



The Importance of Language – Part 1¹

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A few days before the holidays I was listening to my friend and business partner Mary Lou Bourne talking with one of our customers and she said –

“Language is how we activate our values”

I had been reflecting on a remarkable discussion about language that was taking place on The Learning Community’s listserv and what Mary Lou’s said captures much of what we need to remember. When we look at the language we use we need to see how it supports our values and helps us move toward our vision.

Among the values that are central to our work is to have a culture of mutual respect where there is “power with” and not “power over”. When I think of our shared vision it is one where people:

- Have positive control over the lives they have chosen for themselves
- Are recognized and valued for their contributions (current and potential) to their communities.
- Are supported in a web of relationships, both natural and paid, within their communities

We need to use language that supports the values and helps us move toward the vision. The values and vision overlap and reinforce each other. Mutual respect begins with how we refer to each other. Asking how we want to be referred to is part of that respect. Asking one person is usually a “Michael or Mike” question but asking a group of people how they wish to be referred to begins with a discussion with that group. Having “power with” builds on the foundation of mutual respect and requires language that is inclusive, that refers to people as participants in a process rather than objects of a process. (E.G. Helping someone eat rather than feeding someone.)

Having positive control requires language that empowers people, language which reflects the expectation of asking, listening, and acting on what we hear. Being recognized and valued begins with mutual respect and

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how we are introduced, how others refer to us. Part of being valued is being described in ways that acknowledge current and potential contributions. Contributions need to be recognized and nurtured. Relationships that last begin with, and are sustained by, the contributions that we make to each other. How we think about each other is reflected in how we talk about each other. How we act is rooted in how we think and talk.

The values and vision are what we test our language against. When we compare the words used in our organization with our endorsed values and vision, we discover if there is consistency and buy-in or if there is a gap. When a gap exists, the organization has the opportunity to clarify expectations. One way to clarify is to be explicit about language we want to avoid –

- Language that makes people different from us
- Language that makes people the object of a process rather than a participant
- Language that diminishes the person or their contribution, or references people as objects

And it is not just the words we use but how they are heard. Context and delivery have an equal impact. While there are words that clearly create distance (and they are easy to recognize), there is no language that can't be abused. One test is to repeat what is said or written and see if it conforms to the vision and if it conveys the values.

In our day to day work the language we use reinforces what we are trying to convey or undermines the message. It is hard to overstate the importance of language. How we use language matters and it matters as much as how we use the tools that we teach. It is all about the message that it conveys.

At the same time we do not want to be the language police. Using coercion to have people talk in ways that they see as "politically correct" creates resistance and doesn't change how people think. We want to encourage and deepen understanding and be careful in walking the thin line between encouragement and coercion. We also need to keep in mind that most of the people who are using language that conflicts with our values or vision are still deeply committed to the people they support. It is the culture of caretaking that has trapped them, not an absence of caring about those they support.

Finally, we have to hold ourselves to a high standard of language behavior. We need to self-monitor, ask others to gently challenge us when we make the inevitable mistake, respond without defensiveness, and continue to have conversations about language – how we use it and its power.