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The Instructor's Role in Aquatic Education: Some Personal Observations

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As aquatic instructors for 30+ years combined, we have seen many great instructors and methods, as well as some that were not so great. We make it a point to turn every instructional experience into a learning experience for the instructor and student alike. No two students will ever be the same, and each problem encountered requires a different and sometimes unique and imaginative perspective. We believe that an instructor should be able to model every skill they teach. We have encountered many "armchair" instructors over the years and are appalled at some of the rationale for their behaviors. We believe that an instructor must build trust and confidence from their students before effective learning can ultimately take place with kinesthetic aquatic skills. Let's face it: To a person just learning a new aquatic skill, it can be an alien landscape fraught with hidden dangers and not-so-hidden fears. If a student is concerned about survival and self-security, she or he might not be able to devote much if any attention to the lesson at hand and to the learning intended by the instructor. So, we ask the question, How does an effective instructor alleviate these fears and instill self-confidence and trust?

In our observations of some of the best aquatic instructors we know, we have noticed they have one particular thing in common. These outstanding instructors play an active role in earning trust and building confidence by being in the water with their students who are learning new skills. It is much easier to demonstrate a skill set and apply kinesthetic learning principles when the instructor is right there beside the students providing immediate feedback and reassurance. The students soon learn that their instructor genuinely cares about them and their safety and wishes to facilitate their acquisition of skill and knowledge. They also begin to develop a closer interpersonal relationship with the instructor. With this interpersonal relationship the beginnings of trust are formed, and students are encouraged to more easily step out of their comfort zone and experiment with new movements, ideas, and skills.

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Armchair Instructors

We have one vivid recollection of an argument with an armchair instructor some years back on the subject of lifeguarding. This instructor, who never got in the water with the students, was commenting on the fact that the students had not been successful during their last session of deep-water backboarding for spinal injuries. We posed the question to him, "Have you demonstrated quality performance with those having trouble?" The instructor replied that the students walked through the exercise on land, and combined with watching the video of backboarding that should be enough. A disagreement ensued that entailed a loud discourse over the appropriate roles and actions of aquatic instructors. The armchair instructor vehemently proclaimed that an effective instructor did not have to enter the water to teach lifeguarding. To us, this claim simply did not hold water, pardon our pun. It is our opinion that instructors should regularly be in the water and should demonstrate every complex skill so that the students can see what the skill looks like when performed in person just before their first try and to enhance clarity during the learning process. This also gives the instructor an opportunity to talk about critical skills and ideal performances. We do not believe that an instructor "must" get in the water in every session and for every skill but that regularly they should be in the water and clearly show comfort and skill with the tasks. Students are much more motivated to perform skills when they see an instructor do the same skill with apparent ease. Students also tend to get chilled and rapidly lose interest in learning when they can see that the instructor is warm, dry, and not particularly empathetic.

We provide the following specific example of teaching manipulative skills in lifeguarding. The circumstance was teaching when the air temperature was 70 °F (~18 °C) and the water temperature was 55 °F (~33 °C). We made a point to complete the warm-up swims and all the in-water required curricular activities in the water along with the students. It was probably one of the most physically demanding classes we have ever taught, but it was also one of the most rewarding. The students saw that the instructor spent as much, if not more, time in the water as they did. There was absolutely no complaining, and the students completely "bought in" to the class and the instructor that day. Several spring classes were taught in that same facility year after year because of the relationship that we were able to build with the students.

Professionalism

All instructors should strive to present a professional appearance and demeanor. We believe that students quickly pick up on lazy or unprofessional attitudes and behavior by instructors who are apathetic about the subject matter. A student in a recent class shared an incident that occurred in a course with an aquatic trainer who was leading an instructor course. The incident was the direct result of the trainer coming to the morning class and leading the course in an unprofessional manner. One of the instructor candidates proceeded to demonstrate practice teaching while mimicking some of the many unprofessional actions of the trainer. The trainer in this instance became upset that the student showed disrespect, but without fully comprehending that the student was parodying the instructor. We believe that

respect must be earned, which is something that the trainer in this instance failed to do. Aquatic educators must expect that their presentation styles and attitudes will be mimicked and transferred, the good and the poor examples alike, so educators must be self-aware.

We believe that it is imperative to the aquatics industry that we hold instructors to a much higher standard of professional behavior. We feel that instructors must be able to perform all skills and demonstrate sufficient depth of understanding of policies, procedures, history, and rationale for all material incorporated into a course, whether it be a learn-to-swim course, lifeguard training, or even a CPR class.

We offer the following incident as another case in point. The incident took place in a lifeguard-training class at a facility that had a typical box pool with an 11-ft (3.4-m) deep end and a 3.5-ft (1.1-m) shallow end. The class had been offered at this local facility for several years by hiring the instructor to come out each spring and teach a refresher course. Most of the students were returning lifeguards from previous years. The class was going very smoothly through shallow-water backboarding, because almost all the students had been or still were active lifeguards. When they transitioned to practice deep-water backboarding, though, things went awry in hurry. When the problem was explored, students said that they had never covered deep-water backboarding because, according to their instructor, their pool had a shallow end and they should simply move the victim to the shallow end and backboard there.

It was a shocking revelation, to say the least, because of the simplicity of the assumption yet the staggering implications it entailed. Indeed, shallow-water backboarding would be the best venue for successful removal of a victim from the water, and the students all nodded heads in agreement. Then the following scenario was presented: The certificate that they would be issued on successful completion of the course was recognized all over the United States, and they could get a job anywhere with these credentials. We asked them, "Now what would happen if you did not learn deep-water backboarding and you were hired at a facility that had a deep-water-only diving well?" It was immediately apparent to the students that inadvertently the lives of the patrons and the financial liability of the guard in that facility would be endangered based on a simple erroneous assumption by the students and initial instructor about student needs.

Changing Times

The aquatic training industry has begun to make some policy changes that in our opinion limit instructors' scope and effectiveness. Some training agencies are relying more and more on video instruction. The instructor role then becomes more facilitator than instructor. Many instructional programs have gone to a facilitation method of instruction, where students sit down with a video and/or book to gain an understanding of psychomotor skills and then move on to an instructor-led block of class for evaluation and correction. With courses that have little or no practical skills application, video-based instruction shows promise. The video method of instruction also gives instructors with little teaching experience an easy framework on which to build their classes and to provide what should be exemplar demonstrations.

It is our belief that when dealing with manipulative skill sets such as those demanded in lifeguard training, experienced instructors can accomplish more in a shorter time and concentrate on areas that need attention more effectively than video demonstration with instructor facilitation. The rationale that agencies seem to be using is that students receive consistent initial instruction because everyone watches the same video. We agree that this allows for consistent delivery, but it does not allow for easy instructor intervention or for the instructor to sculpt the class to fit the learning needs of the students. It also leaves final evaluation up to the instructor, who may or may not apply assessment criteria objectively and rigorously.

Quality of Videos

Frequently we have noted that videos for aquatic demonstrations are of poor quality. Skills that are recorded are often flawed or inaccurate. At a crossover training session that we attended, one of us was demonstrating a teaching sequence that was being rated by the agency trainer. The agency trainer stopped the demonstration and said it was wrong. We responded that the demonstration was exactly like the video showed, which it was. The trainer responded that participants should not follow the video—the textbook was the "bible" for this course. We frequently have noted incorrect demonstration of water skills in aquatic instructional videos. Students often notice them, too. This creates a problematic task for the instructor to explain the discrepancy. This also causes consternation for the students, because if the training agency can't get it right, how can they be expected to? Perhaps one can use video errors as "teachable moments," but this is certainly not an optimal situation, in our experience.

Conclusions

Our recommendations are to raise the bar for instructor training. We have seen many instructors display marginal performance and teaching skills. These poorly skilled instructors provide negative reinforcement to good students. Training agencies as a whole should reinforce professionalism and institute a more robust and comprehensive system of checks and balances to ensure that high-quality instructor-led training is being conducted as the standard.

This could easily be done by the use of anonymous surveys sent out periodically to people listed on the class records that ask very specific questions in reference to the skills covered, instructor activities and teaching techniques, and the overall quality of the course and instructor from the student's perspective. We also believe that after instructors earn their instructional certificates, they should be mandated to teach several classes with a much more experienced instructor in an apprenticeship model, to allow them to blend their conceptual knowledge with real-life expectations while being evaluated by an experienced instructor trainer. Instructors who are able to meet this challenge will be able to exert much more influence on the skill and knowledge level of aquatic staff and professionals in just a few years. As the quality of instructional skills is increased, the quality and expectations of instructor applicants can increase. This cycle of increasing quality and expectations should be self-sustaining and beneficial to the industry as a whole.