



3 Uniquely Powerful Ways To Praise Your Students

By Michael Linsin on March 10, 2018

Here at SCM, we've talked a lot about the importance of making your praise worthy.

That is, praise that is based on true accomplishment.

— Which can be defined as achievement, excellence, or effort beyond what is commonly expected.

In this way, we support the growth of intrinsic motivation and inspire our students to greater accomplishment.

Praising for that which they've already proven they can do, on the other hand, weakens this churning, self-sustaining force.

It places pushing in one's chair, for example, on the same level as an outstanding essay.

Which is not only confusing to students, but it strips your praise of any real meaning.

(For expected behavior, a good old-fashioned "thank you" will do.)

How you give praise can also have an effect on its power and impact.

Although there is nothing wrong with an occasional "good job" or "nice work," there are more unique and effective ways of expressing your approval.

What follows are three such examples.

1. The wordless fist bump.

Often, the less overt and demonstrative your praise, the more meaningful it will be. There is power in acknowledging true accomplishment with [the smallest, simplest gesture](#).

It gives it a weightiness and significance, as if the work or improvement is too sacred to make a big deal out of. This is the idea behind the wordless fist bump.

The way it works is that you're first going to give the student you'd like to praise a private moment to enjoy their accomplishment. Let them revel in it a beat or two before inserting yourself into the narrative.

When the time feels right, approach calmly and, while making eye contact, hold out your fist *so they have to reach* to bump it. Then move on quickly without waiting for further response.

And that's it. When the student knows what prompted your praise, there is no reason to say anything at all. In fact, it's often best if you don't.

Although smiling is perfectly okay, a more determined look can sometimes give the moment that secret sauce that shakes them down to their shoes.

2. The smile and nod from across the room.

In a similar vein as the fist bump, catching a student's eye from across the room as they're enjoying their moment can be so, so powerful.

It's as if you're admiring them and their accomplishment from afar and they just happen to catch you watching them.

If you're actively aware of your students' successes, and you should be, you'll notice them *trying* to make eye contact with you, though sometimes shyly, to get your reaction or share in the experience.

If you're someone [they respect and admire](#), then a slight smile and head nod declaring your pride and approval will mean the world to them.

3. The surprise note.

I love [leaving notes for students](#). Just showing that you're willing to take the time to write to them personally is something they'll always remember.

I have former students who still have notes I wrote to them more than 20 years ago. The key is to use special stationery (post-its are a no-no) and write in your most careful, delicate handwriting.

Fold it crisply, secure it privately with a piece of tape, and speak from the heart. Make your words direct, specific, and keep exclamations and smiley faces to a minimum.

Again, the lack of frivolity adds depth and dignity to the gesture. The more meaningful and cherished it is to the student, the more it will rev their intrinsic motivational engine.

Plus, it's fun and it feels good.

Praise That Matters

There are times when enthusiastic, over-the-top praise is right for the moment, when a welling up of pride in a student's success bursts out of you. *"Way to go, Jonah! I love your essay! Now, this is what I'm talking about."*

But often, subtle is best.

Because you're recognizing something the student *is already feeling inside*. You're not overshadowing their accomplishment or disrupting their quiet satisfaction.

You're just letting them know that you see it too.

Which is a powerful thing.

Noticing improvement, hard work, or success beyond what your students have done before, and simply noting it—the pure truth of it—can be profoundly meaningful to them.

But it takes a keen eye, a soft touch, and a willingness to hold back, just a little, in order to create the perfect moment.