or some similar adjective, without considering whether differentiating instruction for these students might spur change and growth.

One of my students had never written an essay in his school career. He was intent on maintaining that record during our unit on writing persuasive essays. Because I knew two of his passions were football and video games, I told him that as long as he used the writing techniques we'd studied, he could write an essay on why his favorite football team was better than its rival or on why he particularly liked one video game. He ended up writing an essay on both topics.

3. Understand that power isn't a finite pie.

I was a community organizer for 19 years before I became a teacher. A key lesson I learned was that power isn't a finite pie. If I share the power I have, that doesn't mean I'll have less. In fact, the pie will get bigger as more possibilities are created for everyone.

Power struggles are at the root of much misbehavior. William Glasser (1988) believes that students have a basic need for power and that 95 percent of classroom management issues occur as a result of students trying to fulfill this need. Having more power actually helps students learn. Giving students choices—about their homework, assignments, how they're grouped, and so on—leads to higher levels of student engagement and achievement (Sparks, 2010).

Remembering that power isn't finite helps us see that asking students for ideas on what might help them feel more engaged isn't a sign of weakness, but of strength. So is seeking advice from students' parents or from teachers in other classes in which challenged learners show more success. Over the years, I've gained great insight and become a more effective teacher by asking parents, "Tell me about a time in your child's life when he or she was learning a lot and working hard in school. What was his or her teacher doing then?"

What Skilled Teachers Can Say

4. Give positive messages.

Positive messages are essential to motivation. Subtle shifts in teacher language infuse positive messages throughout our interactions. Here are three practices I've found helpful.

Use positive framing. "Loss framed" messages (if you do this, then something bad will happen to you) don't have the persuasive advantage that they're often thought to have. "Positive framed messages" (if you do this, these good things will happen) are more effective (Dean, 2010). I've had more success talking with students about how changing their behavior will help them achieve their goals (such as graduating from high school or going to college) than I've had threatening them with negative consequences. Positive messages that connect students' current actions to broader student-identified hopes or goals are different from "if-then" statements focused on what teachers want students to do ("If you don't get out of your seat without permission, then you'll get extra credit"). As Daniel Pink (2009) notes, such extrinsic manipulations don't develop students' higher-order thinking skills or long-term commitments to change.

Say "yes." Avoidant instruction is language that emphasizes what people should not do ("Don't walk on the grass." "Don't chew gum"). Some researchers (British Psychological Society, 2010) believe that a more effective way to get a desired behavior is to emphasize what you want people to do. For example, if a student asks to go the restroom, but the timing isn't right, rather than saying no, I try to say, "Yes, you can. I just need you to wait a few minutes." Or if a student is talking at an inappropriate time, instead of saying, "Don't talk!" I sometimes go over and tell that learner, "I see you have a lot of energy today. We'll be breaking into small groups later and you'll have plenty of time to talk then. I'd appreciate your listening now."

Say "please" and "thank you." People are more likely to comply with a task (and do so more quickly) if someone asks them instead of tells them (Yong, 2010). I've found that "Can you please sit down?" is more effective than "Sit down!" Saying thank you provides immediate positive reinforcement to students. Research (Sutton, 2010) shows that people who are thanked by authority figures are more likely to cooperate, feel valued, and exhibit self-confidence.

5. Apologize.

Teachers are human, and we make plenty of mistakes. There is no reason why we shouldn't apologize when we do.

But saying, "I'm sorry," may not be enough. I often use the "regret, reason, and remedy" formula recommended by

Dorothy Armstrong (2009). For example, one afternoon my students Omar and Quang were paired up in my class but were sitting passively while everyone else focused on the task at hand. I said sharply, "Come on now, get working!" A few minutes later, I said simply to the two boys, "I'm sorry I barked at you earlier. I was frustrated that you weren't doing what I'd asked you to do. I'll try to show more patience in the future." They clearly focused more energy on their work after this apology.

What Skilled Teachers Can Do

6. Be flexible.

Being flexible might be the most important thing teachers can "do" to help students who challenge us—in fact all students—to get past whatever challenges of their own they confront. Three practices help me differentiate instruction and classroom management in a way that helps everyone.

Help them get started. Psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik identified the Zeigarnik Effect: Once people start doing something, they tend to want to finish it (Dean, 2011). If we get a disengaged or anxious student started, that's half the battle. For a task that's likely to challenge some students, present a variety of ways to get started: a menu of questions, the option to create a visual representation of a concept, a chance to work with a partner. Encourage students to launch themselves by just answering the first question or the easiest one.

Help postpone tempting distractions. Making a conscious decision to postpone giving in to temptation can reduce a desire that's getting in the way of a goal (Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 2012). My student Mai was frequently using her cell phone to text message during class. I didn't want to take her phone away, so I made a deal with her—she could text in my classroom during two specific times: from the moment she entered the room until the bell rang and as soon as the lunch bell rang. Since we made that deal, Mai hardly ever uses her cell phone during class. Even more significant, she hardly ever uses it during our agreed-on times.

Acknowledge stress. As most of us know from experience, people tend to have less self-control when they're under stress (Szalavitz, 2012). When a student is demonstrating self-control issues in my class, I often learn through a conversation with him or her that this student is going through family disruptions or similar problems. Sometimes, just providing students an opportunity to vent worries can have a positive effect.

7. Set the right climate.

Pink (2009) and other researchers have found that extrinsic rewards work in the short term for mechanical tasks that don't require much higher-order thinking, but they don't produce true motivation for work that requires higher-order thinking and creativity. However, everyone needs "baseline rewards"—conditions that provide adequate compensation for one's presence and effort.

At school, baseline rewards might include fair grading, a caring teacher, engaging lessons, and a clean classroom. If such needs aren't met, Pink (2009) notes, the student will focus on "the unfairness of her situation and the anxiety of her circumstance. ... You'll get neither the predictability of extrinsic motivation nor the weirdness of intrinsic motivation. You'll get very little motivation at all" (p. 35).

8. Teach life lessons.

My colleagues and I frontload our school year with what we call life-skills lessons.¹ These simple, engaging activities help students see how it's in their short-term and long-term interest to try their best.

For example, a lesson might highlight how the learning process physically alters the brain. This particular lesson encourages a growth mind-set. It was eye-opening to one of my students who had claimed, "We're all born smart or dumb and stay that way." In terms of keeping up kids' motivation, the times throughout the year when I refer back to these concepts and reflect on how they apply to learning struggles are as important as the initial lessons.

What We Can Always Do

Consistently implementing these practices is easier said than done—and is probably impossible unless you're Mother Teresa. But most teachers already do something that makes all these practices flow more naturally, and that we can do more intensely with conscious effort—we build relationships with students. Caring relationships with teachers helps students build resilience. By fostering these relationships, we learn about students' interests and goals, which are fuel for motivation.

On Fridays, my students write short reflections about the week. One Friday, I asked them to write about the most important thing they'd learned in class that week. One student wrote, "I didn't really learn anything important this week, but that's OK because Mr. Ferlazzo tried his best."

Although I wasn't that thrilled with the first part of his comment, there's an important message in the second half. Even if we can't always think, say, and do the ideal thing to strengthen struggling students' motivation, there's always something we can do to meet them halfway. We can try our best.

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Endnote

¹ Lesson plans are available free at [my blog](#).

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