



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Educating Through Coaching: Defining Your Role and Instilling a Dynamic Classroom Environment

“Pressure Is a Privilege.”—Billie Jean King

Think back to the very first moment you received confirmation that you are officially a “teacher.” Whether that was an affirming call from your department’s dean, an email from your college’s human resources department, or a handshake with the person who just finished interviewing you, each of these moments signify the split second your world has changed forever. Aside from the hustle and bustle that comes from needing to fill out freshly-printed new employee forms, scheduling orientation sessions, and developing your course syllabi, the most important element you need to meticulously plan, develop, and prepare is YOU!

What kind of teacher will you be—the “strict one” who rigorously challenges students, or a “pushover” who gives out easy A’s to keep your class numbers high? How will you dress—what type of image do you want to portray to your students? How will you ask your students to address you—by your first name, “Professor,” “Mr./Ms.,” something else? What kinds of rules will you enforce within your classroom? Sure, your college has specific guidelines for everyone to follow, but what will be *your* specific attendance policy or procedure for handling it if a student breaks the cardinal rule of educational professionalism: plagiarism/cheating? How will you create a classroom environment that not only captures students’ attention and fosters learning, but most importantly, allows your students to *retain* the information you teach them?

While one can methodically attempt to prepare for every little detail leading up to the first day of class, nothing will prepare a teacher for the rollercoaster ride of student-related factors that stem from aspects outside of your classroom that you cannot control. As a former head coach for an NJCAA Division 1 Women’s Sports team, I learned—fast—that the title you have after your name does not even scratch the surface of the role you play in your students’ lives. You see, while the plaques in my office read “Coach of the Year,” they actually should say: “Coach/Parent/Friend/Disciplinarian/Listener/Mentor/Educator of the Year.” Think about each of these words; think about their role, connotation, and effectiveness. Now think about a teacher who has made a difference in your life. Would you apply any of these words to him or her, or would you just limit that

person’s role to the term “teacher?” More likely than not, the teachers who are standing out for you embody some, if not all, of the abovementioned words.

With this in mind, I would like to digress for a moment to share a story about my first two weeks at the helm of a collegiate sports team.

It was the first day of August, and the weather was, as expected, warm. I had just returned to the office after walking off the courts from the first day of tryouts. I had just seen a diligent group of college freshmen working very hard outside in the August heat. No complaints; all raring-to-go attitudes. I remember thinking to myself, “This is a good group of recruits. We will do alright this season.”

The next day I get to practice and find out that one of the athletes will not be there. After lecturing about a strict attendance policy just the day before, I was quite unnerved by the seemingly blatant form of disrespect. However, I shook it off and focused on the people who were standing in front of me and waiting to begin the second day in the heat. To my surprise, by the end of practice, the player (who originally did not attend) showed up completely disheveled—she had gotten into a car accident the day before. Thankfully it was not too serious, but my heart still sank for her. We began the process of unrattling her nerves and focusing on school and the upcoming season.

A couple of days later, I received a phone call that two more athletes would not attend practice. A bit more prepared, I expected the worst, but hoped for the best. As it turned out, these two players had also gotten into a minor car accident. Three student-athletes, three car accidents, and all in a span of about a week.

Just when I thought our team’s luck could not get any worse, the day before our first game, I received another phone call that a *fourth* player had gotten into a minor car accident. Mind you, I only had seven athletes on my squad. And four of them had been involved with car accidents—all in the initial two-and-a-half weeks of my first season as a head collegiate coach. I thought for sure someone had a voodoo doll out for our team. Despite all of this, I had to learn to no longer be the coach who made my players run laps and do drills. They—the ones who had suffered from the car accidents and the three who were left wondering what could possibly happen next—needed more *from me* than that. The events made me more empathetic as a coach, and us more unified as a team. We went on to lose only one game the entire season.

While on my resume it does not look like “Head College Coach” is relevant for a “Professor” position,

it is this very title that has shaped my entire teaching pedagogy. I do not consider myself as a coach-turned-teacher, but rather as a *teacher* who coaches her students. With the notion of simultaneously being a coach, parent, friend, disciplinarian, listener, mentor, *and* educator, I shape my teaching style in a way that can be adaptable to all my students. Here are some simple, yet highly effective, ways that you can, too.

- Be a coach. I often tell everyone—yes everyone—that when I coached, I never “coached” two athletes in the exact same way. While yelling in one of my player’s faces might motivate her, this same strategy may make one of her teammates shut down and start crying. Likewise, using a talk-things-out-with-long-detailed-explanations approach may get through to an athlete better than if I physically show this player the specific technique through hand gestures and body language. The same principle absolutely applies in the classroom. I do not teach two of my students in the *exact* same manner. Some students can only handle small bits of information at a time. For them, I focus on succinct, bullet-point outlines. Likewise, some of my students are more visual when it comes to learning. For them, I use images, videos, and diagrams. There are also students who obtain and retain most of their information from speaking. For these learners, I implement a dynamic class dialogue that is catalyzed by a Socratic method of questioning and even small-class debates. I strive to implement at least two or three of these learning strategies in every one of my lessons, because the more I can diversify my teaching, the more likely I will be able to get through to my students—in their own ways.
- Be interactive. I think back to when my athletes used to say, “Put me in, Coach!” whenever they had to sit on the sidelines during a game. I know as a former student-athlete, sitting back used to make the game seem boring because I was not part of the action. Well, in my classroom, the learning *is* the action. So, why would I ever want my students to sit on the sidelines! I encourage their involvement by calling on my students to answer questions or have them administer their own small-group (and eventually whole-class) discussions. But wait, what about the students who are more introverted? I respect them immensely and never make them feel like they *have* to orally contribute. Of course, I do not let them totally off of the hook when it comes to class participation, either. Online Discussion Boards (on Blackboard) and Twitter conversations using a class hashtag have been wonderful ways for *all* of my students to “get off the sidelines” and become engaged in the

discussion. I have found that the quieter students are often the ones who have the most to say when it comes to this type of format. I and my students especially like Twitter, though, because it is more of an informal, “social” outlet for them to become engaged.

- Skill Drills. When I coached, at the beginning of practice I would always do a “skill drill” that reinforces a concept/ technique/ strategy the players had recently been working on. The same can be applied to your classroom. For my more basic level composition courses, I implement skill drills in the form of team board races. Students go up to the board and answer grammar-related questions based on a unit we just finished learning. Their teammates are allowed to help them out so everyone becomes involved at the same time. This is also a great way to promote collaborative skills. For my more advanced writing courses, I incorporate skill drills in the form of things like scavenger hunts where students look up different ways to cite specific sources in MLA format, and the first team to find all of the items and provide written examples wins the scavenger hunt. I have found that using skill drills takes away the angst of a formal test or exam, yet simultaneously promotes learning because the students are applying their knowledge in a dynamic format.
- Practice Makes Perfect. This concept can vary based on ability and subject content, but basically the principle of repetition comes into play. For instance, if we are working on a lesson that emphasizes the literary device of imagery, I will have students focus that unit’s set of journal activities on applying adjectives and adverbs to really “paint a picture” through their writing. Likewise, if our lesson is focusing on applying quotations, then each workshop leading up to the due date of the unit’s final paper will involve not only applying quotations, but writing in-text citations, effective quotation lead-ins, and even explaining the research that was used. The point of my “practice makes perfect” mentality is that, through repetition, my students become more comfortable *applying* the skills I teach. The more comfortable a student is, the likelier it will be for him or her to remember my lessons and hopefully apply this knowledge to other courses or events outside of academia.

I began this piece with a quote from tennis legend Billie Jean King. She stated, “Pressure is a privilege.” For me, this phrase is the epitome of our role—from professors to coaches to administration—in education. We are under a great deal of pressure to not only teach our students, but also to retain them. Think about the

dropout rates of colleges across America, or even on a smaller scale, the number of classes that get cancelled due to low student enrollment. Especially in higher education, we are under a great deal of pressure to make sure our students succeed. With this pressure comes great responsibility. But you know what, with our jobs—especially as educators—we are *privileged* to have the opportunity to work with our students and see them use what we teach them in society. After all, isn't that the point of why our students go to college in the first place: to get some type of degree or obtain a certain skill set so they are prepared for the real world? It may be game time, and there may be pressure on the line, but consider yourself privileged to be in a position to be there, at the very least, as a coach who is motivating your students by speaking to their diverse set of learning styles. But more than likely, as a person who is applying diverse roles as a parent, friend, disciplinarian, listener, mentor, and educator for your students to succeed.

Nicole Selvaggio, *Adjunct Professor, English/Composition*

For further information, please contact the author at Moraine Valley Community College, 9000 W. College Pkwy, Palos Hills, IL 60465-2478. Email: selvaggion@morainevalley.edu