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Developing a Culture of Trust Among Novice Swimmers

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Novice swimmers often relate stories of being thrown into the water or pool to either "sink or swim," while others saw or had nonfatal drowning experiences. These experiences contribute to an individual lacking confidence in their swimming skills and may limit their participation in swimming and water activities. Establishing a culture of trust is important toward developing a student's competence in the water. Trust is developed by the novice swimmer through the instructor, classmates, themselves, and water through orientation, a safe environment to learn, individualizing instruction, and giving specific, corrective, and positive feedback on performance. This article provides swimming instructors at various professional agencies (physical education, recreation, community, and university settings) with a unique approach by targeting acclimation activities/games, personal safety/rescue skills, and paired practice specifically for teenage (high school students) and young adult (college coeds) novice swimmers. This article guides an instructor in different ways instruction can be adapted to different contexts in teaching novice swimmers how to swim.

Key words: swimming instructors, trust, swimming skills, swim instruction.

Joe is an eight-year-old novice swimmer and enjoys spending time playing in the shallow water at the pool. His father has given him informal swimming lessons at the beach and pool and is confident in Joe's swimming ability. He wants Joe to take the swim test for deep water. Dad leaves to get the lifeguard; Joe misunderstands and begins swimming (doggie paddling) from shallow water to the deep-water floating dock. Half way to the dock, he begins to panic and realizes that he must get to the dock or he will drown. Now Joe is in high school and struggles to participate in his required swim class.

Children and adults have memories of early swimming experiences that limit their participation in swimming for many reasons, including fear of drowning from past experiences, anxiety about not being able to breath when under water, fear of not being able to get back to safety or touch the bottom of the pool, and fear of failure in learning to swim (American Red Cross, 2009). These events contribute

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to persons having a lack of confidence in the water and keep individuals from accessing the water for full use of its benefits (i.e., exercise and enjoyment). About two-thirds of Americans are afraid of open bodies of water like lakes, rivers, or the ocean, and almost 50% are afraid of the deep end of the pool (Dash, 2011).

Issues for Novice Swimmers

In my experience as a certified American Red Cross Water Safety Instructor (WSI), too many novice swimmers first experience in the water are negative. Stories shared by participants relate them being thrown into the water or pool to either "sink or swim," while others saw or had near drowning experiences as children when swimming at a pool or open water swim area (i.e., creek or rock quarry). Additionally, others were forced or mandated to participate in swimming in high school classes and caused the individual to resist swimming at all costs. These experiences contribute to individuals lacking confidence in their swimming skills and may have contributed to their limited participation in swimming and water activities later in life.

This article will provide swimming instructors at various professional agencies, including physical education, recreation, community, and university settings an alternative way of instruction through developing a culture of trust among novice swimmers specifically teenagers (high school students) and young adults (college coeds). Novice swimmers defined in this article are individuals who have limited swimming proficiency in the areas of water entry, buoyancy management and compensation, water adjustment, breath control, and stroke development.

Characteristics of a Culture of Trust

Lack of swimming ability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012) and fear of the water are leading causes in many adults lacking confidence in learning to swim (Dash, 2011). Establishing a culture of trust is important toward developing students' competence in their swimming ability. Trust is developed by the novice swimmer through the instructor, classmates, themselves, and the water through orientation, a safe environment to learn, individualizing the instruction, and giving specific, corrective, and positive feedback on performance. The initiation of these elements will lead to development of swimming skill competency and lead the novice swimmer toward developing skill in swimming.

Orientation

When developing a culture of trust among novice swimmers, a planned and deliberate approach is key toward the student gaining confidence through a focus on student centered goals, individualized instruction, self-paced skill development, a positive atmosphere, specific feedback, and gentle guidance to do more.

An orientation for novice swimmers introduces the participant to the components of the class beginning with the initial land based session, which orients students to the class objectives, facilities, and administrative requirements. The participant completes the swimming information questionnaire (Figure 1) and the information from this form guides the instructor regarding each learner's prior

Name_____Hometown/Country _____

Phone Number_____Home or Cell _____Email_____

 In case of emergency -- Name, telephone number, and relation to student.

Contact_____.

Contact_____.

Hobbies/Interest_____

Medical Information (list any condition that could hinder you from participation or performance in class)

_____

What are your past swimming experiences? Positive or Not positive. Explain

What (if any) strokes are you able to swim?

Describe your involvement with other previous swimming experiences. Pond, River, Lake Swimming, Swim Team, Swim lessons etc…

What are your current swimming goals? Goals in this class?

Rate your swimming proficiency?
1 -- I am terrified of water and can't put my face in the water or go under the water.
2 -- I am scared, but can put my face in and move around a little in the water.
3 -- I am okay in the water, but have problems when I put my face in the water or when floating
        or swimming, I get scared. "Feels like I can't breathe".
4 -- I can float or move a little in the water, but not comfortable.
5 -- I am okay floating or moving in the water, but need to learn how to move in the water.

Do you have any concerns?

What is the best way you learn?

Figure 1 — Student information questionnaire.

swimming related experiences or conditions that may limit or inhibit participation. This information is useful as it outlines previous history, medical conditions, and swimming experiences in the water that may inform the instructor of the student's background in a confidential and discreet manner. Within this orientation, the instructor also listens to the participant and gains insight into previous history, current skills, ability, and knowledge while being prepared to develop an instructional plan that meets the student's needs.

Instructors can then develop student centered goals with clear expectations/objectives based on student experiences, needs, interests, and skills (American Red Cross, 2009). Planning for student learning in this way may motivate the novice swimmer to make the most out of their time spent during instruction thus beginning to establish the foundation for gaining confidence and trust among novice swimmers.

Once the novice swimmers have a plan and know their respective goals, it is imperative that the instructor provide individualized learning activities to meet their needs. Using a guided discovery approach (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002) allows for learning to take place where the students have the opportunity to explore or discover the water in a variety of ways at the individual's preferred preference while being given general guidance by the instructor. These skills and activities are self-paced and intended to encourage and build student independence in the water, thereby increasing the individuals trust.

Many times, novice swimmers experience failure or see a skill as too difficult and often stop trying ("I can't do it!"). In my experience, emphasis promoting positive affirmations and statements of success assist the student from the negative (can't) statement to a positive (can) statement, "I am working on it!" Additionally, using equipment, resources, and adaptations to lessons persuades the student to overcome the negative thoughts and have success in skills. As the students are encouraged and refocused during unsuccessful trials, continual practice of the skills will lead to success in some aspect of skill practice or the whole skill. This leads to a sense of accomplishment and the establishment of a personal connection with the instructor and others in the class, leading students to work to achieve future skills.

Yarger and Dalcher (2008) noted that establishing interpersonal relationships with the instructor and others broadens the students' comfort zone, causing personal connections to become internalized and help the students to gain confidence. Having regular opportunities to practice swimming (usually three or more days a week), public recognition of success in skills and partner/group work will build close and personal connections. Development of assurance in themselves, their ability to complete skills, the reinforcement and encouragement from classmates, and guidance and care of the instructor all help to broaden the students' comfort zone, producing trust and confidence. These connections often last throughout the class and many times are maintained beyond the class.

Asking permission to assist the learner in the water is another way to develop a culture of trust. It explains and cues the learner as to the level of performance for the specific task. For example, when a learner is working on the back float with support, the instructor will ask permission to assist the learner in completing the back float by supporting the individual at the shoulder blades with the palms of their hands. Asking permission of the learner shows respect for the student while preparing the student for the activity that is about to take place.

Acclimation Activities/Games

Acclimation or adjustment activities assist swimmers in getting used to the buoyancy, pressure, weight, depth of the water, while additionally requiring swimmers to understand how to coordinate, balance, and position themselves in the water (Gabrielson, Spears, & Gabrielson, 1960). Using games, personal safety/rescue skills, and paired practice will assist novice swimmers in acclimating to the water. Typically, games are activities that support aquatic skills that students practice (i.e., bobs for water adjustment). Playing games is a nonthreatening way to reduce fear and anxiety in novice swimmers by distracting them from their fear of the water through fun play, motivating them to learn by trying something new and enhance

learning by practice and reinforcing skills previously learned (Langendorfer & Bruya, 1995). It is an opportunity to implement a brief assessment of students' abilities in the water while opening lines of communication and interaction among classmates that increase interpersonal relationships in class. Using games to teach novice swimmers allows for review, reinforcement, and extension (i.e., increased complexity) of swimming skills (Langendorfer & Bruya, 1995).

The games in Table 1 identify two examples of ways to get students actively engaged and acclimated to the water. In these games, the objective is for novice swimmers to submerge completely under water. These games provide the instructor with a quick assessment of individuals who are comfortable submerging their head completely under water and those who are not. These activities are good for encouraging swimmers to practice submerging without thinking about going under the water. These games offer choices in how to move through the water in addition to reinforcing other skills learned in previous classes. For example, emphases on breath control (blowing bubbles out) when surfacing can be emphasized prior to participation in the game.

The later game, underwater freeze tag, allows participants to submerge underwater in a nonthreatening way and work collaboratively with classmates. As students learn additional skills, more complexities can be added to this game, like rhythmic breathing when surfacing and underwater swimming when moving around underwater.

Personal Safety/Rescue Skills

Safety builds confidence and confidence builds trust that in turn builds community. Novice swimming students want to be safe in the water; likewise, teaching students to be safe in the water and recognizing a person who may be distressed or near drowning is vital in class. Students initially learn how to perform individual personal safety skills like standing up from a front float position, rolling over from front to back, and deep water bobbing (American Red Cross, 2009). Emphasis among the students in learning to relax when in a distress situation and using the personal safety skills will develop their trust and competence in learning to swim (Table 2).

Meanwhile, as the class progresses to pool instruction, an initial focus among all novice swimmers requires detailed instruction on the types of assist (rescues) and the equipment used during each assist when a colleague needs assistance. Teaching students to recognize a person having difficulty in the water and having them practice using various pieces of safety equipment (towel, rescue tube, reach pole, and kickboard) build confidence and trust in swimmers as they know how to help in an aquatic emergency. It also emphasizes the importance of students being aware of their surroundings and offering rescue assistance to their classmates or others if they find themselves in distress in swimming classes.

Paired Practice

One teaching method for developing a culture of trust among novice swimmers is using paired practice or reciprocal practice, which is the use of partners during skill development (American Red Cross, 2009). Two skills novice swimmers should

Table 1   Acclimation Activities/Games

Activity	Directions/Rules	Skills Assessed/ Developed
Blob Tag (Version of Blob Tag). Adapted from Panicucci et al. (2003)	Blob tag: two people start as the blob and the others participants move about in a designated space in shallow water. Allowed to move on top of the water, underwater, and over the water and if tagged become a part of the large blob until last two are left untagged who become the new blob.	Actively engages students in water activities and adjustment to water. Movement, comfort in the water. Head going under. Breath holding.
Seals & Otters (Modified Sharks & Minnows). Adapted from Swimming Pool Data and Reference Annual (1947)	Two teams line up on opposite sides of the pool and one side are seals, the other otters. Two people in the middle (who can swim and move around) are octopi. The objective is to tag any seal or otter that has any body part above the water. The game is started by the call of the octopi to the respective groups who are required to swim or move from one side to the other side stopping when they reach a safety line. Once tagged by the octopi, the seal or otter become seaweed and are stationary and assist in tagging other seals or otters (similar to them getting tangled in seaweed).	Actively engages students in water activities and adjustment to water. Movement, comfort in the water. Head going under Breath holding Learner has choices in how to move through the water. Reinforces other skills Breathe holding Rhythmic breathing Front glide w/kick
Under Water Freeze Tag: The game should be played within the shallow end only. Adapted from The American National Red Cross (1977)	Tag game. There are students selected who are "it". The students move about restricted space attempting to tag students who are not it. Once tagged, they are frozen until another student swims under their leg (tagged student raises leg) or tags their foot.	Water Adjustment (movement, comfort in the water) Head going under Breath holding Underwater swimming Advanced skills Rhythmic breathing

Table 2 Examples of Personal Safety Skills

Activity	Directions/Rules	Skills Assessed/ Developed
Standing up	Student works with a partner and begins a front float position. Partner observes as a safety. Participant initiates front float skill for 3 seconds. Recovers to standing position, using appropriate cues: Hands push down, head comes up, knees toward chest, and uses arms for balance.	Water adjustment Buoyancy Water pressure Rhythmic breathing Balance and coordination
Safety skill trio	Groups of three students work together, each having a set of safety equipment. Safety equipment (towel, rescue tube, reach pole, and kickboard). One in the water, one rescuer and one to provide feedback during the skill. Scenarios – distress, active, passive, and swimmer	Recognition of types of swimmers (distress, active, passive, swimmer) Reaching/ throwing
Water adjustment activities	Water entry and breathe holding activities. Partner practice, support the partner's hands while partner submerges the head under the water the other observes and provides feedback.	Water adjustment activities Rhythmic breathing activities
Novice skills practice	Swim skills practice. Partners work together on various skills providing feedback and support for partners performing skills.	Front/back float Front/back glide Bobbing (rhythmic breathing activity) Front/back glide w/kick Front/ back stroke

develop first are water adjustment and breath-holding skills. These skills prepare the swimmer for beginning activities in the water and teach students warm up routines practiced at the beginning of the swimming experience. A specific skill, bobbing, requires students to partner in groups of two standing in shallow water supporting each other by the holding hands. Each partner will practice submerging one at a time while holding their breath for three seconds under water and then returning to the surface for five repetitions. During this activity, the partner not performing the skill reinforces the other performing partner by using cues with positive feedback during their practice trials. This paired practice provides opportunities for interpersonal communication, feedback on skill cues, and skill practice with assistance. The instructor moves about the class providing individual feedback or works with individuals who have difficulty submerging. In Table 3, a sample unit plan is provided as a guide for structuring learning experiences for novice swimmers specifically lesson four regarding paired practice.

There are many ways to teach novice swimmers how to swim, and it is the responsibility of aquatic instructors to determine the abilities of their students and plan an individualized program for those students and class.

Conclusion

Many novice swimmers have anxieties and fears about the water for a variety of reasons. The goals of the swimming instructor are to assure the swimmers safety during instruction, determine ways to meet their individual learning needs, and assist in developing their skill and comfort in the water. Using acclimation activities and games, personal safety/rescue skills, and paired practice teaching are some of the ways to build a culture of trust among teenagers and young adult novice swimmers alike. This article guides an instructor as to different ways instruction can be adapted to different contexts in teaching novice swimmers how to swim.

> Although Joe made it safely to the dock and returned to the shallow water and passed the test, this initial experience caused fear and anxiety about swimming. He learned to swim using appropriate techniques, eventually became a Lifeguard and a WSI, and authored this article.

Table 3   Sample Block Plan for Skill Development in Novice Swimmers

Skill	Performance Objective	Instructional Method
Week #1	Introduction to novice swimming	Instructor guided
Orientation	Student information questionnaire completed	
Student information questionnaire	Emergency action plans	
Pool tour and description of the first day's activities.		
Question and answer session		
Week #2	Recognize type of swimmer, perform appropriate rescue.	Instructor guided
Routines/expectations established		
Safety-related skills—Safety skills trio	Ease in (one hand on deck, two feet in water), BOBs 3 sets of 3 @ 1sec under water each.	
Water adjustment/entry (controlled breathing during submersions—BOBs)	Perform front float 3 times using skill cues for 5 seconds each.	
Floating front and back	Perform back float 3 times using skill cues for 5 seconds each.	
Front glide	Perform glide and stand up 5 times using appropriate skill cues.	
Games—Blob tag	Assessments of students' movement and comfort standing in the water during game. Does head/face go under?	

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Skill	Performance Objective	Instructional Method
Week #3	Students complete	Paired practice and instructor directed
Water adjustment/entry (controlled breathing during submersions—BOBs)	3 sets of 3 BOBs 3 sets of 5 BOBs	
Floating (front/back)	Perform front float 5 times using skill cues for 5 seconds each.	
Safety skill—turning over	Perform back float 5 times using skill cues for 5 seconds each.	
Front and back glide	Perform front to back, back to front 3 times using appropriate skill cues.	
Games—seals and otters	Perform glide and stand up 5 times using appropriate skill cues.	
	Perform glide and stand up 5 times using appropriate skill cues.	
	Assessment of student ability to get body under the water. Use of rhythmic breathing as reinforcement of skills learned (BOBs).	
Week #4	Students complete 3 sets of 5 BOBs.	Paired practice and instructor encouraged
Water adjustment/entry (controlled breathing during submersions—BOBs)	Perform front float 5 times using skill cues for 5 seconds each. Student choice.	Paired practice instructor directed
Gliding (front or back)	Perform back float 5 times using skill cues for 5 seconds each. Student choice.	
Safety skill—jumps (mid-depth, 5ft of water)—Deep water bobbing to shallow water.	Perform arm sweep and leg bounce to shallow water, two trials each person at own level.	
Front crawl—flutter kick	Holding on to wall students perform scissor kicks for 15 seconds suing appropriate skill cues.	
Front glide w/flutter Kick	Perform Glide w/Kick 5 trials to partner at 15 ft., return to wall. Partner prompts correct skill cues.	
Games—underwater freeze tag	Assessment of student ability to move in the water with arms and legs, under the water. Breath holding ability and use of rhythmic breathing skills learned (bobbing).	

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