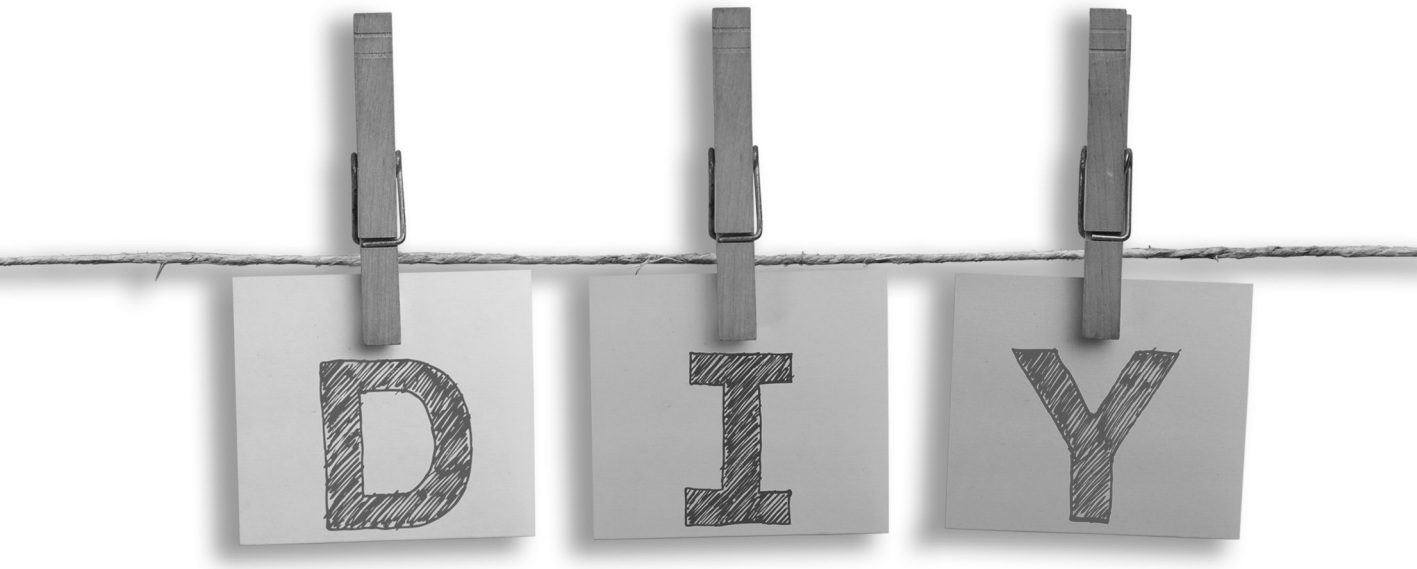
KATE ROBERTS & MAGGIE BEATTIE ROBERTS



DIY LITERACY

Teaching Tools for Differentiation, Rigor, and Independence

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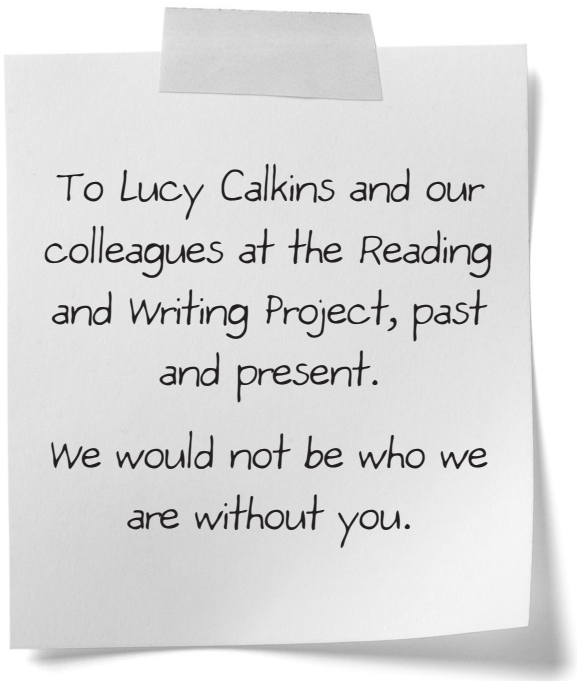


Contents

Chapter One

Extending Our Reach

A few days ago, the taillight on our car went out. Our first thought was, "Oh jeez, there goes another 150 bucks," and we planned to take the car to our mechanic. Then we thought, "Why not do it ourselves? We are strong and capable people. We can do this." So we did what any modern, would-be car mechanic would do—we went to YouTube and watched videos. Emboldened by the power of the Internet, we marched out to our car with our tiny, we-live-in-the-city toolbox and confronted the busted taillight.

And we failed.

We didn't really know what to do. We didn't have the right tools to do the job, and we barely knew how to use the tools we did have. For a moment, we resigned ourselves to the large amounts of money we were going to have to pay someone to do it for us. But then we thought to find a teacher. We thought to ask Rich, Maggie's stepfather, if he could help us to fix the car ourselves.

"Well, that depends," he said. And he opened his truck of tools. You see, Rich travels with his truck stocked with every tool he could possibly need, and luckily we were traveling with him this day. He looked at our car, assessed the situation, and then taught us how to change a taillight for a whopping $3.67. What it took for us to save some serious money? A ratchet, a lightbulb, and someone to teach us.

Without those tools and the knowledge of how to use them, we couldn't "do it ourselves." We could assess what was wrong, we could get a sense of the steps from a YouTube video. But without the right tools, we could never have done the work effectively on our own. Without the right tools, and the knowledge of how to use them, our "Do It Yourself" dreams were out of reach.

In our teaching, we have faced impossible moments, those times when our inner teacher voice says, "It can't be done!" Maybe it was that kid we couldn't seem to reach—the one for whom we had tried everything we knew on our own to help but had yet to turn the corner. Or maybe it was a moment after a unit when, even though the unit seemed to go okay, we were depleted and unable to muster great energy for the next unit beginning the following day. "There has to be something to make this easier," we thought.

Of course, teaching children is never as simple as installing a taillight. However, we have often craved—in our work with students, teachers, and districts—the "truck full of tools" that could help us to do more of the work ourselves, or to make the work more effective (and a little easier) along the way. Alongside this, we have wished for the tools that could help our kids feel more like DIY warriors of their own learning. We have wanted tools that could help students work harder, smarter, and on their own.

Teachers have always used teaching tools in the classroom. To transfer information, we went from slates and chalk to carbon copies to anchor charts and interactive whiteboards and, now, the cloud. The tools we use in the classroom have changed, partly because our technology has advanced. But tools also evolve based on needs we uncover and dreams we begin to dream. Rethinking tools and their uses helps address what might appear to be insurmountable challenges. Because, in those tough "it's not working" situations, we know deep down that when our kids aren't engaged, or learning, or growing, there is something they are not getting from us that they need.

In this book, we strive to help you find, and teach your students to use, the right teaching tool for the job.

After all, we do what we do for the kids. The tool is there to help students do more, better work *on their own*. So we must always ask ourselves, "Are the teaching tools I offer my kids really helping them to grow?"

The Right Tool for the Job

To find the right tool for the job of teaching, we must first identify what the obstacle to getting the job done *is* exactly. Often the biggest problem we face when teaching students is not the curriculum, or the politics of education, or the lesson plan we have written. Most of the time the biggest problem we face is tougher than that; it's sneakier and harder to define. In this book, we tackle three such problems:

Memory: Our students are being taught so much, and so quickly, that they struggle to remember what they "should" know or do.

Rigor: Our students are not always doing the heavy lifting in class. When our students don't work hard, we know they are not getting all they can from school.

Differentiation: We struggle to meet the needs of all our students, and we sense that there are groups of kids who are not being inspired, pushed, or helped the way they need and deserve.

These real struggles get in the way of learning. True learning happens when students get the instruction that fits their needs, have the agency and motivation to work hard, and remember and recycle what they've learned. Sometimes we—teachers and kids—need teaching tools to help us to reach these goals. This is just the way of things; tools have *always* helped us reach farther than our bodies and minds allow us to alone. We have *always* needed a little bit of help to get to where we want to go. From the days of our earliest

ancestors, human beings have relied on invented tools. (Just consider a stone axe, the wheel, duct tape, a pencil.) As educators and students, we are no different. Sometimes we can reach our dreams; we just need some help to do it.

There are many types of teaching tools to adopt and adapt to meet the needs of students. Chapter Two introduces and outlines a few—some of our favorites—and Chapter Six explores ways to make teaching tools effective and manageable. The tools we highlight include those shown in Figure 1–1 (see page 4). (Chapter Two provides a lengthier discussion of the examples shown in the figure.)

While we hope to empower you to make some useful teaching tools with your students, we spend the bulk of this book addressing not just *what* tools to use, but *how* these tools can help address specific challenges you face in your classroom. Chapter Three examines how teaching tools help students remember what has been taught before. Chapter Four dives into the work of using teaching tools to help students work with rigor, and Chapter Five offers ideas for how teaching tools help differentiate your teaching to match your students' needs. We have also included a "bonus chapter" that helps you to find the content that goes *on* all these teaching tools—the strategies, lessons, and tips that can help your students become the readers and writers they dream of becoming.

We are able to shift currents in our teaching when we step back, reflect upon the root issue for a student, group of students, or class, and offer a concrete, practical, visual tool to help address that bigger problem. After all, being frustrated when a child is refusing to clean her room rarely helps, nor does nagging. Instead, a star chart—a simple chart hung on the refrigerator marked with fun and flashy star stickers so your child can see all the times he or she made a smart choice—often does the trick.

Teaching tools can be the star charts of your classroom, the seemingly simple things that cause great positive change.

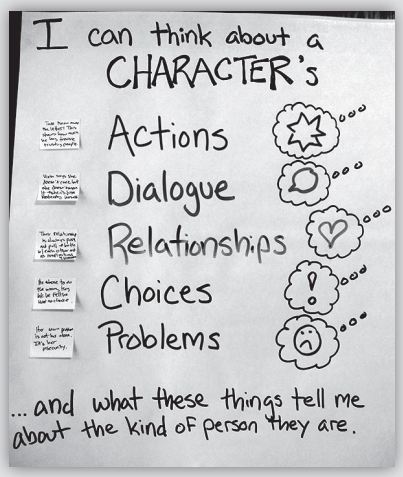
How Teaching Tools Help

The tools in our lives *improve* our lives. They save us energy, time, and struggle. Our son uses a little toy grocery cart to help him practice what he most wants to do right now but can't quite do on his own—walk. This tool helps him achieve his goal faster by allowing him to practice independently. Tools make the work easier, more manageable, and less stressful. They *help*.

Teaching tools help kids work hard and do better, sure. But they also help kids meet and match our deepest hopes for them. We hope they need us less, not more. We hope they become flexible problem solvers and are engaged in school and beyond. We hope that our kids become more powerful, independent readers and writers of a variety of texts. We crave these results as we teach, and yet often we get trapped in the hamster wheel of breadth—of being sure we have gotten to everything—rather than centering our work on depth. Teaching tools can clearly illustrate steps for exploration and growth toward these ends, and in doing so they can help make our hopes for our kids *their hopes for themselves*.

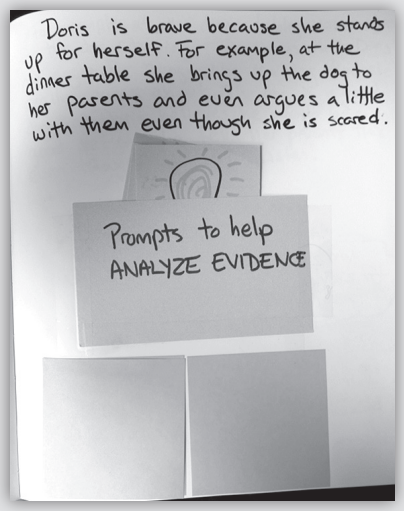
REPERTOIRE OR PROCESS CHARTS

Lists of strategies or steps hung in the classroom, often created and introduced with kids in whole-class teaching and referred to in conferences and small groups



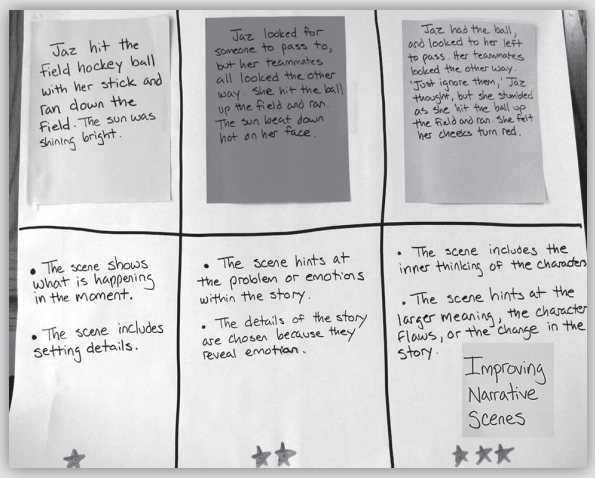
DEMONSTRATION NOTEBOOKS

Collections of teaching texts primarily for conferences and small groups



MICRO-PROGRESSIONS OF SKILLS

An agreed-upon range of levels for a particular skill, created and introduced in whole-class teaching and referred to in conferences and small groups



BOOKMARKS

Personalized lists of helpful strategies, tips, and lessons that kids make with a teacher's guidance

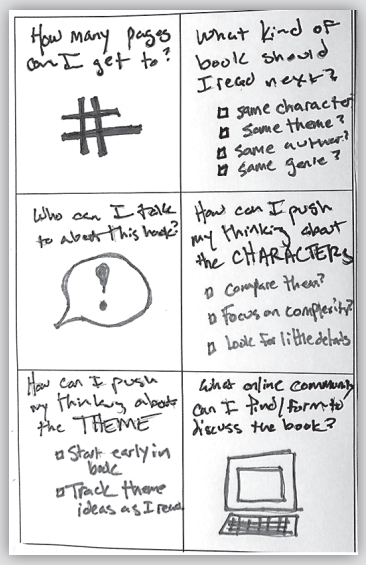


Figure 1–1 Examples of Teaching Tools

Teaching tools will not be the answer to every problem you face in your classroom, nor will they all by themselves create rigor and independence just by being in your students' hands. You will also need good teaching practices, a strong curriculum, and solid relationships with your kids. But we do argue that teaching tools are powerful assistants along the way.

We Use Teaching Tools to Make Teaching Clear

As literacy consultants at the Reading and Writing Project, we have been nurtured in a methodology of teaching that is always in search of the answer to the question, "But how do readers and writers actually *do* that?" We believe that one of our jobs as teachers is to demystify the very abstract world of what it means to be a reader or a writer. It is not enough for most students if we simply say, "When you read you should be thinking about the bigger meaning of the text." When we have taught in this way, we have felt deeply the unspoken question that follows: "But *how*?"

The way we demystify this work—the way we find the how—is to crack open the hood and look inside at the inner workings of reading and writing. We pause as we read and ask, "What am I doing here to make meaning?" And then we strive to put that work in generalizable, kid-friendly language so that we can charge into our classrooms with the good news: "Hey kids, I figured it out! Here is one way we can be better readers today." (For more on generating strategies like this, refer to the bonus chapter.)

We believe that one of the most effective ways to spur growth is to offer students clear steps and moves to try interesting, rigorous work in their reading and writing. In fact, we believe (and have learned from edu-heroes like Calkins, Anderson, Keene, Beers, and Bomer) that entire units can be crafted around a sequence of these steps and moves, also known as strategies. That is one way to make our teaching clear and to be sure that kids understand exactly how to do the things that they want to do. But as anyone steeped in strategy instruction can tell you, pretty soon you start to accumulate, well . . . an awful lot of strategies. Each day, whether in your whole-class lesson or in small-group lessons and conferences, the strategies come spilling out: "Good readers do this . . ." and "Writers of essays try to. . . ." Before long it begins to feel like an embarrassment of riches where students are swimming in tons of possible strategies. It is important to create authentic, deeply known repertoires of strategies for students, but sometimes these clear strategies become muddy from overcrowding.

Teaching tools help organize and bring clarity to the strategies in your classroom. A series of lessons on how to find the main idea in a text may demystify that skill for your students for the time that you are explicitly teaching it. However, a chart or a bookmark that keeps those strategies front and center, *and* allows your students to refer to and choose what will work best for them, gives students not just an understanding of the skill but a flight plan they can refer to whenever they are feeling off course.

We Use Teaching Tools to Bring Big Ideas and Goals to Life

Stay in education long enough and you will experience a sea change. A new idea or set of ideas will hit the educational landscape and suddenly professional development sessions, curriculum, and criteria will spring forth to address the next big thing. Perhaps it will be a standard, or a skill, or a desired quality that students should have. And the thing is, it will most likely be a really good idea. You will agree with it. It will excite you. But when you try to make that idea work in your classroom for your students, you might find it difficult to make the abstract come to life. For any worthwhile goal to be within arm's reach, many students need a boost. It helps to have a clear path of steps to follow when walking toward something new. One way to extend students' reach as they strive to meet a goal is to find a tool that can help.

Let's take one recent big idea in education as an example. John Hattie has performed comprehensive and helpful research around this question: "What has the biggest effect on learning in education?" In his book *Visible Learning* (2009), Hattie scours eight hundred meta-studies to look for the interventions, methods, and circumstances that have the largest effect on the growth and learning of students. His list is long, but it's what is at the top that compels. Figure 1–2 shows some of the primary influences on learning, among the top ten, according to Hattie.

Self-Reporting Grades: How well do students predict they will do? To what extent do students have expectations for their own learning?

Piagetian Programs: Does the teaching developmentally match the students in the room?

Formative Evaluation: Is the teacher assessing how students are doing before and during the unit, and adjusting teaching accordingly?

Figure 1–2 Some Top Influences on Learning, According to John Hattie

And here is the thing: This is a *really* good list. Hattie's research might just be some of the best, most research-based thinking out there (we think it is). The keys to successful learning and growth are empowering students to self-monitor their learning, meeting students where they are when teaching something new, and bookending units of study with *before* and *after* snapshots of student work so that growth (or lack thereof) is clear to see.

We have traced the lines from this research into classrooms, studying the intersection of what the research says and the practical nature of the everyday in schools. This is the place where we need to live and think as teachers—where the rubber meets the road. What does the research say about best practice *and* what does that look like at 8 a.m. on a Monday morning in a fifth-grade classroom in Brooklyn?

We might be tempted to simply weave bits of his suggestions into our daily practice, asking students to predict their success with a partner, maybe, or using formative evalua-

tion here and there. But will we feel the full effect of that work if it's piecemeal? As we all know, a certain chemistry exists between research practices and practical application—sometimes it can fizzle, sometimes it can spark. Rather than relying on small, behind-the-scenes shifts that might not even be noticeable to students, we put this work in the kids' hands, perhaps by using a micro-progression, which gives students concrete ways to track their own progress. In this case, a micro-progression not only helps name the work we're doing with students but also shows it developing across time. More powerfully, and to Hattie's point, this teaching tool helps students embed the idea of constant self-assessment and progress into their own academic identities. Showing work via a micro-progression, or another teaching tool, is deeply rooted in practicality and the everyday, but the branches of this work reach toward the sky of big ideas and goals for kids.

We Use Teaching Tools to Help Learning Stick

Most of us, if asked why we wanted to teach, wouldn't say, "I really wanted to write curriculum and assess student work." Instead, we bet most would say we wanted to become teachers because we wanted to make a difference. We wanted to have an impact on students' learning and their lives. Yet, most of us have also faced moments of doubt. Instead of having the *Oh Captain! My Captain!* moments from the movies we so hoped to have when entering the profession, we at times feel more like the economics teacher from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, waiting for someone in the class to answer a question, asking forlornly, "Anyone? . . . Anyone?" These doubts make us question: Is our teaching making an impact? Are we making a difference?

Teaching tools create an impact on students' learning because they help students hold onto our teaching and become changed by the work in the classroom. They help teaching become "sticky," as Shanna Schwartz describes in *A Quick Guide to Making Your Teaching Stick, K–5* (2008). As Schwartz reminds us, rare is the child who can learn a new skill in one try. Instead, "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" (1). Without this "solid comprehension" in our teaching, we can start to feel a sense of hopelessness and futility. Why work so hard on a unit, a lesson, or a stack of papers if we don't see a lasting effect?

There are three main reasons why teaching tools help teaching become stickier:

1. **They are visual.** We all have a drive and need to see things clearly. No matter the age, it helps to see things represented, spelled out, and broken down. In fact, a large portion of our brain tissues' sole job is to analyze images (Gazzaniga 2009). Visuals help us to understand and remember information. For example, we most likely do not recall the daily recommended servings of every food group, but the teeny tiny triangle at the top of the food guide pyramid is a clear (and sad) reminder that the total number of sweets we eat should be but a fraction of our total diet. In the same way, students can easily visualize

the difference between levels of work when they see them side-by-side on a micro-progression, and they can retain strategies better when they have a few easy icons on a bookmark or chart to prompt them.

2. **They make the abstract concrete.** We have all had the experience of trying to explain something complex to our students only to find ourselves caught in a "word salad," a confusing jumble of language that refuses to take shape. It's hard to clearly explain a tough concept or complex skill. Making a teaching tool—a demonstration notebook page, a micro-progression of skills—requires us to find the exact language to describe something abstract, like finding the main idea of a text or developing a thesis statement. It helps us corral our teaching by figuring out how to explain something big in a small amount of very clear words. This clarity helps teaching stick.
3. **They encourage repeated practice.** Think of a time you learned something new, perhaps a new language, a new sport, or a new recipe. Chances are you practiced that thing a number of times. The number of times practiced is different from person to person, although there are statistics. A quick Internet search will show that one has to practice something for twenty-one days in order to make it a habit. Psychologist Jeremy Dean (2013), in his book *Making Habits, Breaking Habits: Why We Do Things, Why We Don't, and How to Make Any Change Stick*, points out that twenty-one days is only enough time to make a habit out of something easy or small, like drinking a glass of water in the morning before a cup of coffee. Anything more complex—say, learning how to determine a theme of a poem—could take much longer. These tougher habits took, on average, around 254 days of daily practice to solidify, or the better part of a year! When turning strategies into habits and lessons into daily practice, teaching tools can remind kids to practice and practice often, just like the *Drink more water* reminder on the fridge.

Reaching Our Goals, Reaching Our Dreams

So far we have outlined how teaching tools help address some of the root issues with learning in our classrooms. And it is true that teaching tools are invaluable when meeting a *need* you have in your teaching. But they also help you achieve your teaching *dreams*. Dreams of helping students work hard. Dreams of helping kids have more of *those* moments, the ones where they get it. Dreams of students feeling seen—by us and by each other.

As literacy consultants, we have never seen teachers work harder than we do now. And we have watched teaching tools help them feel as though all of their hard work is worth it. In part, the tools help get traction going with teaching and learning. In larger part, the tools inspire kids to work as hard as we are. These tangible, colorful, personalized offerings of our teaching are individual gifts to students. They communicate the message

of *I see you. I see your next steps. Let me help you. Here is this.* These teaching tools invite kids in on the work of the class in a way that is tailored to them, allowing students to take control of their learning and do it themselves.

When we take on DIY projects, from remodeling a bathroom to making a new teaching chart, we know that part of the joy in this project is going to come from our own efforts. And while many times the hallmark of a DIY project is its imperfections, these flaws often become marks of character, points of pride, and evidence of learning.

One key to experiencing joy is working hard and seeing that hard work pay off. When mathematicians solve a problem they've been grappling with for months, when a musician perfects a performance of a complicated piece, when a learner masters a difficult concept, joy arrives.

It is our greatest hope that the tools we offer here will help your students to work hard, to hold onto what they know, and to see themselves in the curriculum you teach.

Onward to joy!