

Talk Matters: Investigating the Nature of Non-Content Classroom Language—Instructor Talk—that May Mediate Student Inclusion

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Abstract

Through the language they use, instructors create classroom environments that have the potential to impact learning by affecting student motivation, resistance, belonging, and self-efficacy. However, despite the critical importance of instructor language to the student experience, little research has investigated what instructors are saying in undergraduate classrooms. We systematically investigated instructor language that was not directly relate to content and defined this as Instructor Talk and identified five robust categories of Instructor Talk that can characterize ~90% of non-content language found in over 60 courses: 1) Building Instructor/Student Relationships, 2) Establishing Classroom Culture, 3) Explaining Pedagogical Choices, 4) Sharing Personal Experience, and 5) Unmasking Science. The remaining ~10% of instances of Instructor Talk in these settings were categorized as negatively-phrased or potentially discouraging in nature. Attention to Instructor Talk in undergraduate classrooms, as well as in laboratory and other contexts, may be key to creating inclusive environments and promote student learning.

About the Speaker

Dr. Kimberly Tanner is a tenured Professor of Biology at San Francisco State University (SFSU). Her laboratory – SEPAL: the Science Education Partnership and Assessment Laboratory – investigates what is challenging to learn in biology, how biologists choose to teach, and how to make equity, diversity, and inclusion central in science education efforts. Her research, science education partnership, and faculty professional development efforts at SFSU have been funded by more than \$12 million in grants from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Trained as a neurobiologist with postdoctoral studies in science education, Dr. Tanner earned her BA in Biochemistry from Rice University, her PhD in Neuroscience from UCSF, and completed a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship in Science, Math, Engineering, and Technology Education (PFSMETE) jointly between Stanford University and UCSF. Dr. Tanner has been nationally and internationally recognized for both her research and her teaching in biology. She is an Elected Fellow of the California Academy of Sciences and the American Society of Cell Biology. Additionally, she has received the 2012 National Outstanding Undergraduate Science Teacher Award from the Society for College Science Teachers, the 2017 Bruce Alberts Science Education Award from the American Society for Cell Biology, the 2018 SFSU Distinguished Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the 2018 UCSF Audacious Alumni Award. Dr. Tanner is a proud first-generation college-going student.

