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TAG—You've Got It

Dance teachers trade criticism for clicker... and see results

By William Henderson/Correspondent

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Staff photos by Robert Branch

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The instructor stands at the front of the room, a group of dancers spaced out in front of her. She quickly explains what she's looking for them to do, turns on the music and watches silently.

She walks closer to the dancers, tilts her head, studies their feet, or their legs, or the position their arms are in. Once the dancer has achieved the requested position, the instructor presses a button on her clicker, a small handheld device that delivers a sharp, distinguishable noise that can identify even the most fleeting of moments. The dancer smiles a small smile. She has done it.

The instructor says nothing. She turns away from the dancers, turns off the music and faces them again.

There is no yelling, no analysis of what was done correctly or what was done incorrectly. There is also no signaling out people who failed. Welcome to dance instruction for the 21st century, a barely audible method of identifying correct behavior while simultaneously de-emphasizing incorrect behavior.



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"I needed a way to stop nagging my dancers," said Beth Wheeler, owner and instructor of Marblehead's A Dancer's Dream, 222 Beacon St.

Enter choreographer and competitive gymnastic club coach Theresa McKeon and scientist Joan Orr. When the two women were put in contact by clicker-training pioneer Karen Pryor, they formulated Tag Teach, a method of teaching with acoustical guidance. "This is a way for teachers to not always be correcting," McKeon said. "This way, correct behavior is identified instead of negatives being pointed out."

The TAG teacher focuses on a single element of a skill (referred to as a "TAG point"). When the athlete demonstrates the correct position or action, the coach rewards this with a "TAG." The TAG is a "click" produced by a small handheld cricket device. The TAG becomes a binary message that is quickly processed by the brain. A TAG means "yes," absence of a TAG means "no." The brain does not have to process corrections, emotions or translations while the body is trying to perform complicated movements.

A Dancer's Dream is the first dance school in the country to utilize TAGing as a teaching and instructional method. This summer's dance camp, held in conjunction with the Marblehead's Jewish Community Center, is the first of its kind to rely solely on TAG training. Both McKeon and Orr worked with the school's coaches to make them TAG certified.



Ballet instructor Meghan Brennan, left, uses the Tag Teach technique to help Emma Rengal, 12, learn the proper movements.

Revolutionary idea

While TAGing at the dance camp is the first wide-scale application of the methodology, with all teachers and students participating fully over an extended time period, McKeon and Orr have used TAGing with other sports, including volleyball, soccer, Special Olympics rhythmic gymnastics, artistic gymnastics, golf, the long jump, and the high jump. Some of the benefits to TAGing include alleviating fears surrounding potential correction from instructors, fostering a "TAG, don't nag" environment, and reinforcing positive and correct behaviors instead of emphasizing negative or incorrect behaviors.

"They become conditioned to think the sound is positive," McKeon said.

The younger students at the dance camp were also rewarded with stickers and beads based on the number of TAGs they received. This recent innovation in the way dance is taught may very well one day be seen used on football fields, in the classroom and even in the home.



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In tap classes, students "TAG" each other. Lauren Rabia, 8, right, holds the clicker and lets Mia Martell, 7, know she has correctly completed a step.

The TAGing method also works to improve the dancer's muscle memory. Instead of hearing when a correct position has been achieved from a coach, the dancer only hears a click. The click (or TAG) signals that the position has been achieved, and the body more easily recognizes the correct position when the dancer next attempts the step.

After more than 20 years as a dance instructor, Wheeler feels the TAGing method will revolutionize the way dance is taught. "We've never seen results this stunning," Wheeler said. "This is going to be used in every sport. They [the dancers] love that we're not correcting them anymore."

Before she began using the TAGing method, Wheeler said she would have to nag her students to get them into the correct position. She would have to watch the entire movement and then explain the different parts still in need of practice. Where traditional teaching does break the dance down into steps, in TAGing, it is the base or core of each movement or step that is defined as a TAG point. The dancer will then learn each step, or TAG point, separately before bringing all of the steps together into a complete routine.

What's important to note, then, is the utilization of TAGing improves the teacher's method as much as it improves the dancers.

"The dancer has to discover where the correct position is," Wheeler said. "The teacher doesn't have to move them anymore."

Instead, the teacher or coach watches, clicker in hand, ready to signal the dancer has discovered the correct position.

Kids respond

It's near the end of dance camp. Both the older and younger students have been working with the clickers. Some of the students have even been asked to watch their peers. Wheeler arranges the class by age group, lines them up across the floor, and asks them for a specific move. Each girl (and the one boy in the class) moves across



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the floor and an instructor watches. They TAG the dancer each time the step is performed correctly.

"Just look at their eyes," Orr said from the sidelines. "They know when they have it." The dancers aren't always TAGged. If they can't hold the position, or if they can't reach it, they must continue. Wheeler occasionally stepped in, one hand placed on a girl's back, another helping adjust a pair of hands, just enough instruction to help the dancer earn her TAG. "The more they use it, the more they're going to want to use it," Orr said.

A group of younger students have been practicing in a separate room. They share clickers so they can watch each other and mark when a step has been made correctly.

"When you TAG your partner, you both learn something," said Kimmie Pfister, 10, of Marblehead. "You can both learn how to do it correctly."

Added Marblehead resident Rachel Buckley, 11, "Instead of a teacher having to tell us, TAGging would mean you're doing a great job," said.

Hillary Lynch, 10, of Swampscott agreed. "They don't have to say good job, but you didn't do... Instead, the TAG means we did something right."

Jake Corcoran, 9, of Marblehead, the only boy in the class, also enjoys the TAG training. At various points during the day, he announces to his teachers how many TAGs he's earned. He likes this new method because it takes away any confusion about whether a position has been learned or not. "It's either a click or it's not a click," Corcoran said.

Pryor, who introduced the world to clicker training with her book, *Don't Shoot the Dog*, attended Wheeler's dance camp to see how her method of teaching dolphins had been altered to effectively teach humans.

"It doesn't matter the species," Pryor said. "It's such a wonderful way to teach behavior." She explained how TAGging helps ease frustrations linked with learning a new skill.

"Kids who are corrected and yelled at for an hour can't help feeling frustrated," Pryor said. "This way, they can focus on learning and the frustration is gone."

She watches the dancers as they perform, at times depressing an invisible clicker in her right hand.



Theresa McKeon, co-creator of TAGteach, gets up close and personal as she helps Phylcia Fishelson, 11, learn foot placement in tap class.