



Judging – For Teachers

"I'm so stupid."

"I'll never get this."

"Again, Jack made the same mistake again. What an idiot!"

"You must be from _____. Only _____ are that stupid."

Have you heard words like this in your classroom? You might have a vision of building a tight-knit group that practices respectful communication and mutual encouragement, but instead this underlying harshness creeps in from time to time. Why do students put themselves down so much and why aren't they supportive of each other? What's going on? Well, some of the same things that go on any time any group of people get together. Most people compare themselves to others to figure out where they stand—who's smarter, cooler, better looking, and so on. When we compare ourselves to others, we often also fill our heads with negative messages—especially when we feel stupid, make mistakes, or can't pick something up quickly. Our students, like us, put themselves and others down. In every classroom where learning takes place we find hidden anxiety, envy, fear, and shame. In literacy or upgrading classes, where students have failed before or been humiliated by others, the problem is even more complex.

It's hard to learn when so much energy is taken up by competition and judgment. Instead of concentrating on school work, students wear themselves out finding ways to keep their mistakes to themselves and to avoid being "found out." Or they wear themselves out finding ways to show how much smarter or quicker they are than the student sitting beside them.

Students who are judging themselves and others may:

- act out (any variety of belligerent/rude/hostile ways) to hide their fears of being exposed as 'not knowing'
- make jokes that are really put-downs of themselves or others
- ask about how other students are doing, sometimes under the auspices of 'helping' them, but actually in order to compare and judge how they themselves are doing

- dislike other students for no apparent reasons
- not talk to anyone in the class and become the loner
- scold other students for not paying attention, or chide them about homework, etc
- form a sub-group that does everything together and behaves like a clique
- put you down as a teacher and/or talk over you
- be unable to handle any constructive criticism without blowing it far out of proportion, or putting themselves down for doing so horribly in class

What can I do to help everyone learn?

1. Create connections, community and as safe a learning environment as possible

- Do frequent activities to help students to get to know each other well.
- Recognize the whole person—help students to feel physically comfortable and emotionally safe; nurture spirit and self-esteem, and help everyone feel smart and capable.
- Work with students to set boundaries and make sure the classroom is as safe and comfortable a place as possible for everyone. Address directly any behaviour that might scare, offend, or inhibit others (all the way to asking people to leave the room until the behaviour can change).

2. Develop curiosity about behaviours while avoiding judgment

- Consider how behaviours that get in the way of learning may have once helped with survival, and how you can gently support somebody when they want to try to change old patterns. Try to be curious about where any frustrating or counter-productive behaviour may have come from.
- Talk about these survival strategies as ordinary and sensible responses to past or current violence. Talk about judgmental tendencies (especially harsh self-judgment) as normal in the aftermath of violence.

3. Encourage learners to take control of their role in the learning environment

- Using the tone that is right for you, connect with learners as adults capable of self-examination. They are probably already aware of how certain attitudes get in the way of their own and others' learning.
- When there is a problem, stand side by side with a student and point out the problem you both need to find a solution for, rather than confronting them face to face and/or criticizing.

4. Help learners name what's going on

- Think of situations where you feel vulnerable and what you need to do to take care of yourself. Introduce that kind of language and tone to learners, helping people identify what they need to feel safe and not judged.
- Speak directly with learners about negative self-talk and put downs. Encourage people to phrase things in ways that distance their learning success or failure from their value as a person.

Where can I find more information and ideas?

On www.learningandviolence.net.

In the Impacts of Violence on Learning:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact.htm> especially “Bad, Stupid, Wrong, Don't Belong”

In Helping Others Learn:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

In Helping Yourself Learn: <http://learningandviolence.net/helpself.htm> especially: “Believe in Yourself”.