

Why Teachers Should Be Stingy with Praise

I've gotten several emails about this [article](#) by Joanne Lipman in the *Wall Street Journal*. The bottom line is that the teachers who get the best results are all about really tough love. The best way to motivate students is to challenge them with realistic (and therefore tough) assessments of their shortcomings. It's a good idea to shout at them when they're slacking off. And to let them fail when they've actually not made the grade through lack of effort or natural gifts.

Studies show that students flourish best when constantly under a moderate amount of stress. Those are the students who don't think of themselves as stressed at all. The best way to handle stress is to routinely experience it. As Aristotle says, the best way to come to possess the moral virtue of courage is actually to be in situations where courage is required to live well. The more the virtue becomes your own, the easier it is to keep your head, choose well, and even be happy in risky situations. We should be happy that today's students almost never find themselves in situations (such as battle) where their lives are on the line. The downside is that they really are a little less courageous than they might be. The more they experience the pressure, the more they can handle the pressure, the more virtuous or self-possessed they really are.

Studies also show that catering to or flattering students actually undermines their self-esteem. Real self-esteem—pride as opposed to vanity—comes from pleasurable reflection on real accomplishments, on meeting real challenges, on magnanimously or generously displaying one's personal greatness. So the best teachers are stingy with praise in order that it really mean something. And they praise students not only or even mainly for their intellectual accomplishments but for their "class." Being classy is just knowing how to act as a responsibly

relational being in a particular situation. It's not some pretension of the privileged, unless by being privileged you mean having been given the challenge of living well as a free and relational person. Poverty is no barrier to being classy, as anyone with classy eyes notices every day.

Studies also show that the best teachers typically use what are viewed as relatively old-fashioned teaching methods. Those who do the studies expected the stellar educators be all about collaborative learning, high technology, and other allegedly "powerful" practices. But effectively tough teachers actually focus their efforts on challenging students by giving them personal responsibilities: attentively listening to lectures, memorization, and working hard on one's own reading and writing. Mathematics—numerical calculation—doesn't become one's own without really knowing the multiplication tables. And the more of Shakespeare you've memorized, the more his poetic narratives really become part for you. It's not that memorization is everything, but it turns out to be foundation on which "higher order" learning is built. Those who write memorable novels or music *know* how indebted they are to their hugely time-consuming acquisition of the disciplined craft and insight of others. They know that "critical thinking" or "problem solving" can't be divorced from the *content* of who we are and what we do.

Creativity, it turns out, has to be learned or, better, always depends on a huge amount of disciplined learning. What passes for creative innovation is sloppy and fashion-driven without really knowing what there is to know about history or philosophy or music. Telling students to "be your own person" or "be creative" without being clear on what you really have to do to achieve such high possibilities is especially pernicious flattery. It's better to tell students to do as well as they can, perform the duties they've been given, and even "make the difference" they really can make in the places where they live.

So, the Aristotelian point is that intellectual virtue depends on moral virtue. It's relevant everywhere from grade school to graduate school. It's the only point that can justify, for example, the continued existence of residential college these days. It explains why it's only those colleges possessing real missions that aim higher than productivity or wealth and power have serious future prospects.

I now have to admit that I really don't teach like this. I'll explain why later. But for now let me say that the article is a riff on the experience of a legendary teacher of music. It turns out to be a great argument for teaching music these days. Some say that nobody much need play music anymore, because it's so easy to be a consumer of the productions of others. All we need do is to teach kids to appreciate music. But excellent musical performance requires all the virtues that I've been talking up, including grace under the pressure of performance. Maybe students these days should be pushed—even shouted at—to work on making their musical potential real, just to give them a realistic assessment of what's required to be all you can be, as well of what's required to be really creative and innovative. It's also, of course, a realistic assessment of what you can't be.

Those who possess musical excellence are a true meritocracy of talent and virtue. So too, it just occurred to me, are those who display excellence in competitive sports. So I'm tentatively dissenting from those who say high school and even non-scholarship college sports are nothing but an expensive diversion from real education. If you want to know more, watch the teaching method—including shouting—employed by the noble philosopher-coach Eric Taylor on the classic TV series *Friday Night Lights*. "Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose."

I actually long for the day (which comes after I die) when lots of teachers of philosophy and literature can convince their students that what you're doing in my class requires even more discipline—the right combination of intellectual and

moral virtue—than football or music.

One reason for what might be regarded as my un-tough, unloving, and otherwise inferior teaching method is that I both stink at and was never pushed in sports and music.

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