Communication between Students and their Teachers about Learning

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Aim

The aim of this study was to identify and explore actions teachers can take to improve communication with students about their learning.

Dimensions of this Case Study

This study was carried out by members of the Effective Learning Group (ELG) and other teachers at John Mason School. It focused on the sixty one students in two Year Nine tutor groups and involved thirty seven teachers who trialled the strategies.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Students could identify helpful and unhelpful actions from teachers, and were sensitive to the ways in which teachers treated them.
- Students valued focused and personal written or spoken communications with teachers.
- Students could interpret with a great deal of accuracy the intentions behind teacher communications.
- The study was able to identify and trial successful teacher actions and there was enough evidence to suggest that their use would improve communication between teachers and students.
- Teachers needed to be helped to make some strategies manageable, especially at the design stage, when they work collaboratively with colleagues.
- Students needed to be helped to see how the strategies are being implemented to help their learning.
- Teachers in the Effective Learning Group needed to recognise their own developing expertise as informed and reflective practitioners, and therefore needed to consider much more carefully how to encourage change with teachers outside the group.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to improve communication between students and teachers about work. It arose directly from existing research carried out by the Effective Learning Group (ELG) based in John Mason School in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, in which it was discovered that in practice, when teachers and students talked, they tended to talk more about bad work and problematic issues rather than good work and positive issues.

Our starting point was the belief that positive communication is important for student motivation; for student/teacher relationships; and, ultimately, for learning.

We were able to identify successful actions and expect a modified set of strategies to be adopted by the school for use by all teachers from September. We obtained enough evidence to suggest that their use would improve communication between teachers and students, but were not able to generate sufficient evidence to claim that this improved communication leads to improving students' motivation for learning.

The Strategies and the Teachers' Responses to them

The 39 teachers of two tutor groups in Year Nine were invited to join the study and all but two agreed to participate. At the end of the study all were asked to complete a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were held with 6 staff, 3 from ELG and 3 others. 25 staff completed the questionnaire.

The 11 strategies are listed here together with the key outcomes from their use:

- Use checking questions to make sure the student is saying what they mean to say.
  There were many positive views about this strategy, with reports that it worked well in some subjects where it helped discussion and deepened thinking.
- Use 'why' questions to check what is going on in the student's mind.
  A small proportion of teachers had difficulty using the strategy in a non-threatening way.
- Set up opportunities for peer-peer reflection.
  This strategy was not well understood by all volunteer teachers but it was reported as working well by one teacher.
- Use questionnaires in which students rate their level of understanding in writing.
  This was not well received by teachers, who found it hard to use.
- When speaking to students, emphasise the validity of the communication by using eye contact, smiles and affirmative nods.
  This was recognised as valuable by most teachers.
- When speaking to students on a 1:1 basis, to be on the same physical level as they are (teacher squatting down to the seated student).
  This was recognised as a valuable strategy, although difficult in small rooms where standing together aside from the group can overcome the space problem. 7 staff reported the strategy as the most successful.
- Give negative messages using non-verbal signals only; positive to be verbal or non-verbal.
  This proved very successful for 6 teachers.
- Reduce the isolation of students from the teacher by using a 'U' shape for seating.
  This worked well when it was done, but seems to be impracticable as a major approach for many crowded classrooms.
- Use checklists to enable the same points to be made to a number of students and thus make it more likely that positive comments will not be forgotten.
  When checklists were used, they provided insights for teachers and seemed to lead some students to improve their presentation. It seems to be practicable when developed collaboratively.
- Encourage students to write comments and questions in their books.
  3 teachers did not like this strategy because they did not want pupils' work to be defaced. Post-it notes or comment sheets would overcome this.
- Adopt mechanisms for the teacher to encourage students to see them without thinking they had done something wrong.
  Some boys still have a problem with this idea, and we need to continue finding ways of getting students and teachers to talk about good work.

What the Students said when Interviewed

It became very clear that *all* the students were keen to improve their learning; that they could identify helpful and unhelpful actions from teachers; that they were sensitive to the ways in which teachers treated them; and that they valued focused and personal, written or spoken, communications with teachers.

In large classes many students had few opportunities to communicate with teachers so the communications that did take place were important, not just in immediate learning terms but also in the ways in which they affected students' sensitivities and feelings. The students remember and reflect upon these particular communications which involve them for a long time.

Students can interpret with a great deal of accuracy the intentions behind communications, even when they are not directly involved in those communications.

Influencing Student Motivation

We asked students to complete a previously created checklist showing how much they engaged in behaviours which had been identified, by a wider group of students, as helpful in promoting motivation. The checklist included, for example, items on the extent to which students talked to teachers about difficulties with work, about more general worries, or about things they found interesting and enjoyable. It also asked students to comment on *how* they talked to teachers (eg. how often they talked with politeness and patience, and in a calm manner). We used these questions to investigate the effect of the communication strategies on motivation.

We compared responses of students on this checklist before and after the trial use of the strategies and also compared them with the previous Year 9. None of these comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference on the relevant items. This suggests that teachers' actions to improve communication, though noticed by some students as was indicated by the student interview data, did not follow through into changes in students' own self-reported behaviour when talking to teachers.

General conclusions

Several issues have emerged from the analysis of the data, some of it anticipated, some of it unanticipated, and some of it puzzling.

The main issues are identified below:

- Teachers want practical suggestions to improve practice but such suggestions can often be interpreted in different ways. This lead to unintended outcomes and to rejection of the suggestions by teachers being 'supported' through change. Teachers in ELG had no such difficulties because they had gone through the process of reflecting on ideas from the literature as they worked towards the identification of strategies to trial. Teachers need to be involved in the change process from its inception.
- Our emphasis on strategies which were practicable and manageable was well founded in that teachers seemed to reject any strategies which required extra time. However, when groups of teachers worked together on those strategies commonly rejected by others then they had a great deal of success with them (for example, the development of homework checklists).
- While some strategies are difficult to implement consistently in practice (for example, the use of non-verbal signals to give negative communication), some teachers have nonetheless been very successful. They are in a strong position to help others to move forward. In establishing a learning ethos amongst teachers, fellow teachers could be a useful learning resource.
- ELG could usefully have taken more account of the change required of students in accommodating change in teachers' practice. Indeed, it is suggested that any school-based project needs to take account of the literature on teacher change, the literature on student change and the ways in which students act as gatekeepers to teacher change.

- Students identified two significant issues: their need to know a teacher's learning intentions for a lesson or sequence of lessons; and what they saw as the unreliability of teachers in judging the efforts students make. For both examples, students were able to identify teachers who had adopted tactics to address these issues.
- Many students, unprompted and independently, raised issues relating to 'respect'. Some teachers treated them with respect, others did not. There was also a very strong message that they were unlikely to be successful learners when they considered that the teacher treated them badly. Since OFSTED commented favourably on the positive relationships between students and staff, we assume that this is a problem shared by almost every other secondary school.

Future Strategies

Based on the findings from this study the school will consider the modified strategies listed below for operation in the future.

Modified strategies

- To make sure that the student is saying what they mean to say and to find out why they think as they do, ask checking questions -"Say some more", "So what I think you are saying is .... is that right?","Can you say why you think [*what they have just said*] is true – can you tell me what makes you know that?" [Subject-specific examples will be developed];
- Set up opportunities for peer-peer reflection through a scoring system for students to express their understanding. To do this ask students, after a minute or two for reflection, to hold up their hands with a number of fingers showing to give themselves a score out of 5 to rate their understanding. They can then discuss their scores with other students and set the 'agenda' for sorting out problems. The process is quick and requires no writing or preparation from the teacher;
- When speaking to students on a 1:1 basis give full attention to the student to emphasise the validity of the communication. Eye contact, smile and affirmative nods. Try to be on the same level as the student – either by getting down to their level or by them standing with you;
- Give negative communication using non-verbal signals only; positive to be verbal or non-verbal;
- Use checklists for marking which can have a variety of purposes; these can enable the same points to be made to a number of students and thus make it more likely that positive comments will not be forgotten. Design spaces for students to write comments and questions on the checklists or in their books;
- Derive mechanisms for the teacher to encourage students to see them without thinking they have done something wrong. Examples of successful strategies have included getting students to cash in approval/praise stamps (smiley faces, "Smart' stamps etc.) for commendations by collecting directly from the teacher.

Further Reading

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Publication number 68 / 8–99