

How To Give Your Students Unforgettable Directions

Posted: 17 Dec 2011 11:43 AM PST

Telling students exactly what you want is good teaching.

It seems obvious, but if you're unable to communicate what you want from your students, then they're never going to give it to you.

Too often when giving directions teachers begin talking before they're ready. They think out loud. They hem and haw. They hesitate. They appear unsure of themselves. *"Okay, um, let's see, here's what were gonna do..."*

And they wonder why their students struggle to follow directions.

It's best to compose yourself first, decide what it is you really want your students to do, and then give it to them straight. *"When I say 'go' I want you to stand up, push in your chair, and line up for lunch."*

This is good. This is excellent.

The teacher informs her students that she is going to use **the 'go' signal**, which improves listening and keeps them from moving too soon, and then tells them precisely what she wants—simple, direct, and effective.

But what if you need to give your students directions to be carried out over a lengthy activity? This can be a challenge for students and a major source of frustration for teachers.

The students start out strong enough, but soon everything falls apart. They forget. They get confused. They lose motivation. They become distracted. They start goofing off and misbehaving.

It can make you want to run screaming for the parking lot.

To be an effective teacher, to keep your students on-task and to encourage independence, you must be able to give unforgettable directions.

Here's how:

Step 1: Make your directions a story.

Your students will pay close attention if you make your directions sound like a story progressing from beginning to end. This is easy to do if you picture one of your students working his way through each of the tasks you want them to complete.

Stories are powerful and can make mundane directions come to life for students—especially when they see themselves in the story.

Step 2: Use “going to” to spark visualization.

To insert your students into your directions/story, use the words, “going to,” as in, *“First, you’re going to pick up your materials from the front table. Then you’re going to...”* When students hear “going to” they begin picturing themselves actually doing it.

“Going to” is a memory device that causes students to create a moving picture in their mind. It’s also predictive. They take it as fact that they’ll indeed be able to do everything you ask them—without your help.

Step 3: Include anchors.

As you walk your students through your directions, add a few simple but insignificant tasks along the way. For example, you might say, *“When you*

finish writing your hypothesis, you're going to run out and touch the basketball pole on the playground."

Silly tasks like this act as anchors along a memory map for your students. The novelty and goofiness has a way of helping them remember the path that leads from the beginning of the activity to the successful end. It's also a lot of fun.

Step 4: Act out your directions.

Detailed modeling can be impractical for lengthy, multi-step activities. But you can always act out what you expect without ever leaving the front of your classroom. Use your body and facial expressions to dramatize the steps you want your students to take.

It provides additional support for their visualization and helps them to better picture themselves completing the tasks you place before them.

Note: When giving directions you want followed immediately, it's best to stand in one place and **not act them out**.

Step 5: Use a winding path as reference.

On an easel or whiteboard, draw a winding path of boxes. In each box write a one or two-word reminder for your students to refer to. Each box represents a task, leading to a successful finish. This supports the idea that the activity is a story and they're the lead characters.

The last box should refer to the final anchor, a fun way to culminate the completion of the activity. For example, after your students record the final results of their science experiment, they hold their journals triumphantly in the air and say, "I did it!"

Step 6: Hang responsibility on their shoulders.

Before releasing your students to begin, ask, *“Is there anyone who doesn’t know exactly what to do from the moment I say ‘go’ until you finish the activity? I want to know now. I don’t want to find out during the activity that you don’t understand.”*

By being proactive and asking if anyone *doesn’t* understand, you effectively put the onus of speaking up on your students—saddling them with a greater feeling of responsibility to do it right.

Step 7: Increase the challenge.

When you first try this new way of giving directions, you may only have a few tasks, or steps, on your path—especially if you’re a primary teacher. But as your students get better, and as they grow more independent, you’ll be amazed at what they can do.

Bring it On

Great teaching doesn’t have to feel like hard work. You don’t have to strain and stress to be effective. You do, however, need to be able to communicate with your students in a way they understand.

For most day-to-day classroom business it’s best to be direct and straightforward with what you want. But for multi-step directions that take time to complete, you must create a story for your students.

Many teachers place giving individual help at the top of their priority list and don’t give a second thought to how they provide the directions—which creates needy, dependent students whose first inclination is to look to their teacher rather than relying on themselves.

But when you can provide unforgettable directions, when your students can see what you expect from them and picture themselves doing it, they'll rarely need your help.

And as you test them and push them with more and greater challenges, they'll develop into capable, independent students who will look back at you with eyes that say...

Bring it on.

Note: I'll be taking next week off to celebrate Christmas, but will be back on New Year's Eve with a rockin' new article.

Have a blessed holiday!

Michael