



Are You Encouraging Your Students Too Much?

By Michael Linsin

Encouraging students is in our DNA.

It's part and parcel to our educational culture. It's what we do. We [teach a lesson](#) and then we encourage.

"You can do it."

"Just keep working and you'll get it."

"I believe in you."

And in the right moments, with just the right touch, encouragement can indeed be effective.

It can provide a lifeline when the seas get rough. It can deliver a jolt to waning energy. It can allay fear and remove doubt.

The problem, however, is that it's given far too much.

You see, when students become accustomed to hearing continual encouragement, for everything from turning on their laptop to lining up for lunch, it dilutes the message. It loses its effect. It becomes the same muffled soundtrack to every school day.

This is why it can seem as if your students need their own personal cheerleading squad just to get their name on their paper. They've become

immune, jaded, and tuned out. Your words become no more noticeable than the soft whirl of the overhead fan.

To break through, you have to crank up the volume. You have to pour it on thick. You have to give more and more just to be heard.

But the solution isn't more. It's less.

By being judicious with your encouragement, by picking your spots and selectively choosing the right moments, your words will have greater impact. They'll cut through the white noise of familiarity. They'll be a balm for itchy ears. They'll be *meaningful* to your students.

A good rule of thumb is to never encourage students for something they've already proven they can do successfully – like a common routine, for example. A walk to the library should be accompanied with neither encouragement nor praise. Just the footfalls of your feet.

Upon completion, a simple “Thank you” will do. In other words, make sure the task, activity, or assignment offers some challenge – which may vary from student to student. Make sure it's something new or different or more complex than they're used to.

Make sure you see signs of struggle or uncertainty before chiming in. And even then, there are times your students will get much more out of working through a tough problem or academic crisis without a single word from you.

To accomplish something difficult of their own accord, after all, is rocket fuel for their [intrinsic motivational engine](#). And if you're not careful, your

words can siphon the supply. Like effective praise, encouragement takes a thoughtful approach.

Save it for when they really need it, and it will have the desired effect.

For example, the next time you send your students off for independent work, whether individually or in groups, resolve to hold back any encouragement for the first five minutes. Allow them to exercise their self-starter muscles. Allow them to think, to overcome, to learn.

Allow them the satisfaction of relying on themselves. Often, to not encourage is the greatest encouragement. It strengthens, matures, and fills with enduring confidence.

Throttle back on using your words and voice to motivate your students and instead shift your focus to a more powerful lever. For it's [your personality](#), your humor, and your cool lessons that provide the strongest motivation.

It's the experience of being in a classroom they look forward to and love being a part of that provides the surest and swiftest kick in the pants.

Your students are moved by truth and beauty and meaning and relationships – like we all are. And your encouraging words, emphatically spoken, deftly touched, and economically used, can be, in the right moments . . .

Just the boost they need.