

10 Things to Say to Your Students Everyday

...and Why They Are Important

1. Hello & Goodbye

Learning is a social endeavor. One of the most basic human needs we have is to be known and acknowledged. As Rita Pearson said in her popular TED talk, “children won’t learn from people they don’t like.” When students feel that their teacher knows and cares about them, they are more invested in their learning, they are less likely to disrupt class, and they are more likely to show respect. Saying “hello” and “goodbye” to every student is one small way we can acknowledge them each day and set a tone for the day.

2. What Makes You Say That?

The question, WMYST?, asks students for the reasoning evidence behind their thought, opinions or ideas. It sends a message to students that simply giving the correct answer or guessing what’s in the teacher’s head is not the game we are playing. When teachers’ press students for thinking, students feel more engaged, challenged, and motivated. They also develop a greater sense of initiative and feel like their teachers expect more out of them.

3. Talk to me about what you’re doing.

When students explain their actions and plans, they have a chance to review and clarify those plans for themselves. Often they will make adjustments or identify problems just through the talking out of their actions. This simple question takes the metacognitive process, which is crucial to independent learning, and makes it overt, apparent, and visible. For us as teachers, students’ responses provide valuable formative assessment information.

4. Here’s where we are going with this.

When learners feeling a sense of purpose in what they are doing, learning goes way up. However, establishing purpose is much more than stating a learning intention or objective. Helping learners feel a sense of purpose is an ongoing endeavor in which we situate work in a larger context that has meaning and where students feel like their accomplishing something that has worth in their own eyes, not just the teacher’s eyes.

5. Here’s the thinking you’ll need to do.

When we introduce assignments, projects, or tasks to students we often lay out the logistics of the task. We describe the product that that will be created and how students will know when they are done. We might also supply grading criteria (in the form of a rubric or as success criteria) that let’s students know what we are looking for in their completed project. However, this approach risks focusing on the work to be done rather than the learning we hope will happen. To focus on the learning, we must also share with students what kinds of thinking they will be asked to do (see Understanding Map). If we can’t identify the thinking, or help students to identify it, we might have a task that limited in its learning potential.

6. Let's debrief.

One of the most neglected parts of lessons is the debrief, wrap up, or closing of the lesson. Teachers run out of time and so this gets abandoned. In British schools, this is typically referred to as the plenary or "the assembling together." Research shows that learning gains in a class are very fragile and that when time is not available to consolidate the learning through reflection and personal summary, it can easily be lost. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman has identified the importance of "good endings"—what happens at the end of events tends to be what we remember. Make sure you plan for the extra 5 minutes at the end for students to consolidate their learning.

7. I've noticed...

Noticing is a powerful form of feedback. Whatever we notice and name we will get more of in the future, because we are signaling this is what we care about. We are communicating where the group or individual is at, and where we want to progress to in the future. In contrast, when we say, "I liked," we aren't really giving feedback, but are communicating that school is about pleasing us. Our noticing also signals to students that we have a growth mindset when it comes to learning and the development of culture.

8. We

Establishing a culture of thinking is about building a community of learners. Using the collective pronouns we, our, and us sends a message about community and clearly situates us as teachers as a part of the group. In contrast, using primarily the pronouns of I and you, can create more distance and emphasize power and control.

9. I'm sorry.

Teachers make mistakes. We are human and we have one of the most decision-intense occupations. When we admit our mistakes we aren't lessening our authority, as some might think, but modeling our humanness and the importance of admitting and learning from mistakes. Walking our students through our decision-making process and identify for them the events that made us reconsider our actions models this process for students and helps them to take ownership of their own learning and actions as well.

10. Wow!

One of the questions I always ask teachers after I have observed a lesson is "What surprised you?" If nothing surprised them, then something has gone wrong. Either they haven't delved deeply enough into students' thinking to uncover the mysteries and uniqueness of their thinking process, they weren't really tuned into and noticed students' thinking, or they constructed a lesson that didn't ask students to do very much.

Bonus: Say Nothing.

*Sometimes we as teachers talk too much. However, it is learners who need the opportunity to discuss, question, and play around with ideas. Therefore, the person doing the talking is most likely the person doing the learning. Also, when we are talking, we may not be listening and allowing our students to surprise us. Remember the acronym WAIT: **W**hy **A**m **I** Talking?*