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Be a Warm Demander to Challenge and Support Students

I loved your class the most. It was the most challenging of my classes to keep up in. You gave me the extra support I needed, and I knew someone believed in me.

—Karen, Grade 9

In our 2022 book, *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Creating a Dynamic Classroom*, my co-author and I discussed the concept of a warm demander teacher. This type of teacher has been proven to be the most effective in the classroom. Let's take a closer look at what exactly is a warm demander.

In the words of Delpit (2013), “Warm demander teachers expect great things from their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them reach their potential in a disciplined, structured environment” (p.77). Further, “Teachers with a warm demander approach expect a lot from each student but also support them in getting there. They expect students to take risks, and at the same time create a safe space for students to do so. They embrace student mistakes and see them as learning opportunities.” (Pariser & Lentfer, 2022, p. 47).

Consider Goldilocks from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. She couldn't sleep in the bed that was too hard, or the bed that was too soft. She had to find one that was just right. Some students are like Goldilocks. They may not respect a teacher that is too easy, nor do they like one that's

too difficult. The goal is to be just right. To do this, first challenge them, then support them where needed and encourage them as they experience success. Let them know a lesson will be challenging, but show them how you will help them.

Let's look at a specific example. Say you are teaching poetry. An easy teacher may have students conduct their own research on poetry. Perhaps this teacher would make it more fun by letting them share with each other or some other enjoyable but low-rigor activity. Fun, but what is the purpose? A teacher who is too difficult, on the other hand, may say, "Write a two-page narrative poem. This will be graded. You have the computer to help you." Note: If this is where your students are, then that is a different story.

A warm demander teacher would have a challenging lesson presented in clear parts, manageable to students. First, she would show students models of narrative poems. Then, she would likely break down the elements of a narrative poem quickly. The key is not to give too much help or you will belittle the students' abilities or give them an excuse to be lazy. The class could then brainstorm possible topics of narrative poems. Finally, the teacher could explain how the assignment will be graded (referring back to the great examples that were shown in the modeling of poetry when the lesson began) and allow time for the students to work on the project. She might also pull aside a group of struggling learners for additional help as the other students write and have access to computers for help. See the difference?

This teacher will earn respect because the students are challenged and given the help that they need—but not *too* much help. The students are also instructed on the grading process and will feel like they *need* the teacher's help because the assignment is difficult and they would like a high score. Ultimately, you'd like to see your class rely less and less on you as the school year goes on. The hope is that by the end of the year, your students will be able to perform, learn, and converse as a community of learners *without* you. It's then you know you've inspired a change greater than yourself. You will succeed and will no doubt be respected if you achieve this. However, until that time comes, challenge them. Make them need you just enough, and be sure to support them. They will grow with your nourishment.

Remove scaffolds throughout the year. For example, with group-work you may choose early in the year to assign each group member a role on how to contribute to the group. This is a scaffold to effective collaboration. By the end of the year, your students shouldn't need these roles assigned and will hopefully be able to work in a group effectively. Expect them to work more independently with better results as the year progresses. This means you give them less academic support and set the expectation that they perform at a consistently higher level. If they falter, be there to give them the support they need. Keep doing this and they will grow.

Remember the following:

- ▶ If your class is too easy, your students will cruise through and your connection with them will be weaker because they won't need you for support. Students may feel like they are missing out on learning what they should.
- ▶ If your class is too difficult without support, students will become frustrated and distant and feel like they aren't heard.
- ▶ The goal is to have challenging curriculum with supports such as collaboration, engaging projects, small group instruction, checks for understandings, and best practices to engage and challenge students throughout the learning journey. Challenged and supported students feel respected.



Listen to this informative, down-to-earth podcast on the warm demander teaching style.

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Your Turn

1. What are the qualities of an instructor who is too difficult? How can this make a student feel? What about an instructor who is too easy?

2. What are some specific teaching strategies, practices, and habits a warm demander teacher would employ? How would this make a student feel?

3. What type of instructor do you see yourself as now? How do you want to see yourself in the future? Are there gray areas?

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