



PH 1: 877-TAG-0002

PH 2: 781-893-1756

FAX: 781-398-0761

49 RIVER STREET SUITE 3
WALTHAM MA 02453

WWW.TAGTEACH.COM

TribTown: Tool helps students, tasks click

All kinds of teachers take a tip from dogs that learn new tricks

By ANNA JOHNS Issue date: Tue, Mar 28, 2006

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At Stoneworks rock climbing gym in Beaverton, the music is blaring as climbers scale walls and swing like monkeys from handholds. Above the commotion, a loud clicking sound is echoing through the room.

The sound is coming from the hand of Juan Rodriguez, an instructor who is using a new tool to teach novice climbers. For every move that his student, Garrett Baldwin, performs correctly, Rodriguez clicks the palm-size instrument in his hand, called a tagger.

"When you hear it, it's like 'Cool,' " Baldwin says. "The positive reinforcement keeps you going."

Rodriguez is using a little-known instructional method called TAGteach, which dog owners may recognize as clicker training. TAG stands for teaching with acoustical guidance. The theory behind TAG and clicker training methods is similar: Break a behavior down into simple steps, and reward the student for right moves with a click (and a treat, if your student is a dog).

"It's great for isolating problems," Rodriguez says.

Using a clicking noise in teaching is more effective than verbal reinforcement, according to Keri Gorman, a nationally certified TAGteach instructor. Gorman teaches TAG seminars in the Northwest and will start a five-week-long TAG class through Portland Community College next month.

"The clicking sound works faster in the brain and creates a muscle memory," she says.

It also sounds the same every time, whereas people use a different inflection whenever they say "Thank you" or "Good job." The message won't get mixed: A click means the student did something right. Silence means "Try again."

Baldwin has discovered the difference firsthand at the climbing gym.

"Hearing the click doesn't take your mind out of the game," he says, which is important when he's thinking about the next handhold to grab.

As with clicker training for animals, TAGteach is based on positive reinforcement. When a teacher breaks down a movement or behavior into simple steps, it sets the student up for success.

It's a method that Mary Lee Nitschke, a psychology professor at Linfield College, wishes would catch on with more instructors.

"It's particularly powerful because this is promoting the development and progress of a behavior, rather than some of the methods that have been used in the past that have been based on consequences," Nitschke says.

"When is the last time you were told that you did a good job?" Gorman adds.

On top of the advantages for students, Gorman and Nitschke agree that the clicker methodology makes better teachers.

"It makes you think outside the box to create many different ways to find a solution for a student," Gorman says.

Although the TAGteach International Web site (www.tagteach.com) primarily promotes the teaching method for sports, especially gymnastics, Gorman believes it can be applied by anyone who teaches anything.

She has put her theory to work at Washougal High School, where she and special education teacher Lyn Ray have used taggers in several activities. For one game, they had the students (all are boys) pair up and learn to tie a Windsor knot. One student in each pair held the tagger and clicked it whenever the other followed a step correctly. The activity required focus for every student.



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“It was amazing to watch all these boys doing this activity and working together in close proximity,” Ray says.

Now, Ray is in the beginning stages of using the tagger for daily classroom management. She plans to dole out clicks when a student performs a desired behavior — for instance, remembering to bring a pencil to class every day.

Of course, with younger people, TAGteach is more successful when a reward is at stake. “I’ll probably offer up five extra minutes at lunch or extra computer time as an incentive,” Ray says.

The clicker approach has helped Regina Frey of Eugene communicate better with her autistic daughter, Eva.

“At first, it sounded a little gimmicky to me,” Frey says. “I was a little skeptical that it would work as well as it did.”

Frey uses the clicker for a number of activities with 9-year old Eva. It has been especially handy when the two are practicing vocals. Eva has to concentrate on her mother’s mouth to mimic the sounds.

In the past, Frey found that saying ‘Good job’ would mess up the task. She also tried visual reinforcement, but that ended up taking Eva’s focus off her mother’s mouth. With a simple click, Eva knows she has succeeded and doesn’t break concentration.

“It is really clear to her,” Frey says. “It has actually taken half the time to teach some of the skills than it had using vocal feedback.”

Gorman will offer her TAGteach seminar April 11 through June 6 at PCC’s Portland Metropolitan Workforce Training Center, 5600 N.E. 42nd Ave. For information, visit www.pcc.edu/community.