

Choosing Words Thoughtfully When Communicating with Students

“How Our Word Choices Can Empower Our Students” by Lauren Porosoff in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2018 (Vol. 100, #2, p. 51-54), <https://bit.ly/2OUFqyy>; Porosoff can be reached at lauren@empowerforwards.com.

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In this *Kappan* article, teacher/writer/consultant Lauren Porosoff says that what teachers write to and about their students “has enormous potential to affect their lives” – from college recommendations to parent e-mails to comments on everyday classroom work. “Our words can empower our students to discover where they are as learners,” says Porosoff, “what seems important to them, how well their learning strategies serve them, and what else they could try.” Because their words are so important, she suggests that teachers discuss samples of various communications in grade-level and department teams, reflecting on how educators’ words come across to students and parents. Each part of speech has interesting issues:

- *Adjectives* – These tend to convey subjective judgments of what students are – *conscientious, earnest, excellent, inventive, insightful, provocative* – versus what they objectively *do*. And there are other issues. “Teachers sometimes describe students as nice and lovely, or as having a bright smile or a cheerful disposition,” says Porosoff. “But using an adjective that could just as easily describe room décor (a lovely rug, cheerful wallpaper) makes it sound like the students are there to please the teacher instead of to learn.” And adjectives can unconsciously convey gender or race biases: “How often do we describe boys as *compassionate* or *helpful*? How many girls’ contributions get called *powerful* or *persuasive*?” she asks. “Do we call students of color *insightful* and *creative*, or do we use those words more often to describe white students?”

- *Verbs* – Porosoff believes verbs are more helpful in naming positive behaviors without the subjectivity embedded in adjectives. “To replace your adjectives with verbs,” she suggests, “try asking yourself what students *do* to make you describe them in a particular way.” For example, why do you describe Patrick as *responsible*? It’s because he *brings* his materials to every class, *writes* his questions about the homework, and *makes* a study guide for every test. More words, but more effective. Another example: “In class, Udi *tests out* his ideas during discussions, *asks* questions, and *listens* with interest and compassion to his peers.”

- *Nouns* – These help vividly convey to students, parents, and other teachers what’s happening and what could be happening in class. Nouns can convey a student’s work products (poem, skit), materials used (writer’s notebook, graduated cylinder), or topics studied (lizards, Mount Fuji, opioids).

- *Conjunctions* – These often connect information about what the student has learned or done well with information about what still needs to be done – *and, but, while, although, unless*. “The conjunctions we choose,” says Porosoff, “can reveal our attitudes toward students and shape their attitudes toward themselves, their learning, and or classes.” Consider these:

- Tariq has gotten better at using imagery and needs to work on sticking to his thesis.
- Tariq has gotten better at using imagery but needs to work on sticking to his thesis.

In the second, using *but* subordinates Tariq’s strength to his weakness, conveying that his effort to use more-specific imagery doesn’t matter very much. The first is more helpful.

• *Adverbs* – These describe qualities of action – *how* students work, learn, relate to each other and the teacher, ask questions, seek help. A teacher might say a student pursued a topic *curiously*, used materials *resourcefully*, shared *courageously*. Adverbs show the qualities of action that matter to us; as such, they're less subjective than adjectives, which judge a state of being. Adverbs value an ongoing process – for example, writing *effectively* – which the student can engage in at any time, for any assignment, in any class, including outside school. “It may sound a little grandiose to say this about everybody’s least favorite part of speech,” says Porosoff, “but adverbs tell us how we want to live our lives.”

• *Pronouns* – When a teacher uses the pronoun “I” in communications to students, it changes the tone. Compare these two:

- I would like to see Jaime proofreading more carefully to improve his writing.
- Jaime can improve his writing by proofreading more carefully.

Making the teacher the subject of the first sentence makes it more about the teacher and less about the student, says Porosoff. This is even more true in these examples:

- I love how Tayo acknowledges his peers.
- I was impressed by how much information Jana put into her video.
- I’m proud of August’s efforts.

“Sentences like these,” says Porosoff, “make it sound as if the purpose of student work is to please me, rather than to give students opportunities to practice important skills and create meaningful products.” Better to objectively describe what’s effective. But there are times when it’s appropriate for the teacher to be out front:

- I can’t wait to read more of Micah’s work.
- I encourage Chandra to e-mail me any questions she doesn’t get a chance to ask in class.

It’s also important to be sensitive using pronouns with students who do not fit into traditional gender categories.