



Text by Matt Jevon

Skills are the foundation of safe and enjoyable diving and the building blocks of all diving certifications. The comment here is not that learning skills is a waste of time, but, learning them from the wrong instructor, and you may have to re-learn them completely for the skills to be of any use.

Until you get into deep trimix or cave diving training, there is little emphasis in diving qualifications on anything other than meeting performance-based skill standards. That is: You can do a shutdown in 40 seconds, whilst keeping perfect buoyancy; you can deploy a long hose—without it looking like an advanced knitting technique—which is very pretty for the video feedback and easily and calmly done in response to an instructor's signal. Frankly, however, it is not much use in the real world.

Neither, by the way, are the pseudo-wanna-be-military type instructors, with camouflage trousers and a my-agency-is-tougher-than-yours attitude. The ripping of students' masks and fins off at random and messing with kit that they do is just

dangerous, and not a learning experience that benefits any student.

I did my Mod-1 course a few years ago with an ex-military instructor, and he was clearly against this type of bravado, and stated that, in his course materials, he

has no time for it. In cave or trimix, lessons have been hard-learned by the instructor and are passed on to the student, who will also have gained considerable experience (if wise) before embarking on this route.

It is little wonder then, that we hear so often, it is not the agency or the course, it is the instructor. Why? Well, if all you do is get someone over a fairly subjectively set line on a skill performance, you can sign them off as passing. Frankly, that sucks.

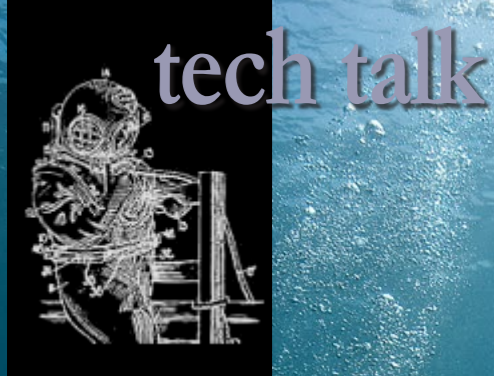
What does the student get? Well, they might have learnt a new skill which they can trot out in response to the appropriate signal from an instructor, but that's it. What is the student's capability to recognise the how, the when, the where, but

Wrong Teacher, Wrong Habits

— *Learning skills from some instructors might be a waste of time*

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most importantly, the why of the skill. Realistic prompts and cues the student will recognise that should kick them into executing the skills should also be included.

Great teachers

Why then are some instructors more valued, have great reputations, and their courses regarded as “graduating” better divers? Of course, these great instructors are not happy with just getting students “over the line”. They will demonstrate demand and insist that the student executes much higher standards of skill performance. These are great teachers. That is, they have an empathy and connec-

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tion to the student and are able to make things understandable in a way that suits the student’s preferred learning style.

I would have been up for expanding on this point, but to be fair, Mark Powell’s presentation at Dive 2015 on why training does not work, knocked that one out of the park. It is worth reiterating his point on how, without practice, skill performance drops dramatically, in only a few weeks.

Motor learning theory

This is common in motor learning theory. There are a couple of influencing factors. First, one

must consider: How well was the skill mastered at the time? If only just over the line, the chances of being able to repeat that skill, even one week later, is slim. The second point to consider is: How many different ways and scenarios was the skill practiced? Even if you can execute the movements well, learning the skills is a wasted effort in the first place, if you do not know the context and the triggers for using them. Every CCR diver knows how to bail out; it is the when, the why and the “on to what” that is really important—not leaving it too long, but also

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not abandoning a piece of life support equipment in an ill thought out rush.

The why

So what do great instructors do? They get you to learn not just the mechanics of the skill, but also the context and scenarios in which that skill is to be applied. This is far more prevalent in technical training than recreational, probably because it is harder to become a tech instructor. With most agencies, tech instructors have a solid basis from teaching recreational diving, and they have probably been in the contexts or situations for which they are teaching. They carefully control the stress levels to which they expose the student, building the students’ autonomous responses or reasoned responses to the real-life, everyday scenarios they might face in their diving.

This is the same when teach-

ing recreational diving. A recent Facebook post showed students still kneeling for skills. Comments were made: “This might have been their first dive—a bit early to expect neutral buoyancy.” I disagree. Of course, I am not going to expect perfect buoyancy, but I am going to demonstrate to the student what good buoyancy looks like and what they will aspire towards. I will then work harder on helping them master this early, ahead of out-of-air scenarios, etc, because once the foundation is in place (buoyancy, trim and propulsion), all other skills can be learnt and mastered “in context”. No-one is going to come to you out of air while both you and the student are kneeling in a pool.

Learning

Learning is a psychological process, and as such, we all learn differently, because we are all



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I fear anyone who actually likes wearing a shirt labeled "Instructor" and loads of badges...

individuals. Teaching styles and learning environments must account for these individual differences. In diving, we embed motor skills into the learning process, but we also would be well-advised to develop stress management, thinking skills or decision making, and appropriate autonomous responses. There are some very gifted instructors out there who manage this naturally. For most, they have to think and plan their way to help students get the best out of themselves.

Authentic vs. holistic

In sports coaching research, there are a couple of interesting concepts that are gaining serious attention from some of the leading practitioners. These are Authentic Coaching and Holistic Coaching.

Firstly, authentic coaching: There is a good article on it by Barnson, (2014), but essentially it is when coaches are true to themselves and to the coachees. "Obvious," you might say, but not in reality, I fear. There are many coaches and instructors who behave how they think the student or the agency or worse behave, in ways they think makes them look cool or saleable. Our previous gung-ho militaristic type is one of these. Similarly, I fear anyone who actually likes wearing a shirt

labeled "Instructor" and loads of badges—although it is true, sometimes an instructor has to do some marketing for and/or represent a dive centre. Personally, as an instructor, I would rather be recognised for what I do. If you are not being true to yourself and you are "playing a part", that falseness will come through in your teaching effectiveness.

Holistic coaching—a term brought to the fore by Tanya Cassidy—looks far more at the person as a whole, as opposed to just what skills one needs to learn. For example, if a person needs to learn a bailout drill, it does not take long to teach the mechanics of the drill. Holistically though, coaches should address that person's abilities around emotional control, decision making, concentration, physical attributes, etc.

In holistic coaching, it is thought that by taking and developing the whole person—using the coaching situation or context as a tool—you enrich the person inside and outside that coaching interaction. I tend to agree. I am certain that the learning experience is richer, that skills are more deeply embedded, and that context and cues for when and where to apply those skills have been thoroughly covered.

Knowledge types

"Coaching effectiveness" is an often abused phrase, which is also true for "instructor effectiveness". True effectiveness (look up Coté and Gilbert) relies on the coach or instructor having expertise in three critical knowledge types.

Professional knowledge – detailed and applied knowledge about the art, science, skills and tactics of what they are coaching

Interpersonal knowledge – an ability to build and foment relationships

Intrapersonal knowledge – an ability to understand oneself and capacity for self-reflection

I do not think it would be hard for most of us to identify those instructors we believe to be effective and see immediately the correlation between those instructors and the required knowledge above.

It also needs to be measured. To be effective you have to know where your start and finish points are and whether the process of coaching or instructing is what is making the difference in getting people there. For sure, there are the very talented who need minimal coaching, and conversely, those for whom no amount of

coaching will ever make a difference. It is quite a complicated interaction then—well, yes, but so it should be.

Improvements

So, how do we get instructors over the line? Well, in developing performance sports coaches, we have identified the vital importance of good mentors. They help the instructor reflect, develop and really build the inter- and intra-personal knowledge. Traditional coaching courses and instructor courses are pretty good at developing the professional knowledge, although again, the mentors are invaluable. In my own instructor development, I have been very privileged to have an outstanding mentor, whom I still see a couple of times a year, to great value.

Ask yourself before you book training whether or not it will give you what you want. Ask the instructor from whom you are considering to take the course just how much of the training will be scenario-based, how much work will they put into setting up decision-making opportunities, how will they mimic realities in which you will have to implement the skills. Ask around... good instructors will be delighted to engage with you on this.



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