

# WORKSHOP HELP DESK

## A QUICK GUIDE TO Making Your Teaching Stick K-5

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**Workshop Help Desk Series**

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*with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project*



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*to my husband*





## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	x
<b>1</b> The Stickiness Principles .....	1
<b>2</b> Principle 1: Children Learn What They Are <i>Ready</i> to Learn .....	15
<b>3</b> Principle 2: Children Learn When They Are <i>Engaged</i> .....	33
<b>4</b> Principle 3: Children Benefit from <i>Physical</i> <i>Representations</i> of Their Learning .....	53
<b>5</b> Principle 4: Children Learn Through—and Love— <i>Repetition</i> .....	74
WORKS CITED .....	88
BOOKS RECOMMENDED BY THIS AUTHOR .....	89



## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Stickiness Principles*

Are there smaller, subtler, easier ways to make something stick?

—MALCOLM GLADWELL

Children, like all humans, do not just learn things whole and then do those things perfectly from that day on, forever. Humans learn through a start-and-stop process that frequently involves (partially) learning something and losing it and then—we hope—learning it again and trying to do it as an approximation, and maybe learning it again, until it finally sticks. One of our jobs as teachers is to provide the numerous iterations needed for a lesson to stick, thus helping children move through the approximation period into solid comprehension and use of a new concept.

Making our teaching stick—more often or with more students—therefore requires a good understanding of the normal process of learning and losing knowledge and a good

understanding of why, where, and when the four stickiness principles work.

First, let me name these stickiness principles plainly:

- ▮ Children's engagement and learning are dependent on a high level of understanding; they are distracted most when their understanding breaks down. In order for teaching to stick, children need to be taught what they are *ready* to learn.
- ▮ Children learn best when they are *engaged and active* participants in their own learning. In our minilessons, we can create engagement in three major ways: by telling little stories to connect our teaching to their lives; by using gestures that get their bodies active; and by asking them to act and to role-play.
- ▮ Children may show great interest in our teaching, but if they don't have something to remind them of that teaching later, they often forget it. We need to provide physical representations of our teaching for children to hold onto as they apply their newfound knowledge.
- ▮ Children learn through—and love—*repetition*. We need to use the power of repetition to create situations where children approximate and accumulate greater and greater understanding.

Let's explore these further by examining each principle and defining the role of each principle in turning our lessons into our students' habits.

## Children Learn What They Are *Ready* to Learn

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Children are more attentive and learn more when they understand more. Most people associate this principle with Lev Vygotsky (1978), who said we learn best when the new material is in our “zone of proximal development”—that is, by determining that which the child can do with just a little help or repetition, we can determine not only what he knows now but also what he will learn next. According to Vygotsky, “The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (86). The idea of the ZPD implies that if we can determine what a child is ready to learn and then teach that, we will have her closest attention. Therefore, our work becomes determining our students’ ZPD and then teaching material that falls within that zone of understanding. In other words, when the lesson adds only a manageable quantum of new material to what our students already understand, our teaching stays with them—it sticks.

In order to teach within children’s zone of proximal development, we can draw on two overarching concepts:

- We can think about any skill as a ladder, that is, we need to be able to imagine what a child does at an emergent level, what he does as he becomes more skilled, and so on. Our teaching aims to help students acquire increasingly sophisticated writing strategies one incremental element at a time. Our goal is not the ultimate; if we were teaching perfection, we’d probably be reaching too

far or trying to have students acquire too many new ideas in one lesson.

- We can aim to create learning scaffolds, through which we provide heavy support at first, then remove this support one small element at a time. This allows learners to acquire the whole writing strategy in an incremental way. That is, in order to help a learner move along the line of growth, we release scaffolds as the child moves toward using the skill with increasing independence.

Let's look more closely at each of the stickiness principles, exploring how each principle applies to teaching writing to K–2 youngsters.

## **Children Learn Best When They Are *Engaged and Active* Participants in Their Own Learning**

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Engagement is key to making teaching stick. The challenge is to both *get* and *keep* children's attention. In this book we'll look at how to *get* children engaged by using stories—stories about ourselves, our classrooms, our students. Jerome Bruner, author of the foundational book *The Process of Education*, says that children “turn things into stories, and when they try to make sense of their lives they use the storied version of their experience as a basis for further reflection. If they don't catch things in narrative structure, it doesn't get remembered very well” (1999, 56).

Next, we will consider how to *keep* children engaged through movement and play. “Physical movement actually has



an inordinate amount of impact on creating and accessing memory. . . . *Movement helps cement memory!*" (Jones 1999, 1). Kids love few things more than wiggling their bodies, making meaningful hand gestures, and acting out roles, and we can draw on this propensity to not sit still to help them learn.

Here are some methods we use to engage children:

- ▶ *Using stories to draw in our learners.* Stories can be a powerful connector between our children and the strategies we want to teach them.
- ▶ *Using gestures to create gross motor memory.* This can help strategies stick with students even after the lesson is over. Using the same gestures throughout the day can also remind and coach students to carry the strategies that they use during writing time across the curriculum, thus solidifying the strategies.
- ▶ *Using role-playing and acting to move children from talking about strategies to trying them on their own.* Pretending is a natural part of young children's lives, and we can use their ability to pretend to help them play their way into writing with feeling and clarity.

## Children Benefit from *Physical Representations* of Their Learning

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Just as they benefit from being physical *learners*, children also benefit from having access to physical *objects* related to their learning. Adults who are learning something new often take notes to cement our learning. These notes are a way of keeping

us attentive as we learn and a way of recalling important information when we need it. In taking notes, we turn the words of the presenter into signs and symbols we can use to recall the information later. Why does this work? Vygotsky explains it this way: “When a human being ties a knot in her handkerchief as a reminder, she is, in essence, constructing the process of memorizing by forcing an external object to remind her of something; she transforms remembering into an external activity. . . . The very essence of human memory consists in the fact that human beings actively remember with the help of signs” (1978, 51).

Note taking, however, does not work for our youngest children. Our five-, six-, and seven-year-old students simply don’t yet have the writing skills to take notes that would help. In fact, if we asked children to take notes as they learned, they would spend all their energy figuring out how and what to write and would therefore have no energy left for learning the concept or idea we were teaching. So what do we do? As Vygotsky suggests, we can help children by making notes and representations for and with them. Most teachers make poster-size charts and hope these serve as physical representations of learning.

Charts are fantastic classroom tools because they create a sign to help children remember, but they work only if we make an effort to be sure they are memorable! Often they are not in children’s faces enough to help them implement new ideas. Just as advertisers use a diversity of media to get their ideas to stick with consumers, we need to do the same in our classrooms. We will explore ways to create more accessible and memorable variations of the classroom chart, so that children

understand charts in the moment and can access that understanding again and again as needed. We will do this through two main methods:

- ▶ using pictures, photographs, catchphrases, and student work to help children hold onto our teaching
- ▶ using folder-size charts and individual cards that can be customized to remind different children to use different skills and strategies, drawn from the larger whole-class charts

## Children Learn Through—and Love—*Repetition*

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The principle of repetition is not altogether new to those of us who teach. This is the ZPD at work! We realize that learning is not linear, that there is always a period in which we are *trying* to do something, but not necessarily doing it with success. Even more important, learning and forgetting, which we so often witness, is actually a symptom of nonlinearity. Often, as teachers, we are frustrated by this. But children don't truly forget what we have taught; they just have not yet learned to apply it yet. If we want them to apply the learning, we need to give them time. Repetition is the most important process through which we can translate time into learning.

Successful repetition in the classroom is more complicated than teaching the same lesson twice. It involves a degree of sophistication and variation. We can use repetition in four contexts:

- ▮ in the minilesson
- ▮ inside the unit
- ▮ from unit to unit
- ▮ throughout the day

## A Sticky Minilesson

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There are many ways to apply the four major principles in our teaching, and certainly any minilesson can encompass each of the principles. In the following example, the teacher has carefully crafted a minilesson that applies each principle. In each of the following chapters, we will take a closer look at how she does this.

### *Connection*

The teacher began, “Writers, remember how on Monday, Jordan shared a picture from his all-about book with us during the share? We were so impressed with how much he taught us in a single picture.” The teacher held up Jordan’s picture. “Remember how Anna took one look at it and said, ‘I didn’t know that dolphins had teeth!’ We decided that authors of all-about books use small details in the pictures to teach more information. After looking at Jordan’s piece, we started to notice how much the pictures in many of your books taught.

“Yesterday, many of you worked so hard to make your pictures detailed so they could teach readers. When I walked over to Desiree, she gave me a little quiz. She said, ‘I put four

things you can learn in this picture. Can you find them?’ It was funny. But then I could only find three things, and Desiree had to show me the last one. But you know what? That Desiree is one smart cookie! Before I left, she put labels in her picture and drew arrows to different items on it so as to make sure her reader could find everything she was teaching. Take a look.” The teacher held up the page from Desiree’s book.

“Today, I want to teach you that we all can be like Desiree. When we, as writers, want to be sure that our readers learn all the things we hope to teach in a picture, we can add labels with arrows.”

## *Teach*

The teacher continued, “Let’s take a look at this mural we made in science when we wanted to teach people about our pet iguana, Beatrice. Do you remember how we first drew the general stuff, and then for lots of days, different children worked on the mural, adding specific details? For example, DaQuan added a squash flower, making it over the iguana’s head. That wasn’t just a pretty picture, was it? You were adding information; you were teaching people that iguanas eat flowers and other plants. It *could* be, though, that some people will miss your lesson! So, watch me as I add labels with arrows to make sure that the reader will notice the important information you guys added.” The teacher and each child put a finger to their eye to show that they were watching. This is a gesture they agreed upon to indicate that they are watching something.

"Let's see. I know DaQuan added the squash flower hoping people would learn from this detail, so I'll add an arrow and write what DaQuan wants the people to learn. Hmm . . . I could say just one word: 'food.' Or I could say, 'Flowers and plants are Iguana food' (so they know it's not *just* squash flowers that iguanas eat).

"Hmm . . . what else? Well, here is her water; she needs it for bathing and drinking. I could label that." The teacher wrote "water for baths and drink" and then drew an arrow to the water.

"Writers, did you notice that I studied the picture, found a detail that we hope will teach, then made a label with an arrow and wrote a couple words to help readers learn the information?"

## *Active Engagement*

"Now it is your turn to try. Remember, look closely at the picture, find something we can teach people about Beatrice, and think about the label you would add with an arrow." The teacher put her finger to her temple and made a "thinking face." The children did the same.

"When you have an idea about something important to label, put a quiet thumb on your knee." Thumbs popped up right away. "Turn to your partner and share your ideas." Children chattered away for a bit and the teacher called them back quickly.

"Great, you have a lot of ideas! Noya, will you share your thought?"

"We can put 'rock' on there."

“What does ‘rock’ teach the reader about our iguana? Is it important to notice?”

“Yeah, ‘cause she scratches her claws on the rock to make them sharp!” Other children nodded vigorously.

“Great! So you want to teach people that iguanas use rocks to sharpen their claws. Come on up and add that. You could even write ‘rock for claws’.”

“While Noya writes her label the teacher went on, “whisper to the child next to you to point out another label that we can add.” The students talked to their partners again.

“Thumbs up if you have an idea.” Students turned their attention back to the teacher, and Noya returned to her spot on the rug. “Daisean, what were you thinking?”

“We can write ‘screen’ at the top because that lets the light in! Iguanas need light to live.”

“Great, come on up!”

Daisean added the label.

“Fabulous! You all did a great job of looking closely at the picture, finding something important to teach readers about our iguana, and thinking about the label you would add with an arrow.”

## *Link*

“So, writers, I am going to take this newly labeled mural of Beatrice’s habitat and put it on this chart.” The teacher taped the picture onto an already titled piece of chart paper.

She pointed as she read the title of the chart. “Ways to Make Our Pictures Teach More.” First, we need to list the strategy of adding lots of details to the picture. I’ll write,

'Details, Details, Details.' Since we like to be able to act out our strategies, let's act that out like this." The teacher tapped her index finger to her thumb, then her middle finger to her thumb, and then her ring finger. As the children tried the motion, the teacher wrote, "Details, Details, Details," at the bottom and circled a few details in the mural to illustrate the idea.

"Now I want to write the strategy that we learned today: label information with an arrow. What would be a fun way to act that out?" The teacher paused to think, and children started to whisper. Finally the teacher looked up and made eye contact with Sam.

"We could just draw an arrow with our fingers in the air," he suggested. Immediately, a few children started to mime drawing an arrow. The teacher smiled and quickly wrote, "Label information with an arrow," on the chart. She drew an arrow to an example of this on the picture.

"Now let's read our chart together."

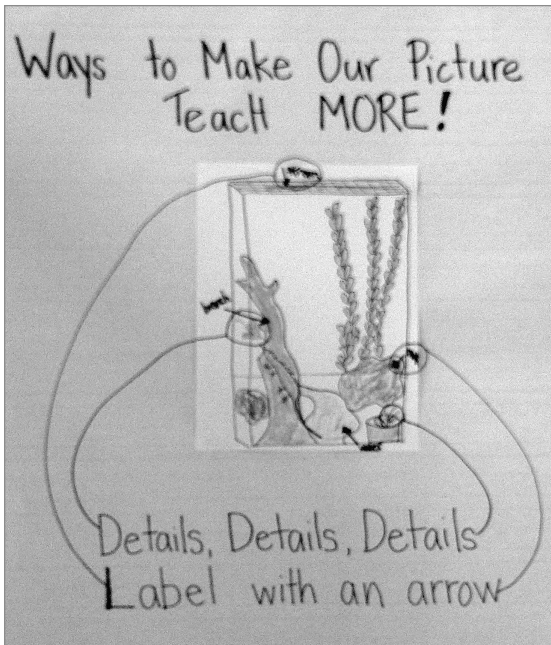
The students joined in as their teacher read and pointed to the chart. "'Ways to Make Our Pictures Teach More: Details, Details, Details.'" The children mimed this with their hands.

"'Label information with an arrow.'" The children mimed this also.

"So, writers, anytime you want to add more information to your pictures, you can add details like you have been doing *and* you can use labels with arrows to point out your details. Off you go!"

As children got started, the teacher moved the chart so children would be able to see it while sitting in their seats.





**FIG. 1.1** *In the model minilesson, the teacher makes a chart with a small version of the students' mural and then circles the parts in the mural that illustrate the strategy.*



"I thought I taught that!" All of us have said this more times than we can count and know the feeling that runs through our bodies as we see children struggle to do something that we thought we had taught so well. This book will give you ideas and suggestions for making your teaching stick with your children and thus make the all-important turn from new concept

to writing habit. Some of the ideas will be new to you, and as you apply them you will see that they can be applied in math and reading as well as writing. Other suggestions may not feel entirely new; you'll see that many of the smart methods you are already using can be applied in new ways that will have a greater impact on your students. Go ahead—get sticky!



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