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Feature Article

Total Physical Response: Building "Verbal-Physical" Connections that take Hands-On Learning to a New Level
Total Physical Response (TPR) is a strategy that was "borrowed" from Speech Therapy, Special Education and Foreign Language Instruction. These folks use the technique on "harder-to-teach-than-ordinary" student populations because the technique is effective. Because the technique is effective in teaching "higher maintenance" and "riskier" students (they are considered "At Risk" aren't they), the methods might seem "elementary," "less than sophisticated," and a notch or two below highest academic standards.

But professional teachers, confident, alert to any strategy that gives students an edge in learning seem unafraid to adopt the TPR Technique.

Of course, strategies that are delivered "one-on-one" or with a pair of students for one or two periods a week by a Speech Clinician need a bit of adaptation if they are to be effective with 22 Fourth Graders or 27 Eighth Graders. And, what about some "ultra-sophisticated Twelfth Grade "know-it-alls?"

These feeble and flimsy excuses (from recalcitrant teachers) for not employing TPR strategy fail to "hold water" because students at top-named colleges, studying under renown professors in accelerated language courses are more "sophisticated" than than the high school crowd. And these students learn by the use of TPR methods.

The TPR Strategy can be connected to other high-profile teaching strategies including: Higher-Order Thinking Skills
Multiple Intelligences

Hands-On, Project-Based Learning

The Mutual Storytelling Technique

Creative Drama

Community Service Learning TPR fits or dovetails into many models, including: Partners in Learning

Meta Cognition and the Construction of Knowledge

Role Playing

Basic Thinking Skills

Enhancing Creativity

Learning from Presentation

Learning Styles
Sidebar See the Classroom Toolkit article that describes the Mutual Storytelling Technique in greater detail. Not a "Cookie-Cutter" Strategy A strategy that consistently delivers productive learning outcomes from Kindergarten to adult learners in formal settings; a strategy that appears to be part of the process that toddlers and preschoolers use to acquire language; must look different for students in each age group.

So, what would we expect to see happening in a classroom that was being lead by an "ordinary" (non-special populations) teacher? Well, a lot more than choral reading or "Listen and Repeat" group chanting.

We would see props, physical action; as in acting out a behavior that exemplifies the words, meaning or concepts that are being learned. For example: I ride.

I ride a horse.

I ride a bicycle.

I ride a train.

I ride a tornado (like Pecos Bill). Or; I paint a glorious sunset on a canvas.

I paint my bedroom with Gothic Black paint.

I paint gang slogans on rest room walls.

I paint word pictures of a sunset to impress my sweetheart.

I paint the sky with a magic brush attached to an airplane. The actual content is not important. What is important is the pairing of ideas and concepts with words and pantomime action.

Other techniques include skits, mini-dramas, plays. But, the more that the TPR process retreats from active individual participation to passive group observation; the more diluted the learning effects and measurable outcomes. Engaged Brains at Work Even oppositional-defiant students who resist following directions that are given by a teacher have to be so disturbed as to be unteachable if they cannot accept instructions given by themselves.

In other words, students that innately desire self-mastery and personal competence self-reward learning with intrinsic payoffs, and these self-rewards are built into the TPR process.

Besides, auditory and speech sensation channels are activated when students talk out words and descriptions for what they are doing, while they are performing or mimicking the action.

And, making normally invisible thinking concrete and tangible assists teachers in assessing their skill in teaching. Sidebar See for a Graphic Organizer that represents the progression from; Physical Models to Abstract Words This means that students have to talk during class. And, this talk needs to be about the curriculum.

The flaw in the "Be quiet and listen to the teacher pontificate" tradition (that was launched with the advent of factory

schools during the last century) is that most students "hear" only the first and last words that the teacher sprouts; unless those words are humor, sexy, angry, lewd or obscene. (Students pay attention to the bad stuff, and learn inappropriate content with magnificent, one-trial learning ease.)

The uniform voice of a lecture or academic discussion; passive absorption; fails to activate the alert centers of the human brain. Uniform stimulation (input) deactivates the brain at the "Reticular Activating System" (RAS) level. Sidebar For a discussion of the "Reticular Activating System" (RAS) and its effect upon learning see; A Language Learning Secret: Reset your Brain's Filter... TPR strategies are one antidote to the learning brain's RAS Filter because the student is providing lots of changes in the the learning environment, and the student's brain remains alert. Fear of Disorder, Disapproval and Public Censure Modern, lockstep instruction thrives upon physical control and an unnatural silence that is only broken by the incessant droning of "teacher talk."

So, while a teacher may agree, in theory, with the concept of students repeating words and commands aloud to themselves; the thought of a score of students (more or less doesn't matter) converting from "subtle, whispering in the ear" coaches into championship game cheerleaders sends ice-daggers through a teacher's spine.

"What if the students get out of control?" is the main fear. "Will I be able to settle them down afterwards?"

Answer: This depends upon the teacher, depends upon whether the teacher communicates expectations, communicates student benefits and how the teacher solicits positive student cooperation.

Dictatorial teachers, rule-enforcement-only teaching attitudes; and a belief in the "Students should be seen, herded, and not heard" mentality are strategies fraught with landmines and doomed to failure.

Careful rapport building with students, selling students on the idea that learning will become easier, more enjoyable, telling stories of other students or other classes that accelerated learning by means of the TPR method work well.

Another strategy: Pick several students, even single these students out for a reward. What you are interested in is connecting TPR activities with fun and reward. This is an application of the "Hawthorne Effect". Sidebar The Hawthorne Effect is often referred to as the "specialness-feeling" that develops when a group of individuals is singled out for special treatment. Classroom Toolkit referenced the Hawthorne Effect in several previous newsletters; Classroom Layout and Design: It's not too Late "We've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'" "Staying Well with Guided Imagery" But the goal is not to make the "volunteered" students feel special or even to them to learn more (although both should occur), the goal is to get other students to want in on a "good thing." Another goal is to allow the "singled out students" to deliver "unscripted testimonials" to the other students.

When students are telling each other that the TPR classroom procedure is rewarding, then the social group convinces any "prone-to-stray" student to "Not Mess Up!"

When students ask to participate, and when students convince others to cooperate, then teachers maintain a positive influence upon the class, and order is maintained at a high level of cordiality and freedom. Summary Once teachers recognize the power, flexibility and effectiveness; not to mention the positive learning outcomes that come from implementing Total Physical Response (TPR) strategies; they can develop plenty of creative ways to use the technique for delightful and imaginative instruction.

Develop a strategic plan for adding TPR to your dynamic instructional "bag of tricks."

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