



## TEACHING THREADS

### *Using Hands in OK Ways: Eight Ideas for Hands-On Teaching*

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In my 40+-year career working with students with behavioral disorders, future teachers, and experienced teachers in both special and general education, I have continually seen the goal of *KHFOTY* (Keep Hands and Feet to Yourself) and its many variations. In most elementary, middle, and high schools, all students have the goal of using their hands in desired, appropriate, or approved ways. I am reminded of the time when a high school principal walked past my classroom and overheard me reminding a student; “*Remember your goal. You can only touch Mr. B in OK ways.*” Of course, in our classroom we knew that meant handshakes and the physical contact that came with our daily basketball games, but not coming up behind poor Mr. B and trying to wrestle him to the floor. My principal was puzzled enough by what he overheard to make a special trip down to my classroom after school to ask me about the current status of physical contact in my classroom. Getting back to the main point of this article, it's not news that a number of students need assistance in *Using their Hands in OK Ways*.

When I introduce this topic to teachers, I begin by emphasizing the need for designing lessons that prevent unacceptable behavior and increase the probability that students will exhibit acceptable behavior. Next, we clear off the desks and actually do some hands-on activities. Afterwards the teachers agree that: they felt they paid more attention during the hands-on activities and didn't daydream as much; the activities were more interesting; they completed each activity and the time seemed to move quickly; and yes, they were using their hands in OK ways without being reminded.

In collecting and designing effective hands-on activities there are a few additional considerations I try to keep in mind. All hands-on activities should be cheap or free and very easy to prepare with readily available materials. These activities are not designed for the initial instruction of new skills but for the

practicing and generalization of previously learned skills. All the activities should be adaptable across a wide range of curriculum areas and grade or skill levels. Included with each activity description presented here is a set of ideas for adaptation or extension of the activity. These ideas are not meant to represent a comprehensive listing of all possibilities. Readers are encouraged to generalize the suggestions provided and to be creative and pragmatic in developing adaptations and extensions for their own students and situations. And, because one of my nephews while in his third year of school, once asked me, “*Aunt Sharon, can teachers smile?*” - all of these activities have incorporated the essential element of fun!

#### **1. Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball**

*Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball* offers an alternative to drill and practice activities in requiring students to review previously learned information and to perform cognitive and physical skills simultaneously. In this activity the teacher and the students stand or sit in a circle so that a large, soft ball can be tossed across the circle and caught by all circle members. The teacher begins by stating a multiplication problem, such as  $6 \times 7$ , while tossing the ball to one of the students. The student is to catch the ball and answer the multiplication fact at the same time. Then it is that student's turn to state a multiplication fact while tossing the ball to another student. And so on. Students are surprised to discover how challenging the combination of a simple physical skill and a basic math skill can be.



Ideas for variations on *Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball* include: using addition, subtraction, or division facts; rhyming words; antonyms or synonyms; states and capitals; same or opposites; foreign language vocabulary; math formulas; the periodic table; or current events people and places. Teachers can also reinforce

identification and information skills through questions such as: which classmate has a pet cat; what is the definition of an island; when did the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor; name one export of Canada; who is the Vice-President; or what is your zip code? Answers to all questions must be very short; lengthy responses will result in idle hands as students wait longer for their turn.

For students who are developing the skills needed to play this game, the structure of *Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball* can be adjusted in a variety of ways to accommodate various skill levels. The teacher could first ask the question and then throw the ball. This would enable the student to first concentrate on answering the question and then on catching the ball. Another variation, stating the student's name, asking the question, and then throwing the ball is helpful for students with attention difficulties, but should be used with caution. Once a teacher calls a student's name that serves as a signal to other students that they need not pay attention to this question. It might also be helpful to have all the students toss the ball back to the teacher after their turn at answering and catching. This would enable the teacher to retain control of which questions were asked and which students were selected next. Students who need to build ball control skills may benefit from sitting on the floor and rolling the ball. Teachers could also start this activity with small groups of two or three students with the goal of working toward a larger group, especially for students who have difficulty waiting their turns.

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### ***Avoiding Chaos***

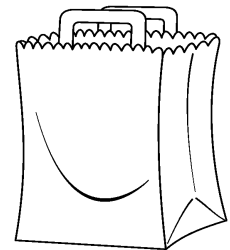
*I enjoy beginning my demonstration of hands-on activities with Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball because I always have at least one educator say, "I could never do this with my class. It would be chaos!" My typical response goes a little like this. "OK, let's talk. When students come to class who can not complete a long division problem correctly, what does the teacher do?" The discussion usually suggests that the teacher needs to identify which skills the student can perform correctly and which ones the student needs to be taught. The teacher then designs a sequential teaching*

*plan to teach the deficit skills until the student can correctly complete a long division problem. The teacher's response is not, "Since Anna can't do long division, we'll just forget it." I then compare this example to Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball. First of all, the teacher must decide whether or not the skill of correctly and successfully engaging in this circle game is important for the student. Will it facilitate his/her functioning in current and future environments? If so, the teacher would follow a similar skill analysis and instructional approach in identifying and teaching the skills needed to correctly and successfully play this game. Therefore, I encourage teachers when they think, "My students can't do that," to change their thinking to "How can my students learn the skills needed to do that?"*

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### ***2. Stories-in-a-Bag***

*Stories-in-a-Bag* has been designed to be an activity where each group of four students is given a paper bag filled with eight word cards, two cards for each student. All group members are instructed to work together to create a story that includes all the words on the cards. When the group has created the story, the group members will be asked to share it with the class. All group members should take part in the sharing of the group's story. This works well when each member relates the section of the story that includes his or her words. Students can be directed to write their stories before sharing or to share from memory. I encourage teachers to include a wide variety of vocabulary words from multiple content areas. Examples of word cards that I have used include: pancake, green, giggled, think, greedily, across, pink, addition, universe, blink, earthworm, purple, juggled, carefully, between, equals, planet, knights, wiggled, stink, angrily, under, orbit, and remainder.



Variations for *Stories-in-a-Bag* involve adjusting the difficulty of words, the number of word cards, or the number of group members. Teachers could emphasize current curriculum

topics by including adjectives, forms of transportation, weather related terminology, or words studied in multicultural units. The types of words included in each bag could be varied by combining words from math, technology, history, science, and Spanish. Students could also be challenged to create poems or radio commercials using the word cards instead of stories. This activity could be used throughout the year to reinforce previously learned vocabulary words or terms. Words cards could be easily organized in a file box to enable teachers to efficiently select words to be reinforced. Students who need to be taught the skills required for *Stories-in-a-Bag* can be taught to complete the activity independently and then with one partner, before joining a group of four.

### 3. *California Raisins*

I first saw this activity in the video, "Good Morning, Ms. Toliver" (FASE, 1993). In this activity, each student is given a small box of raisins, a sheet of paper, and something to write with. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups. The teacher then poses the question, *How many raisins do you think are in the box?* Students are instructed to describe their plan for estimating how many raisins are in their box, without opening the box and counting the raisins, of course. After the students have developed their method of solving this problem, have written it down, and calculated their estimates, their ideas are shared. The class discussion on problem solving focuses on the fact that there are many different approaches to solving the same problem. Following the discussion the students are allowed to open the boxes, count the raisins, and evaluate their estimations.

Variations for *California Raisins* include using popcorn kernels in a jar or the number of slices in a loaf of bread, the number of jellybeans in a jar, or the number of cups of popcorn resulting from one cup of popcorn kernels. Teachers could reverse the problem to be solved by having students estimate the size of a container needed to hold one million raisins, thirty pairs of athletic shoes, or 100 mini-marshmallows. Students could also be given probability statistics regarding the percentage of the population who are left-handed or who have blue, brown, or green

eyes, and asked to estimate the number of such students in their school.

### 4. *Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down*

I always enjoyed asking my students what they would do with one hundred dollars. Their answers gave me a quick idea of their perception of the value of one hundred dollars and the cost of different things. In this activity also involving estimation, students are asked to decide if the cost of an individual item is above \$100 or below \$100. Students are instructed to keep both hands on their desks as the teacher states the item or shows a picture of an item. All the students are to immediately raise both thumbs up if they feel the item costs more than \$100 or put both thumbs down if the item costs less than \$100. With some groups teachers will get a more accurate assessment of individual student ability if they have all students put their heads down and close their eyes. This greatly reduces student temptation to look around and see how others are responding. Examples of items I have included in *Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down* are: a loaf of bread, a new car, a trip to Disneyland, a T-shirt, 10 Big Macs, 30 tickets to the movies, one night's stay in a hospital, or a week's groceries for a family of four.



*Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down* can also be used to indicate yes/no, true/false, or agree/disagree responses. I've seen elementary teachers use stand up or sit down in the same way as Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down. Teachers could use other subject areas such as animals that are mammals, things that are red, cities that are capitals, numbers that are square roots, countries within a continent, words that rhyme, or antonyms versus synonyms.

### 5. *The Price is Right*

The *Price is Right* also involves the ranking and estimation of costs of individual items. In this activity students are asked to sequence a set of items according to cost. Students work in groups and are given a set of item cards to sequence. The students are instructed to line up the item cards from left to right beginning with the least expensive and ending with the most expensive item. After each group has completed this activity, the teacher provides

the actual costs of each item so that students can check their work. Examples of items include: a dental cleaning and check-up; a standard refrigerator; a flash drive; a three bedroom house; one air fare ticket to Paris; a 37-inch flat screen; a football; a pair of prescription eyeglasses; and a pair of running shoes.



Variations for the *Price is Right* include adjusting the range of and degree of difference between the prices of individual items and beginning with a few cards and working up to larger sets. An extension of this activity could be to have the students help design the activity. Give each student an item or two and the assignment to find the correct price. Students could also gather price information across the United States or in other countries using the Internet. Different topics that could be ranked would include the size of different animals, a time line for historical events, a set of directions to be followed, a sequence of events from a story or play, or the hardness of various types of rock.

## 6. *Shirts and Pants*

In this activity students are asked to solve this problem: *If you have four shirts and three pairs of pants how many outfits would you have altogether?* Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups during this activity. Each student is given colored paper representations of four different shirts and three different pairs of pants, paper, and something to write with. The students are instructed to develop their methods of solving this problem and to write that method and its solution on the paper. This requires the students to put their thought process into words and onto the paper. All student ideas are shared in the class discussion focusing on the basic mathematical principles incorporated in student solutions, the process of problem solving, and the fact that there are different ways to correctly solve the same problem.

The topic used in *Shirts and Pants* can be varied by having the students come up with all the possible types of peanut butter sandwiches when given four different types of jelly,

marshmallow fluff, and both crunchy and smooth peanut butter. During class scheduling time, have students work on this problem; Given a set of class offerings, how many possible schedules can be made which include math, English, history, and P.E.? Other variations could involve questions, such as given a penny, a nickel, a dime, and a quarter, what are all the possible amounts of change you can make using one, two, three, or four coins? Or, given 13 different pizza toppings, what is the total number of different pizzas you could make using from one to all 13 toppings?

## 7. *How Do You Eat an Oreo Cookie?*

I like to gain student interest by placing the package or Oreo cookies in sight several minutes before I begin this activity. Each pair of students is given two Oreo cookies, a clipboard with two recording sheets, and something to write with. The goal of this activity is to have students record the steps of eating an Oreo cookie as demonstrated by their partner. Students are instructed to take turns as both the demonstrator and the recorder.



This activity can be extended by having students compose complete paragraphs entitled, *How to Eat an Oreo Cookie*. As I observed a student teacher use this activity with 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, I realized that I had not considered the important difference between licking the frosting off a chocolate wafer versus scraping it off with your teeth. This student teacher and her students created small round paper books with black covers and white insides.

This activity can be easily varied by using different topics, such as how to eat a hot dog at school lunch, how to make a book cover, how to locate the UFO sightings on the Internet, and how to talk your teacher out of homework over the weekend. This activity could be extended to have students produce their own how-to videos.

## 8. *Q-Sorting and Resorting*

In this activity students are asked to work in pairs or small groups to rank a set of 10 threats to our environment. Examples include:

overpopulation; destruction of the rain forest; pollutants in the atmosphere; radiation; destruction of natural habitats for wild life; chemical wastes added to the earth; global warming; non-recyclable trash. Each pair/group is given the instruction sheet for this activity, a set of environmental threats sticky notes, and a response graph. Students are introduced to this activity in which they must, as a group, rank the environmental threats by how much harm each one causes to our environment. The response sheet is designed in a way as to allow one threat to be rated as causing the lowest amount of harm, two as causing a moderate amount of harm, three as causing a extreme amount of harm, and four as causing the greatest amount of harm. This format requires that students use all levels of rankings and eliminates the tendency to rank items similarly. Each threat is printed or written on a sticky note to allow students to sort and resort as they work through this activity. In my experience this activity usually creates a good amount of discussion among group members, which is one of the reasons for its use.

Other topics that could be used in variations of *Q-Sorting and Resorting* include the necessary characteristics of a good friend, the degree of preference for different foods, ranking of past presidents and their effect on the US, a ranking of common values, class rules and rule infractions, or the degree of importance of various responsibilities students have, such as doing homework, cleaning room, feeding the dog, or being on time for class.

As always, my intent in presenting these activities is to help teachers answer this question -

***What can I do to make it easier for my students to learn and behave?***



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