Learning Express-Ways

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The Learning Express-Ways Communication System was designed to create a communication 'fast lane' to allow every student the opportunity to express who he or she is as a learner.

Solid, productive academic relationships are crucial to establishing supportive learning environments in a classroom. Like any relationship, good academic relationships require commitment and significant effort from both parties.

Conditions in a typical school may pose particularly thorny problems in regard to building relationships.

From the student's point of view, getting to know teachers or being able to ask questions or explain problems or frustrations may seem nearly impossible in high-school settings. In addition, students, especially students with disabilities, may experience feelings of isolation, rejection, or disappointment.

Teachers, for their part, are faced with a multitude of responsibilities and demands to cover a great deal of content in a relatively short amount of time. Faced with these realities, identifying the needs of individual students and making instructional decisions accordingly can be difficult.

Despite these obstacles, investing in building a positive academic relationship returns benefits for both teachers and students. When strong academic relationships are in place, students are more likely to be comfortable participating and sharing in class. Teachers can tap information about students—including those with disabilities—the backgrounds they bring to the classroom, and their questions and frustrations to more effectively shape their planning and instruction. Overall, positive academic relationships are key contributors to the conditions that make schools safe places (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 1998).

CRL researchers have developed a package of tools to help establish healthy communication patterns and build productive academic relationships within a classroom: The Learning Express-Ways Communication System.

The Learning Express-Ways Communication System

The Learning Express-Ways Communication System was designed to create a communication "fast lane" to allow every student the opportunity to express who he or she is as a learner and to have continuing discussions with his or her teacher. The system responds to the question of *how* teachers can learn more about their students with learning disabilities. It provides guidance for improving the use of academic relationship building skills for teachers and students.

Essential Components

The Learning Express-Ways Communication System consists of several items:
- a Learning Express-Ways folder
- a Learning Express-Ways Feedback Form
- a Learning Express-Ways Teacher Self-Reflection Form

Learning Express-Ways Folder

The teacher introduces this folder to students at the beginning of a course. In specially designated sections printed on the folder itself, students record their

Relationship vs. Communication

The term "relationship" is defined as an enduring association between two people who have established an ongoing connection with each other that has special properties, including a sense of history, an awareness of the nature of the relationship that influences thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and an expectation to interact in the future (Reis, 2001). When the nature of the relationship focuses on outcomes related to academic progress in a course, the connection, history, and actions of the relationship are based on the shared goal of learning together.

Increasing communication between teachers and students will not increase the connectedness between teachers and students, nor will increasing communication increase learning (Adams, Lenz, Laraux, and Graner, 2001). Simply initiating communication about learning more frequently may change students' perceptions of teachers, but the interaction between the student and teacher must be based on how to effectively support and improve learning if the full benefits of increased communication are to be realized. The goal should not be to improve communication alone. Instead, the overall goal should be to create productive academic relationships between a teacher and his or her students.

schedules, information about course and life goals, learning preferences, strengths and challenges, and academic support systems. The teacher leads students through the initial completion of these sections.

Learning Express-Ways Feedback Form

Every week, the teacher distributes the Learning Express-Ways folders to students. Inside each folder is a Learning Express-Ways Feedback Form (Figure 1 on page 3).

Message from Student. The Feedback Form provides a space, labeled *Message from Student,* in which the student writes a message about his or her learning. It allows the student to raise questions or issues that he or she might not feel comfortable sharing in class or face to face.

The space also includes a seven-point rating scale. The teacher asks students to rate how well they think they have been learning during the prior week of instruction and to include comments to clarify their rating. This rating scale is particularly helpful in getting a *minimum* response from students who may not otherwise give feedback in *written* form (for example, ESL or students with disabilities).

Students may use the *Message from Student* section to solicit a variety of types of feedback from the teacher. Among the messages students may include are the following:

- questions about learning (for example, homework problems or assignment clarification)
- feelings about the class (for example, difficulty level, behavior issues, or class control)
- reactions to instruction (for example, student acknowledgement or pace of instruction)
- discussion of problems preventing learning (for example, home life, peer conflict, or self-worth)

When teachers initially introduce the Feedback Form to students, they may need to provide prompts or questions to begin the dialogue. Conversation starters might include

- asking about information that has been provided by the student in the Learning Express-Ways Folder
- asking a question about a lesson
- soliciting an opinion
- asking for clarification about something the teacher knows about the student
- asking a question about how a student learns best
- asking for ideas about potential assignments
- asking about the best time and ways to contact the student after class

In the course of using the Feedback Form, students also may need help acquiring the language they need to communicate information about learning to their teacher. Figure 2 on page 4 provides examples of Conversation Starters students may use for this purpose.

Message from Teacher. Af-

ter students have completed the *Message from Student* section, the teacher collects the folders and the forms. During planning time, the teacher reads the students' messages and writes a response designed to increase learning outcomes in the *Message from Teacher* section.

The response should always be as *specific* and *personal* as possible. It also should be short and to the point. If a longer reply is needed, the teacher might recommend a face-to-face meeting.

The content of the *Message from Teacher* should be based on the student's message and do one or more of the following:
• answer a question
• clarify information
• offer guidance
• suggest a course of action
• ask a question
• prompt problem solving
• coach the development of strategies and skills

During initial implementation of the system, most teachers in our studies were able to respond to a class of 30 students in 30 to 45 minutes. After teachers became experienced with the system, written response time was reduced to 15 minutes or less for a class of 30 students.

Learning Express-Ways Teacher Self-Reflection Form

The **Teacher Self-Reflection Form** (Figure 3 on page 5) provides a place for the teacher to make note of common student questions and concerns, what feedback is needed, and changes to planning. The top of the form provides a place for the date and the class. Below this are brief directions for use of the form and a checklist of common concerns.

Two boxes provide a place for the teacher to jot down common student concerns, to note feedback to be made to the entire class, and to record any plans to alter instruction.

For best results, use of the Teacher Self-Reflection Form requires a two-day cycle:
1. On the same day that students complete their Feedback Forms, the teacher reads through all *Messages from Students* and completes the Teacher Self-Reflection Form.
2. On the next day possible, the teacher provides group feedback based on notes made from student comments. The *Teacher Feedback* should be communicated to the entire class along with notification of any *Alteration to Plans* that may have resulted from the students' comments.

Use of the Teacher Self-Reflec-

Class _____Eng 10_____ Name ____Jamie Benson_____

Learning Express-Ways Feedback Form

Date: Feb 14   M T W (T) F

Message from Student

Rating	How was learning today?
	1---2--(3)--4---5----6---7
	Low .... High

Today, when you were teaching about argumentation and persuasion, I did not understand what you meant by evidence. Could you clear this up?

Date: Feb 15   M T W T (F)

Message from Teacher

Thanks for letting me know. I guess I did rush through the information in trying to cover everything. I will review the information again before the test next Friday.

Date: Feb 15   M T W T (F)

Message from Student

Rating	How was learning today?
	(1)-2---3---4---5----6---7
	Low .... High

Are you going to be lecturing in every class? Will we ever have any group activities?

Date: Feb 19   M (T) W T F

Message from Teacher

Beginning next Monday, we will start a group project, so I will be leading and talking a lot less.

By the way, your notes from the lectures are pretty good. However, try using the two-column format that I described last week.

Figure 1

Conversation Starters

**If you want information
or don't understand something...**
Would you please explain...again?
Could you please go over...again?
I need more examples of...
I am confused about...
I don't understand...
How do you...?
I don't know how to...

If you want to repair a mistake...
I am sorry that I... What can I do to make it up?
How can I make up for...?

**If you have a problem
that you need help solving...**
When could we meet to talk about...?
I have a problem about... Do you have any suggestions?
How can I get more help with...?

**If you want to GET a report
on your learning or progress...**
How can I find how I am doing in this class?
What should I focus on to improve my grade?
What is my grade in this class right now?

**If you want to GIVE a report
of your learning or progress...**
The best thing that I learned today was...
The best thing I learned this week has been...
The most useful thing I learned was...
I have trouble learning when you...
I have trouble understanding when you...
I don't get it when you...

If you want to provide an explanation...
The reason _____ was not done is...
I was late because...
I missed school because...
My work is not done because...

**If you have an idea or suggestion
that would improve your learning...**
It would help me learn better if you...
It helps me learn more when you...
I learn best when you...
I like it when you...
Could we find another way to...?
Could we try...instead of...?
Could I try...instead of...?
I need more...
The activity I like best is...

If you have helpful information...
I know a person who...
I know where to find...
I would be able to get you...

If you want to show appreciation...
I want to thank you for...
I really like the way you...
You do a great job with...
It is great to see you...
I appreciate it when you...

**If you don't know what you want
to communicate, try one of these...**
I am not sure how I am doing in this class.
What skills do you think I should work on improving?
What skills do you think are my strengths?

Figure 2

tion Form benefits the teacher in several ways:
- It gives a place to make note of and tally the common concerns of students.
- It provides a guide to cue feedback in addressing these common concerns.
- It provides a place for teachers to make note of any changes they may make to their plans.
- It provides a continuing record of the responses made to students and the alterations that were made to plans.
- It builds trust with students by promptly let-

ting them know the teacher has heard what they have to say.

Supporting Research

CRL conducted research on use of the Learning Express-Ways Communication System with more than a thousand secondary school students enrolled in both general education and special education classes. Studies confirmed several benefits when teachers were taught to use the system and then used it as specified by researchers.

Class: _____ *English 10* _____ Teacher's Name: _____ *Jackson* _____

Date: _ *March 4, 2002* __ Lesson focus/topics: _ *Giving Persuasive Speeches* __

_____

Learning Express-Ways
Teacher Self-Reflection Form

Directions:

In the first column: Weekly, after reading and commenting in your students' folders, make note of comments from students that may guide your teaching for the week. **In the second column:** Make note of feedback that you would like to give to students and any changes that you will make to your plans for the week.

Date: _____ *Feb 14* _____ **Notes from Student Folders**	**Plan Changes and Group Feedback**
go over evidence- //// (Jamie, Marshall, Kim, Greer) problems understanding differ-ence between arguing and persuading ////////////////// - half of class Too much talking around Rich-ard?? When will mini debates be held? - /// Ask Sam to see me during class about getting project done before he leaves on vacation Aaron does not understand assignment on debates.	**Altered/Additional Plans:** Go over criteria for evidence. Move debate rules lesson to next week and go over arguing and persuading again today. Watch talking around Richard's area. Give 10 minutes of work time at end of class on reading assign-ment so I can talk to Sam and Aaron. **Group Feedback:** 1. Will go over "evidence" before test. 2. Will start today going over "arguing" and "persuad-ing." 3. Mini-debates will be next Friday. 4. Will move test from next Thursday to next Monday.

Figure 3

Benefits for students included that use of the system taught students how to communicate their needs more effectively. Students also were more aware of their progress in class and their options for improving performance.

The system prompted teachers to make changes in their planning related to meeting students' individual needs. It also increased the effectiveness of teacher communication. Teachers reported that they could use the system in a different class each day or target specific classes to improve communication.

In general, use of the Learning Express-Ways Communication System promoted greater respect and trust between teachers and students.

Availability

The Learning Express-Ways Communication System will be available in Summer 2003. Contact a SIM Professional Developer or the Center for Research on Learning to learn more.

References

Adams, G., Lenz, K., Laraux, M., & Graner, P. (2001). *The effects of the Learning Express-Ways Communication System on students with disabilities in high school settings* (Research Report). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning.

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Reis, H.T. (2001). "Relationship experiences and emotional well-being." In C.D. Ryff & B.H. Singer (Eds.), *Emotion, social relationships, and health* (pp. 57-83). Oxford: University Press.

Next summer marks the 25th anniversary of the Center for Research on Learning.
Check out 25 years of stories, successes, and more on the CRL History Project web site:
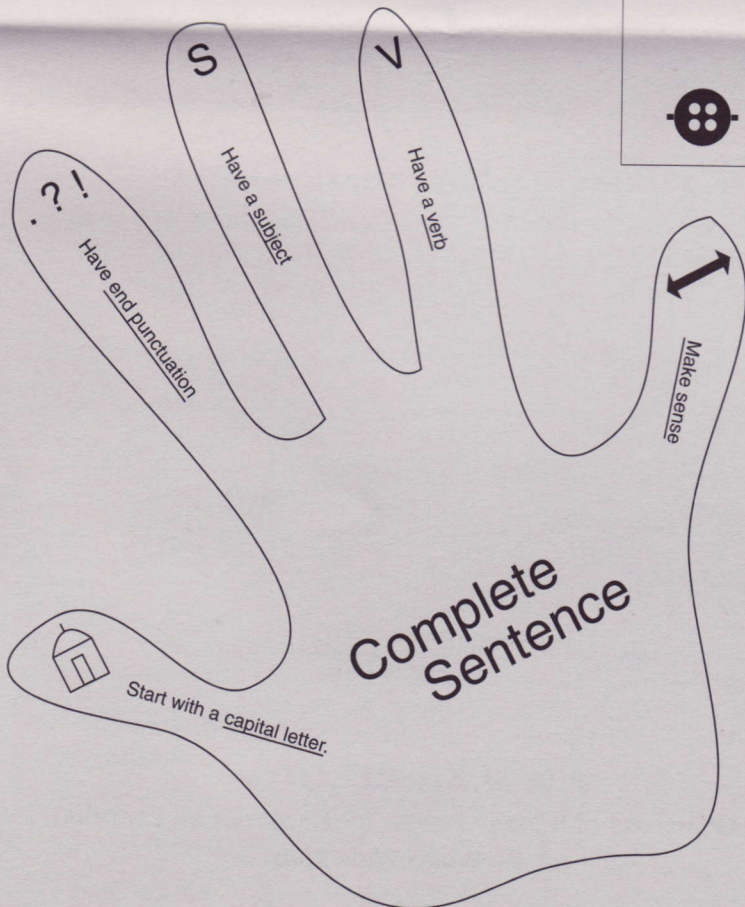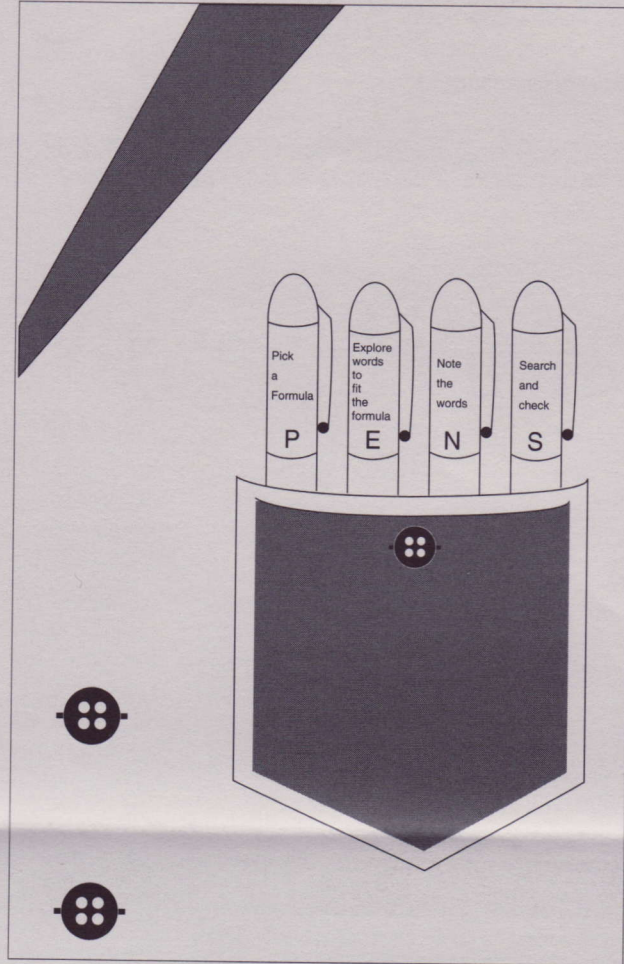www.ku-crl.org/history.

Keys to Success

The first step in developing an effective communication system with students is to shift the goal from simply communicating to communicating to create an academic relationship.

Experience with classroom communication systems has indicated that the following factors are important for building trust and opening up the lines of communication between student and teacher:

- The system is carefully planned and revised based on the characteristics of the class and continuing information shared by students.

- The system is explicitly introduced to the whole class and modified by the teacher so students can understand how the teacher's use of the system and their own participation in the system can markedly improve their relationship with their instructor *and* improve their academic performance.

- The system helps build student trust to encourage the sharing of information about learning and challenges to learning that might not otherwise be shared publicly.

- The system is used *regularly* and *consistently* so that both teacher and students have ample opportunity to become comfortable with it as a learning tool.

- The system is integrated over time with other classroom and teaching systems to create a powerful synergy.

- Students become actively involved in *meaningful* use of the system in partnership with the teacher for the purpose of improving learning for all students in the class.

Sentence Writing graphics

Yolonda G. Butler and **Nellie Gonzalez** of Orange County Public Schools, Orlando, Florida, developed these graphic ideas for use with the Sentence Writing Strategy. Thank you to **Connie Gentle** for sharing.

Pick a Formula — **P**

Explore words to fit the formula — **E**

Note the words — **N**

Search and check — **S**

Have end punctuation **. ? !**

Have a subject **S**

Have a verb **V**

Make sense **1**

Start with a capital letter.

Complete Sentence