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Blog

The power of words to spark positive change

August 10, 2015

By Dawn Wilson

How do you use the power of words to spark positive change? How are words being used in your setting to create a culture of caring?

In a YouTube video, a blind man sits by a busy city street hoping for some spare change. Beside him is a sign, "I'm Blind. Please Help." People pass him by without notice until a girl stops and re-words his sign, "It's a Beautiful Day and I Can't See It." Immediately, passersby respond to the man because of the power of words.



The recent passing of my 24-year-old niece caused me to think more deeply about the power of words. Emma loved words and used them with economy to convey deep meaning, often in handwritten cards and notes with words of encouragement and hope. Many who attended her memorial service brought "Emma's Words" with them and shared how her words inspired them.

How many of you have collected words that inspired you?

Words matter

Words can offer perspective, insight, and understanding. Words can bring encouragement and hope. Words can remove fear and isolation. Words can reconcile and unite. When words become actionable in our own lives and the lives of others, we can change our thinking and our practice.

Education is word intensive. Educators use words continually in classrooms, meetings, professional learning communities, curriculum guides, school improvement plans and in a multitude of ways. Using words meaningfully is both an art and a science.

Recently a teacher shared how her observation debrief was conducted. In a nutshell, the administrator read the verbatim notes taken during the observation, offered value judgments, and gave no opportunity for the teacher to contribute. *The teacher was left with a lot of words but without a plan for next steps to improve her instructional practice.*

The impact of words

Now let's imagine how the administrator could have conducted this debrief and given meaningful feedback. Effective feedback is built on carefully chosen words. What if the administrator offered helpful feedback, asked reflective questions and invited the teacher's input about the lesson? Feedback is information about how someone is progressing toward meeting a goal.



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Advice and value judgments are not feedback because they lack information that can inform next steps.

Constructive feedback is goal-oriented, results-focused, actionable, specific, timely, ongoing, consistent, and comes from an informed voice.



Hattie's research review in [Visible Learning](#), indicates that feedback has a significant impact on increasing student achievement. So it makes sense that using words powerfully to craft effective feedback is fundamental to improving student performance. Imagine the change in teaching and learning if we became more feedback savvy!

Feedback can harness the power of words and build a culture of trust. It is the beginning of a conversation that leads to improved instructional practice. Feedback is also an integral part of conversations about teacher assessment. When educators are skilled at giving and receiving feedback, teachers' confidence to self-assess and reflect is cultivated and collective collegiality is enhanced.

As an educator, my experience and learning taught me that words are powerful messengers. However, I learned from our Emma how words can be transformed into actions that change people's lives for the good. Now that is the real power of words.

Lessons learned from the power of words:

- Let your words carry hope.
- Heart will always win over mind. Share words accordingly.
- Choose your words carefully. Once shared, they are irretrievable.
- When giving feedback, avoid advice or value judgments.
- Words without an informed voice is just noise.
- Active listening opens minds to different insights.
- Ask questions that cause others to think deeply and reflect.
- An economy of words can speak volumes. Often less is more.
- Silence can be effective communication. *"Silence is the language of god, all else is poor translation."* - [Rumi](#)

How can you use words powerfully in your setting to create positive change and a culture of caring?

Dawn Wilson

Dawn Wilson is a lead coach for the Learning Forward Academy who has served in a variety of district and school roles including teacher, instructional coach, director of curriculum and instruction, director of testing and evaluation, director of instructional technology and executive director of professional learning. Follow her on Twitter: [@wilsondyf](#).
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Dorie Davis | *September 02, 2015*

Dawn,

As a grant-writer, we seek the "right" words to persuade and encourage systemic improvements. The success of each grant submission is dependent on the positive collaborative mind-sets of staff who conduct powerful conversations (with active listening) to create accountability and excellence in a unified voice. Yes, words can "spark positive change." Thanks for reminding us through your article.

Dorie

Beverly S. Strickland | *August 29, 2015*

Dawn, thank you for the reminder that feedback is providing information on how someone is progressing toward a goal. Far too often we have seen value judgements given as feedback and the words are either defeating or serve as no help at all in reaching a projected goal. I am inspired by your words (as well as Emma's) and am striving to provide effective and results-focused feedback for the teachers I work with in the certification program. Great article!

Bev

Joy Grace | *August 26, 2015*

After teaching 40 years, I can still recall words that encouraged and shaped my teaching. Checklists and nonspecific feedback have long disappeared from my memory.

Some of my most important accomplishments occurred when I was encouraged and empowered by those around me. (usually and sadly not administrators but encouraging peers)

I still hear from students who recall specific words I said or wrote to them and how those words shaped who they are. Powerful indeed.

It is important to invest the time to communicate the best practices that Dawn has so carefully outlined. When teachers receive and profit from this type of communication, they pass it on to their students who pass it on. It multiplies exponentially. Imagine the results.

147977 | *August 25, 2015*

Loved reading Emma's story. Reminded me of the words of hers we got to keep from the Academy. Words indeed matter!

Dawn Wilson | *August 25, 2015*

Thanks to all for your insightful comments. So glad the Power of Words has sparked conversations in your settings for positive change.

Linda, I agree that modeling . . . along with practice, feedback and coaching can enhance how words may be used to improve teaching and learning. And yes, I am interested in collaborating on this topic.

Linda Mayer | *August 24, 2015*

Thank you for this thoughtful article. How might we extend your thoughts with specific examples of the bulleted lessons learned? Often I find that people have good intentions but may lack the verbiage and modeling by others. Would you consider engaging in a collaboration on this topic?

Kay Earhart | *August 22, 2015*

Dawn, I must say this article you have written certainly would make Emma proud. You have used the power of words with all of us whom you have coached. I loved it when conferencing with me you would say, "Are you open to a suggestion?" I knew what came next would be respectful, insightful and

open for discussion. Feedback handled in this manner uses words to grow and develop students, teachers and administrators. Thank you.

Elizabeth Mann | *August 20, 2015*

Dawn-

Words empower others more than we will ever know. Children remember everything; we teachers need to remember that. Also, I enjoyed your article because it promotes change in many evaluation tools.

i enjoyed sharing with my administrators and staff.

Emma's words will continue to shape others.

Thank you,

Elizabeth

1st grade teacher

Pamela Gibboney | *August 18, 2015*

Dawn,

Words should be chosen for self-improvement and teacher growth. Most of my evaluations were check-lists followed by, "Do you have any questions", with little discussion words. I enjoyed your article.

Sister Pam

Lea Arnau | *August 11, 2015*

Loved reading your thoughts. Words DO matter!

Nancy Hutchinson | *August 11, 2015*

Word crafted, excellently!

Sissy Gandy | *August 11, 2015*

Dawn, so touched by your words!!!! Our Emma is definitely smiling. I appreciate you sending this to me because our school is focusing on the area of feedback so I am sending this out to my school. Have a blessed day.

Sissy

(Jace's mom)

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