# EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR PRAISING STUDENTS

*Douglas Bartholomew discusses various purposes that teachers have in mind when they use praise and urges them to match the praise to the purpose.*

BY DOUGLAS BARTHOLOMEW

The idea that students need positive verbal feedback is a basic truth for most teachers. We've all probably given comments like "nice singing" or "you've never played better" and noticed the effect our positive comments had on the attitudes, behaviors, and actions of students in our classes. We typically classify these positive comments as "praise," and it may be surprising to read that praise is not always positive.

Peggy Bennett describes four ways in which praise can be negative: It can cause feelings of embarrassment when a compliment focuses attention on someone not wanting to stick out. It can cause feelings of manipulation when used as a control device to get students to do something or behave in a particular way. It can cause feelings of inferiority if one doesn't receive any praise, or feelings of undue superiority if the praise makes one feel as if one has "done it all." Finally, praise can be habitual or overused and lose its meaning.[1]

These claims are problematic if we personally have seen how well positive comments can work. Maybe we should consider the situations when praise can be empty, overused, thoughtless, or motivated by the wrong reasons. We

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may be able to adjust our verbal responses to avoid the problems of praise and still reap its benefits (see the "Suggested Readings" sidebar for publications on teacher praise).

The purpose of praising students seems to fall into four broad categories: to recognize or show interest in them, to encourage them, to describe what we observe in their behavior, and to evaluate their performance. When we tell students that they have done well in class, we may be intending to show

interest in them as people, to encourage them in their music participation, to evaluate their work, and to support and reinforce certain behaviors exhibited in class or point them toward other behaviors by giving descriptive feedback. The problems begin when we realize that the statement "You did well" does not accomplish all of these purposes equally well. We might want to consider alternative statements depending on what our specific purpose is.

## Recognition

We show interest in students by recognizing them or noticing something about them in a way that acknowledges their uniqueness. This requires some direct contact. Direct contact is often achieved verbally by use of the student's name, but it can also be achieved through eye contact, general proximity, gesture, or, with younger students, an encouraging touch. This direct contact is the way we recognize the student, affirming a personal relationship between one person and another, between a teacher and a student. Comments that describe a specific action, feature, or characteristic of the student can also affirm this relationship.

Comments or actions that do not distinguish the individual from the group, are not specific enough to focus on a particular student, or are not directed to an individual fail to show personal interest. Generic praise ("good

job") can easily miss the mark because it is not clear to whom it is directed.

We often include other information when we recognize a student. Comments such as "Sarah tapped the rhythm with her fingers accurately," "Roger, that's the way," and "Bobby, you sang all the words" recognize the student and go on to evaluate, encourage, or describe student action. In order to show interest in a student, however, some sort of personal recognition of the student may be all that is necessary. Students who need attention may not need encouragement, evaluation, or guidance. Maybe all we need to do is to recognize their existence. Eye contact, a smile or nod, or "Julie!" may be all that is needed to accomplish this.

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## Encouragement

The linguistic root of "encourage" refers to the heart. To encourage students is to urge them to "take heart" and "have courage." Encouraging comments can be exhortations: "Keep it up." "You're on the right track." "One more time and you'll get it." The purpose of encouraging comments is to give students hope and inner strength. When we encourage students, we want them to think that they are capable of meeting the challenges they face. We want them to know that although they are having difficulties, they are making some progress. We want to direct the students' attention to the positive aspects of their performance, so that they can see some achievement even

when other factors may be negative.

By steering away from the negative and accenting the positive, we will probably succeed in encouraging our students. Even generic praise can be encouraging when students know to whom it is directed. Exhortations and statements of belief ("I know you can do it"), descriptions ("Your movements ended with the song"), and positive evaluations can all serve to encourage students by giving them hope that they are up to the task at hand.

## Description

One of the more obvious problems of generic praise statements is that they do not address specific situations. "Well done" does not tell a student what it was that was well done. "You have it now" may encourage a student to continue, but it does not offer any specific direction in which to continue.

Comments that describe student behavior point the student in a particular direction. They direct the student's attention to those behaviors that the teacher wants to see continued or discontinued. Specific descriptions provide "expert witness." Comments such as "Your voice matched mine that time," "The intonation was faulty in the third measure," and "You talked during Alison's turn" let the students see their own actions through the expert eyes and ears of the teacher. They tell the student that what the teacher notices and feels is important enough to share.

Descriptive statements can be delivered as neutral. "You kept a steady tempo" is by itself neither positive or negative. It simply describes a state of affairs. If students know the expectations of a situation—that they should accelerate or move in a way contrary to what the song says—they will be able to interpret the descriptive comment as positive or negative. The purpose of the description, however, is to let students know what it was they did. Even if the students have forgotten, or never knew the expectations, providing an accurate description of their actions provides a common base for further response. The student finds out what the teacher noticed and then understands when the teacher gives a statement of expectation: "You were supposed to speed up." Tone of voice and other nonverbal cues can

give a positive and encouraging dimension (or the reverse if we're not careful) to descriptions that would by themselves be neutral.

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Descriptive statements can also include an element of interpretation if we use students' actions or behavior to infer their motivation, intention, or other mental state. "I could tell you were listening by how you moved your hands," "That answer tells me you were thinking about the problem," and "Your face showed me you were confused" are statements that describe both an external behavior and a supposed inner state. Although our inferences may not always be perfectly correct, many times they are quite accurate. By giving descriptive comments, we tell students the evidence we are using for our inferences. We may not be able to *see* listening, but listening is something we want students to do.

## Evaluation

Praise is generally a statement of approbation or approval, a positive evaluation. Such approval can be given to a person or group ("You sang that well"), to an action or behavior ("That was good singing"), or to a creation or object ("That's a good song"). Generic praise ("well done") leaves the student in the dark as far as who and what is being evaluated. If we are serious about

expressing an evaluation, it may be to our advantage to include a descriptive comment along with the evaluation. "Betty, you shaped the line of that solo nicely today" lets Betty (and everyone else in hearing range) know that what is receiving approval is the action she just performed. With a specific description of what is being evaluated, there is less chance that our praise will be misinterpreted.

While we want students to know who is being evaluated, some of the problems of praise arise from singling out a student. The attention that comes with the evaluation can be unwanted. A specific description of what is being evaluated may allay these feelings as it does not address a person so much as an action. Another way to reduce the self-consciousness a student might feel would be to recognize him or her in other ways than using a name. Making eye contact with Betty when delivering your evaluation may be as effective as using her name in the evaluation.

Evaluations are not always positive. If we can maintain the distinction between encouragement and evaluation,

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it is easier to see how negative feedback can be appropriate. When we evaluate a student's action or creation, the possibility of a negative comment must exist. Yet, a negative statement need not be devastating to a student. Compare the following comments:
1. "That wasn't very good."

2. "You didn't get the rhythm in the third measure."
3. "You didn't get the rhythm in the third measure, but you will next time."
4. "You didn't get the rhythm in the third measure, but you played the right notes."

In example 1, we get the opposite of generic praise: generic criticism. General comments like this suffer from the same problems as generic praise. Students deserve to know what it is we think was wrong and to understand that we are not evaluating them as people with this kind of comment. Example 2 is specific, though negative, and unobjectionable in some contexts. Example 3 combines the specific evaluation with an expression of encouragement, and example 4 combines the evaluation with a positive comment. The combination of approaches in examples 3 and 4 can reduce the sense of discouragement that a student lacking confidence might feel when receiving a negative comment.

When we combine positive and negative comments, the order makes a difference. Ending with a positive note seems more encouraging. This is especially true when we combine general and specific comments. A final negative comment, especially when general, seems to cancel out any preceding positive evaluation. A final positive comment, whether general or specific, seems to give the feeling of progress.

We need to use language carefully. Absolute terms such as "never," "always," "everybody," and "nobody" have such broad applications that they are rarely useful. "Nobody watched," "Everybody missed the entrance," "You never wait your turn," and "You are always talking when you should be listening" are statements that are not likely to be true. Emphasis is gained by the use of "nobody," but at a cost. The one or more students who happened to watch (but weren't noticed) feel compelled to correct the statement. "But *I* watched," they might say. Even if they do not speak up, wrongful accusations can undermine the respect a student has for a teacher. More accuracy may be more effective: "I didn't see anyone watching," "Many of you were not watching," and "You need to watch." Other problem words in this regard are

■■■■■■■■ *Suggested Readings* ■■■■■■■■

Bennett, Peggy. "Is Praise Always Positive?" *TMEA/MENC Connection*, January 1989, 12–13.

Bennett, Peggy D., and Douglas R. Bartholomew. *Songworks: Valuing Singing in Education*. 1992. (Available from Douglas Bartholomew, Department of Music, College of Arts and Architecture, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717-0008)

Brophy, Jere. "Teacher Praise: A Functional Analysis." *Review of Educational Research* 51 (Spring 1981): 5–32.

Cannella, Gaile S. "Praise and Concrete Rewards: Concerns for Childhood Education." *Childhood Education* 62 (March/April 1986): 297–301.

Ginott, Haim G. *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

Good, Thomas L., & Jere E. Brophy. *Looking in Classrooms*. 3d ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

intensifying adverbs ("That was *so* beautiful" or "It was *very* precise") and superlatives (best, most beautiful, worst, finest, most exciting, most unmusical, and so on). These terms evaluate but tend to overdramatize the situation and are usually exaggerations. When everything is "best," nothing can be "better."

Generic condemnation ("That was awful"), besides suffering from the same lack of specificity as generic praise, also discourages the students. Although global negative evaluations may be appropriate at certain times, we should be very clear about their purpose. It may be helpful to couple generic condemnations with specific descriptions or expectations, followed by some encouragement. A steady diet of overly general negatives is not going to build up the students' confidence or self-image or their trust in the teacher. It seems that we are more able to be specific when something is wrong than when it is right. Instead of nit-picking, maybe we should try picking out details that are positive.

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Evaluative comments can state the criterion on which the evaluation is based. The criterion expressed in "I like the way Evan is sitting still" is the teacher's liking or preference. This comment sends the message that students should comply with what the teacher likes in order to gain the

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# Assessing Verbal Evaluations

## Questions of balance:

■ What is the ratio of positive to negative comments in your evaluations?

■ What is the ratio of specific to generic comments in your evaluations?

■ What is the balance in your specific evaluations between positive and negative comments?

■ What is the balance in your generic evaluations between positive and negative comments?

## Question of timing:

■ What kind of evaluative comment do you usually begin with? End with?

## Question of accuracy:

■ How often do you exaggerate in your evaluations, using superlatives such as "all" or "never," or intensifiers such as "very" or "so"?

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teacher's favor. But, "Evan is doing a good job of sitting still" sends the message that there is a standard of sitting still of which Evan is now a good example. The latter case directs students to a member of the class and to the expectations of the classroom, while the former directs them to the teacher and the teacher's expectations. Evaluations that direct students to standards beyond the opinion of an individual to those accepted by a group prepare them to look for objective and identifiable expectations and standards.

## Self-Assessment

In order to avoid the problems of misusing praise, we need to examine the purposes of our verbal feedback. Do we want to encourage, guide, show interest, or evaluate? Not just any type of comment, even if positive, will accomplish each purpose equally well. The sidebar lists questions for assessing our verbal

evaluations of students.

Praise is not all the same. We can show interest in students without an evaluation or judgment. We can describe behavior and performance with a neutral tone. We can encourage without causing self-consciousness and without statements whose veracity may be in question. We can evaluate without causing undue embarrassment or disappointment, and evaluate in such a way that students become more aware of our expectations and their own achievement. We can avoid overuse and misuse of praise by expanding our repertory of verbal responses. The point is not just to have more ways to say "well done," but to have more ways to address specific issues and accomplish different purposes.

## Note

1. Peggy Bennett, "Is Praise Always Positive?" *TMEA/MENC Connection*, January 1989, 12–13. ■