

Ways To Use TIP Cubes

Emotions

Green I am ready to learn. Good to go.

Yellow I am willing to try.

Red I feel blocked.

Understanding

Green I fully understand. I can help others.

Yellow I understand somewhat but need more practice.

Red I do not understand YET.

Progress

Green Completely finished.

Yellow Still working.

Red I am stuck.

Yes/Not Sure/No

Green Yes

Yellow Not sure

Red No

TIP Cubes | Written by Teacher and TIP Author, Karen Brittain

Origin of the Cube

After my first year of teaching, I knew that I needed to better serve my many students who were impacted by difficult life issues. I knew that I had to find a simple way to understand at least some of what was going on in their troubled lives that caused them to struggle with learning. Though math is my subject area, I know that I am, in reality, providing a space for my students to learn about themselves, others, communication, cooperation and problem solving. The world can be a hurtful place. I believe that school can either add to the hurt or become part of the healing.

All educators struggle with covering the required material with limited time available. I wanted to allow a type of “**check in**” for my students that would function as a quick, easy event at the beginning of class. I began a search for a non-verbal way for a student to communicate with me which led to **TIP Cubes**.

The Colors

Only three colors are used on the six faces of TIP Cubes; green, yellow and red. I talked to many of my colleagues before trying out a variety of phrases that simply described a student’s state of mind. I finally decided to go with the following:

Green I am ready to learn. Good to go.

Yellow I am not sure I am ready, but I am willing to try.

Red I feel blocked.

The word “blocked” is not positive or negative. It implies that the current emotional status is preventing the student from being ready to work. At any emotional level, I did not want to use a word that has a negative connotation for the student who is experiencing struggles.

How I Use the Cube

I want to make it clear that I devised the Cube to help myself. I hoped that the students would also benefit, but I had no idea how it would turn out. To my surprise and delight I found that the Cube transformed my classroom interactions with each of my students.

At the beginning of every class, while students work on their “do now” (warm-up, starter, etc.) they place their Cube in front of them to express their emotion for the day’s class. I walk around and face them, picking up their Cubes, making eye contact and placing the Cube in a basket. I generally say, “Thank you, (student’s name)”. If a student is always on green and then turns it to yellow, I might ask “are you doing alright?” I generally mention that I appreciate their willingness to try.

On Red

When a student’s Cube is on red, I stop and quietly ask why this is the case. I make it clear that they need not answer my question. I sometimes ask if they would like to see a counselor to talk about anything. I express that I am sorry they are facing something difficult. Then I say, “are you choosing to work today?”

When students do share their emotional situation with me, I generally ask “how does that make you feel?” I might ask if I can do anything to help them today in my class. I generally follow up the next day as they enter the room to see where things stand.

Sometimes a student’s Cube is on red because of hunger. If possible, I try to solve this with a breakfast bar or fruit snack. Most of the problems I encounter are beyond my ability or resources, but not my compassion. This is the time when it is good to have an intervention team at your school that can counsel

and refer students who are experiencing ongoing trauma. I see myself as a first step in a process of support and a stable presence for my students.

In some cases, I ask the student if they would like to write about the situation in their notebook to get it off their chest. When a student is visibly upset, I ask if they need to take a minute outside the room and I allow them that time and space. This is a privilege infrequently requested by the students and rarely abused.

Ultimately, the beauty of TIP Cubes, being a non-verbal tool, is that my students know that if they are on “Red”, I will stop to have some type of conversation with them. Often, they just want someone to listen and to know some of what is going on in their lives. They don’t have to wonder if they will have my attention or interest. They know they will get it. Surprisingly, students know when they need to be heard and, given a safe space, they will ask for what they need.

Follow-up conversations after a student has a “Red” day also serve to build continuing relationships. We’re told that educators must build relationships for maximum educational success, but we all know that this is often easier said than done. TIP Cubes are another tool for building teacher-student relationships and expressing care for each student as an individual.

Your Use of the Cube

The most important part is to try. I have heard so many reasons why it will not work in certain classes. Try it. Make it your own. You don’t have to be perfect. In my experience, students are much more forgiving than adults. You don’t have to be the most feeling or empathetic person. Try it and keep using it every day. If nothing else, you will make eye contact and have some interaction with each student every day.

In the beginning, students may leave it on green because they are not sure what will happen if they turn it to yellow or red. Once they start to see your interactions with other students, they will begin to share and let you in on their struggles.

For elementary teachers, you may want to have several check-ins each day. In my experience, children are often in a different state after lunch than before.

In the end, TIP believes teaching is an art form and we are sure you will have many good ideas on how to use TIP Cubes in your classroom.

About TIP Author Karen Brittain

Karen was born in Dallas as the first child of two teachers. She attended the University of Texas and currently teaches mathematics at a middle school in Utah. A central way Karen makes sense of our world is through her belief that while it is useful and necessary for life, math is also BEAUTIFUL. She hopes students find the beauty in math as they learn to think and solve problems using the tools that math provides.