

Replacing Weak Language with Strong: Transforming your Teaching Persona*

Which teacher would you prefer to teach you Art History—the one who says “I’m no expert in East Asian Art,” or the one who says, “Chinese monumental painting is an area I’m particularly fond of”?

The first instructor uses language that undermines his or her credibility and ultimately the learning environment. “Weak” language, as we have labeled it here, comes in many forms but shares one common feature—it communicates low expectations. Its effects are both immediate and hard to retract. Teachers are often unaware of its subtle impact.

Weak language typically includes phrases by which the teacher unknowingly indicates a lack of confidence in his or her plans for the course or assignment: “Will you get into groups now?” (spoken with a rising intonation). It may also indicate a lack of expectation of the students: “If you did the homework, please pass it forward.” The most disturbing effect of weak language lies in the fact that it can profoundly undermine otherwise strong teaching. The same instructor who employs solid pedagogical methods, one who effectively engages students in the course content, may come to an instructional consultant shocked at receiving low course evaluations. Weak language can overshadow the use of active learning exercises and careful course design. The resulting low course evaluations may not correlate with the students’ final grades, nor with the learning they accomplish during the semester.

Don’t use rising intonation at the end of sentences.

When we repeatedly finish statements with a rising intonation of “right?” or “okay?” we may hope to invite listeners to relate. However, many students perceive this as tentative. “Does he really want us to get into groups?”

Don’t sound doubtful about the way the course or assignments have been designed. When giving a quiz, don’t say, “I hope these questions are clear.” If there is a chance the questions will be misunderstood, have a colleague edit them in advance.

(continued on page 2)

Introduction to College Teaching

Spring 2003 16:186:855:01
Wednesdays 4:30-6:30
Busch Campus SERC 205

The *Introduction to College Teaching* seminar, sponsored by the Graduate School - New Brunswick and the TA Project, will explore a wide range of issues pertaining to higher education and college teaching. This seminar will help prepare you for your roles as a future faculty member. This experience will enhance your employment marketability and your knowledge of higher education, and strengthen your pedagogical skills. Some readings will be required, along with attendance and participation. The 0 credit seminar will be graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory and will not incur additional fees.

Weekly topics include: an overview of higher education in the United States; developing a philosophy of teaching; multiple roles of the faculty member; course design; motivating students; testing and grading; assessment and outcomes; technology in the classroom; teaching large classes; and other contemporary classroom issues.

View the syllabus online at:
**[taproject@rci.rutgers.edu/
college_teaching.php3](mailto:taproject@rci.rutgers.edu/college_teaching.php3)**
**Call 732-932-7747 for special
permission numbers.**

Weak Language...*(continued from pg. 1)*

Don't apologize for things students should be responsible for. For example, if a student explains the reason a paper is late ("I couldn't get my printer to work"), a teacher might want to express empathy ("I'm sorry"). But this communicates self-blame that services neither the teacher nor the student. Switch to more neutral language: "That's too bad," or "That must be frustrating," putting the responsibility back in the student's hands.

Don't put yourself down.

Students expect their instructors to be strong and knowledgeable. If you seem uncertain, for example, by saying, "You know, I'm a total klutz when it comes to technology," they may begin to be critical. This does not mean that topics or procedures will not arise that you might not be familiar with, but instead of "I don't know" or "I'm new at this" (which draws attention to a weakness they will remain focused on for the rest of the semester), explain that you will learn more about the topic or solution for the problem before the next class period.

Don't overpraise students.


If, for example, we ask students to provide the term "neutrons" which had been introduced in the last class period, one need not respond with "Fantastic!" To do so only decreases the instructor's credibility. A simple "yes" or "that's right" is a more appropriate response. Similarly, don't tell a class that "the reports you turned in were great" if some were fine and others only adequate or worse. To do so undermines the validity of the grading procedure for which you are ultimately responsible.

Don't provide an open forum for student's to criticize your teaching.

For example, allowing mob-like criticism following an exam ("Those questions were unfair." "Yeah!") not only allows students to feed on each other's criticism and create a snowball effect, it also denies the instructor any time for composing a reply. These criticisms, once invoked, are difficult to address in a realistic way and often show up in a similar form on evaluations. If students have concerns, invite them to raise them outside of class such as during office hours or via a memo.

How do you know when you are using weak language? Weak language is difficult to self-diagnose since we are not usually aware of the nuances behind the language we use. Low teaching evaluations can serve as a red flag.

When an instructor has thoughtfully designed and implemented a course, yet receives what seem to be undeservedly low teaching evaluations, there are steps you can take. Get your teaching videotaped or invite a trusted colleague, instructional consultant, or friend to observe your classroom, focusing specifically on your use of language. If weak language shows up, plan each class session in a way that gives you confidence, even if this requires developing and rehearsing a script for a while.

Strong, confident language communicates clarity, organization, consistency, and high expectations. It is polite and shows respect for the students. It also reveals a confidence in how the class and its assignments have been organized, as well as the students' ability to meet these challenges. It does not posit the instructor as sole repository of knowledge, but it does hold the instructor responsible for having shaped the course and all of its in-class and out-of-class activities, and for communicating these clearly. Consciously adapting one's language, the tool so intimately connected with one's self-presentation, is not easy, but the results will prove worthwhile. 

TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School–New Brunswick.
Editor: Jennifer Einspahr
Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.
TapTalk
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(732) 932-7747
tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu

*Reprinted with permission the author, Joan Middendorf, and from THE NATIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING FORUM, a bi-monthly newsletter on college teaching available through the Orxy Press (an imprint of the Greenwood Publishing Group), 88 Post Road P.O. Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881-5007. Individual print subscription, \$39 annually. Multiple orders discounted. Internet site licenses available (www.ntlf.com). Orders and additional information: 800-793-2154.

Academic integrity and the internet: Slowing a growing problem

Cheating and plagiarism are serious problems on all college campuses today, with between 40 and 70 percent of college students admitting to academic dishonesty during their college careers. The problems have been compounded by access to the internet. Students can easily find and copy general assignments, and for a fee, they can hire an internet essay service to write their term papers.

No teacher wants to be a policeman. It is unpleasant to feel suspicious of our students, with whom we would ideally foster trusting relationships. Furthermore, when we suspect a student of cheating, we waste precious time and energy tracking down source material and reporting violations. It is far better to prevent instances of cheating and plagiarism if we can. Below are some suggestions for maintaining academic integrity in the information age.

Let your students know that you are aware of the internet and the ways it can be used for dishonest purposes. This may deter some potential cheaters.

Be aware that many students are genuinely unclear about the guidelines for using the internet for their academic work. Much as students need to be taught the difference between, say, *Cosmopolitan* magazine and a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, students

need to be given guidelines about what constitutes an acceptable internet source. If you decide that you don't want your students using the internet at all, keep in mind that your students most likely will consult it at some point regardless. An open discussion about the (un)reliability of the internet as a source for accurate information may be in order.

Clarify the distinctions between plagiarism, paraphrasing, and direct citation. Students need to be taught the proper way to use others' ideas and words, and this is doubly so in the case of the internet. Consider providing some examples: Copy a sample passage, and give models of correct and incorrect ways to use the passage. Inform them that in no case is it honest to copy another person's bibliography.

Well-designed questions can go a long way toward preventing plagiarism. Specific, detailed, and unique questions can make it harder for students to cut and paste from existing essays posted on the internet. If the topic is open-ended, the best way to prevent internet plagiarism is to collect work in stages. Ask for proposals, annotated bibliographies, or drafts along the way.

Students are more likely to cheat when they feel

overwhelmed. In addition to collecting work in stages, let your students know that you are available if they need help, and encourage them to take advantage of the various campus resource centers. Also, if there is a real emergency, students should feel that their professors can be safely approached. It is far better that they come to you, so that you devise a workable solution together, than they cheat out of sheer desperation, risking failure, suspension, or expulsion.

Spell out the consequences for cheating. Include a clear statement of your academic integrity policy on your syllabus. Give them definitions for cheating and plagiarism. Make it clear that you fully intend to enforce your policy, and then follow through.

In the event that you suspect a student of plagiarism, contact the appropriate college dean and report the violation. Following university procedure is not only essential to dealing with repeat offenders, but it will protect you as well.

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://>

tapproject.rutgers.edu

Graduate School – NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA
Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30-4:30

TAP Calendar

10/30	Teaching Your Own Course	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/6	Careers in Academe	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/6	Business and Dining Etiquette (<i>dinner included</i>)	CAC	6:00-8:00pm‡
11/13	Issues in Academic Integrity	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/15	Teaching Careers for the Non-Certified	CAC	6:00-7:30pm‡
11/20	Public Speaking and the TA	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/20	"Out at Work"	CAC	8:00-10:00pm

Employer panel for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. No sign-up required.

† At Scott Hall 115. For information and to register, call 732-932-7747

‡ For information and to register, call 732-932-7997

**Want to be a Movie
Star?**

Get your class videotaped!

Call 932-11TA for details
<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

*Interested in Peer Observation
of your Classes?*

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html>

Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181
(732) 932-7747