

The Language we use – and building learners' agency

Peter Johnston¹ studied for many years the language that effective teachers use in their classrooms, and the implications that teacher's choice of language has for learners' identities, relationships, purposes etc.

For example, he offers the scenario of a classroom discussion group getting chaotic, and makes the following distinctions between what teacher might say and what implications might be:

Teacher Comment ->	1. "That group, get back to work or you'll be staying in for lunch"	2. "When you are loud like that, it interferes with the other discussion groups and I feel frustrated"	3. "This is not like you. What is the problem you have encountered? Okay, how can you solve it?"
Question answered by comment:			
What are we doing here?	Labouring	Living in cooperation	Living collaboratively
Who are we?	Slaves and owner	People who care about others' feelings	Social problem-solvers. Normally admirable people.
How do we relate to one another?	Authoritarian control	Respectful with equal rights	Work out our problems
How do we relate to what we are studying?	Do it only under duress		

Does ring bells with any of your experiences or thoughts about the language used in classrooms?

Building agency

"If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. I call this feeling a sense of agency" (page 29)

Examples examined are:

"How did you figure that out?"

"What problems did you come across today?"

"How are you planning to go about this?"

"Where are you going with this piece (of writing/of artwork/of inquiry)?"

"Which part are you sure about and which part are you not sure about?"

"Why would an author (historian/scientist) do something like that?"

He summarises "As teachers, then, we try to maximize children's feelings of agency. There are really three parts to this: the belief that the environment can be affected, the belief that one has what it takes to affect it, and the understanding that that is what literacy is about" (page 39). "Developing in children a sense of agency is not an educational frill or some mushy-headed liberal idea. Children who doubt their competence set low goals and choose easy tasks, and they plan poorly" (page 40).

Overall his writing emphasise the importance of Noticing Naming and Narrating our experiences – including our experiences of learning.

¹ Johnston, P.H. (1999, 2004). *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*: Stenhouse Publishers 1571103899 Paperback