

How Well Do We Know How to Teach?

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In 1997 the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Education Task Force published several recommendations to reform athletic training education.¹ As a result of these recommendations, educational reform not only helped to redefine athletic training education, but also redefined a new job market, the athletic training educator. With the establishment of new curriculums, more doctorally-educated athletic trainers (ATs) were needed to fill the tenure-track faculty positions that were created.² The terminal degree or doctorate – whether it was a PhD, EdD, HSD, DA or other degree - helped to solidify the athletic training educator's role in academics, assuming all of the rights and responsibilities necessary for tenure and promotion, to affect higher education policy, and for advancement into senior faculty and administration positions.²

However, like many professional degree programs the terminal degree or earned doctorate was in some cases simply a means to an end. The terminal degree allowed athletic training educators to fill tenure-track faculty positions, not necessarily because of their specific degree, but rather because they were a doctoral-educated AT. The degree itself may not necessarily have guaranteed a complete understanding of pedagogy. Pedagogy, as the “art, science, or profession of teaching”³ is an integral component in assuring effective delivery of the professional body of knowledge. As ATs we have already demonstrated competence related to the skill set defined by the Board of Certification Role Delineation Study⁴, but the ability to transfer this knowledge in meaningful ways to athletic training students is challenging, even for seasoned educators.

A terminal degree in exercise physiology, for example, suggests that this doctorally-educated professional has an understanding in how the body physiologically responds during exercise. It does not mean that the person holding this degree necessarily understands how to design, implement, assess, or even instruct his/her content expertise. Obviously, there are always exceptions

to the rule, but in general most, if not all, educators need to improve the delivery of the educational content he/she is responsible for. This is particularly true as we learn more about athletic training pedagogy and the students whom we instruct and interact with on a daily basis.

Today, this delivery of professional content is further complicated by the generational gap that now exists. Millennial generation students, think, behave, and engage in life much differently than Baby Boomers and Generation Xers.⁵ As a Generation Xer, my experiences and expectations with higher education were, and still are, vastly different than those whom I now teach. In fact, in my own personal experiences I too have struggled with how to engage and reach my Millennial students. Like many new doctorally-educated ATs, I looked to my own past experiences and how I was educated as a reference point. These were the behaviors I modeled in the classroom in the early days, but these behaviors did not always work.

I thought, “What is wrong with me? I have been teaching 5 years, I have a PhD in curriculum and instruction, and I know the material. I should be better in the classroom than I am, why don't my students get it?” The conclusion I came to was that we simply think, act, and react much differently and have different responsibilities and priorities in our lives. This was good news and bad news. Good news, because I knew I had students who wanted to learn. The bad news was, I felt as though I either did not know what I was doing, or the methods I was using to reach them academically, professionally, and/or personally simply were not working. Solution – learn more about who they were as students and individuals, learn more about their learning preferences and assessment, and learn how to be more creative and develop better and more appropriate approaches to teaching and learning for the Millennial student. I stopped trying to be like my former teachers and began being me. I soon began reaching my students and, even better, they responded!

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It was just being me that allowed me to improve my teaching. I spent less time trying to fit a round peg in a square hole and began reading and researching what it meant to be an effective educator and what pedagogy really was. I spent time trying to improve my own teaching by taking time to reflect not only on-action, but also in-action as well. If something is not working in the classroom, I have no problems stopping, evaluating, and refocusing what I am doing, right there on the spot.

My continuing professional education began focusing more on educational programming and not only on the latest cryotherapy research or ACL outcomes. I knew how to treat patients, what I did not know was how to deliver the content in a way that was meaningful for my students. Meetings, such as the NATA Educators' Conference, taught me that there was more to education than lecturing for 60 minutes and that assessment was not just about paper and pencil exams. It also taught me how to educate not only students, but also those working with and around me in the athletic training education program.

I also looked to my peers for suggestions to improve my instructional strategies. Most of my colleagues know nothing about the content I teach, but coming from the College of Education, they knew a lot about pedagogy. I have also begun expanding the conferences I attend and present at, such as the American Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD) or the Hawaiian International Conference on Education (yes, it was nice to be in Hawaii in January). But the great thing about these meetings is learning about and interacting with colleagues who struggle with engaging and reaching their students as well interacting with those that get it. The individuals I met at these conferences shared one commonality with doctorally-educated ATs. They too are doctorally-trained in their profession and are content experts in a specific professional field and not necessarily in teaching. So at the end of the day we are all learning how to improve our teaching from each other.

This then leads to the purpose of the Teaching and Learning column in the Athletic Training Education Journal. It is the goal of the editorial board to use this column as a means to disseminate information related to "current educational concepts or practices with implications in athletic training education." Current educational concepts or practice is a very broad topic, but one that allows for an exploration of a wide diversity of topics. Issues related to how to teach the Millennial student; student responsibility and accountability; addressing how to teach specific issues/skills in athletic training (e.g., ethics, diversity, specific psychomotor skills); and my favorite, teaching and learning strategies used in the classroom or clinical education setting, such as using a case (e.g., mnemonic strategies to improve learning) or research-based approaches (e.g., using games and puzzles in the classroom to improve learning outcomes) to learning and student outcomes, are all potential topics for the column.

Now I can write the required columns per year, but this is so much larger than me. I am not an expert, just well traveled at this point in my life. You are all the experts in a pedagogy and reaching the Millennial athletic training student and whether doctorally-trained or not we are all in this together. If you have any suggestions or ideas of column topics, or if you are interested in contributing to the column, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you!

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