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The perils and profits of praise

by Peggy Bennett

Praise is seldom criticized. More often, praise serves as a tonic that we generously dispense, intending to help students feel good about themselves and their work. Like generous doses of penicillin, however, praise can have some undesirable side effects.

Although praise in the classroom takes many forms, all are not equally beneficial. Three major challenges are posed here: (1) that we as teachers become more aware of the ways we use praise in the classroom, (2) that we become sensitive to the effect of praise on students, and (3) that we practice offering specific information in our compliments.

To rethink the practice of complimenting students, we need a definition of praise. According to Richard Farson, praise is "any statement that makes a positive evaluation of an object, person, act, or event, and that contains very little supplementary information."[1] The limitations of this definition are essential to the case being built in this article: that specific, constructive information is not included in statements of praise.

Thinking before speaking

The perils of praise are infrequently discussed. "Good" teachers are often cited in evaluations for praising student effort, using approval statements, and giving positive feedback. Clearly, students need and deserve to feel accepted, recognized, and supported, and educators can and should provide this kind of encouragement. What is at issue, though, are the word choices, intentions, and potential effects that statements of teacher approval have in group settings. Ironically, thoughtlessly delivered praise in the classroom can jeopardize a student's motivation, creativity, and sense of self-worth. Praise statements can be divided into the following three categories:

Type A: those that focus on teacher approval to manipulate student behaviors

Type B: those that focus on student knowledge, ability, skill, or personal qualities

Type C: those that are unfocused, automatic responses that carry little meaning

Type A praise

Small children seem to respond well to Type A compliments. They are often eager to imitate those students receiving the teacher's recognition. Consider what message, though, is given in the following remarks: "I like the way Tommy is sitting," "I like what I hear from the front row," and "Thank you, Gina and Courtney, for following instructions."

The phrase "I like the way..." suggests that students' behavior management during activities is for the purpose of pleasing the teacher rather than for their self-satisfaction. The method of achieving a short-term goal—obedience from our students—becomes questionable, however, when compared to the lasting message given to students: that the approval of others is the primary motivation for accomplishment. Sadly, some students become addicted to approval. When they are not able to rely on their own sense of satisfaction, students can feel negatively evaluated when their work is *not* praised. "What am I going to get out of it?" becomes the motivation.

Although they are models of courtesy, "please" and "thank you" statements of praise can lead children to believe they are doing the teacher a favor by following instructions and behaving in the expected manner. Older students are especially able to sense this manipulative strategy. Consequently, they may resist a teacher's attempt to coerce the repetition of desired behaviors by giving insincere, profuse praise. In describing Haim Ginott's theories for dealing with student behaviors, C. M. Charles stated:

> Praising good behavior has its drawbacks. When teachers praise students for behavior they are supposed to show, it may appear that they are surprised by good behavior. This implies that they expect poor behavior. Sometimes, children decide to live up to negative expectations.[2]

Manipulative praise statements often involve compliments intended to change a student's behavior. This change, however, may be more for the convenience or pleasure of the praiser than for the benefit of the person being praised. For example, when a teacher praises a group for entering a room quietly, she is probably not as much delighted on their behalf as she is relieved that her role is easier as a result.[3] To avoid Type A praise statements, consider these ways of offering constructive information:

- "I like the way Tammy is sitting" (praise); "Some students are sitting quietly ready to begin" (constructive information).
- "I like what I hear from the front

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1. Richard Farson, "Praise Reappraised," in *Human Dynamics Psychology and Education*, ed. Don Hamachek (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968), 112.

2. C. M. Charles, *Building Classroom Discipline* (New York: Longman, 1985), 55.

3. Farson, 112.

row" (praise); "It sounds and looks like the kids in the front are figuring out the problem!" (constructive information).

- "Thank you, Gina and Courtney, for following instructions" (praise); "Gina and Courtney, you sure listened to instructions!" (constructive information).

Type B praise

As teachers, we do want to compliment good work, build self-confidence, and recognize students' abilities. For some students and for some classes, however, this type of praise may have the opposite effect from what was intended. Many people feel uncomfortable when they are complimented. With the best of intentions, we may shower students with praise to encourage their initiative or to build self-esteem and confidence. What we may not be aware of, though, is that praise can be embarrassing for students when it is delivered with too much enthusiasm and exuberance, and it may subsequently dampen their willingness to participate. When a student is unhappy or dissatisfied with himself, praise either is ignored altogether, makes him feel his teacher does not understand his problems, or reinforces his already low self-esteem.[4] For some, praise can be more discouraging than encouraging.

If we as teachers do not consider these potentially negative side-effects, we may be using praise as "a piece of psychological candy."[5] For some students, praise can create a feeling of defensiveness when they are being evaluated. For others, feeling an obligation to be praiseworthy can be overwhelming. Surprisingly, some students respond negatively to the implication of superiority that the person delivering the praise assumes.

Along with the possible repercussions of embarrassment, defensiveness, and feelings of inferiority, compliments can also backfire in the classroom because of the effect that praise of an individual has on other students. In some classes, complimenting one student is seen as a negative evaluation of others. The need for peer acceptance may complicate the effects of praise: A student may not want to be viewed as the "teacher's pet." Some students also are sensitive to the differences in gradations of superlative statements. Any downgrading from "excellent" to "good" or from "wonderful" to "okay" may be taken as a negative evaluation.

When a teacher develops a pattern of delivering praise for accurate responses, students may infer that responses are only worthwhile if they are perfect. Students can easily construe praise or criticism of their responses to be synonymous with praise or criticism of them as individuals. Consider these alternatives for making praise substantive:

- "Chase, you are so smart! I'm glad you're in my class!" (praise); "Chase, you sure are thinking!" (constructive information).
- "What a beautiful voice you have, Sandra!" (praise); "Sandra, can you hear how clear and free your voice sounds today?" (constructive information).
- "That was excellent, Sean! Good boy!" (praise); "Sean, I can tell you've been practicing! That rhythm is getting easier for you" (constructive information).

Type C praise

In an attempt to be positive and accepting, teachers may praise nearly all responses in the classroom, often confusing their delight (or relief) at *getting* a response with the quality of that response. This practice may also confuse the students because no sense of quality or skill apparent in their responses is gained. "Good," "much better," and "great" can become meaningless, habitual responses. Used as indiscriminate tags after performance of each task, this type of praise becomes a distracting mannerism and an empty compliment. Even when used sparingly, these terms convey little or no information about what was "good." Students need to be told what assessment the teacher is making so they know exactly what is accurate and what skills have improved. "Good" is an insufficient substitute for informative teacher feedback.

To avoid habitual praising, consider these alternatives:

- "Very good!" (praise); "We could hear every sound in the song when you tapped. Good job!" (constructive information).
- "That was much better!" (praise); "Your hand signs are looking very clear, and I can see that today you are being careful of their positions" (constructive information).
- "What a good idea!" (praise); "Now there's a challenge for us! Let's try it!" (constructive information).

Changing old habits

When delivered with sincerity and supplemented with constructive information, praise can have an invigorating effect on students. If thoughtlessly used, however, compliments can unintentionally deliver negative messages to some of those students. Instead of removing phrases of approval from our classes altogether, we should examine the purpose of praise, consider the effect of compliments on individuals and the group, and offer specific information to supplement praise.

Finally, for constructive information to achieve the desired effect, a teacher must convey support, curiosity, and delight through his or her tone of voice, facial expression, and body language. The words themselves will not come to life and communicate an encouraging attitude unless educators bring to them a concerned and supportive style.

4. Thomas Gordon, *T.E.T.: Teacher Effectiveness Training* (New York: Wyden, 1974), 54.
5. Farson, 112.