

Highly Effective Personal Training: An Evidence-Based Review of Teaching Strategies

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SUMMARY

A COMMANDING ASPECT OF PERSONAL TRAINING CENTERS ON THE ATTRIBUTES AND ABILITIES IN TEACHING CLIENTS. WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF EXCELLENCE IN INSTRUCTION? THIS EVIDENCE-BASED BRIEF REVIEW ON THIS TOPIC WILL PROVIDE ASPIRING FITNESS PROFESSIONALS WITH NOTEWORTHY RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND A TAXONOMY (I.E., CLASSIFICATION BY CATEGORIES) OF PERSONAL TRAINING TEACHING EXCELLENCE.

As personal trainers and fitness professionals, much of our goal-centered attention is focused on demonstrating, instructing, leading, evaluating, and motivating clients to exercise. A commanding aspect of personal training centers on the attributes and abilities in teaching clients. What are the elements of excellence in instruction? This evidence-based brief review on this topic will provide aspiring fitness professionals with noteworthy research on effective teaching and a taxonomy (i.e., classification by categories) of personal training teaching excellence (Table 1).

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS

According to Hattie (2), the 5 dimensions of excellent teachers are (a)

identifying the essential representations of their subject, (b) guiding learning through classroom interactions, (c) monitoring learning and providing feedback, (d) attending to affective attributes, and (e) influencing client outcomes. A detailed examination of these areas is warranted.

IDENTIFYING THE ESSENTIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THEIR SUBJECT

Essential representations of a subject identifies the construct that an effective personal trainer must know and understand the guiding principles of the subject, such as the personal training areas of exercise physiology, kinesiology, injury prevention, exercise biomechanics, and disease prevention through exercise. By knowing these principles, the highly effective personal trainer can accordingly integrate, progress, and sequence learned content with new exercise instruction and program design. Traditionally, the role of a client is to “sit and receive” and the role of the personal trainer is to “stand and deliver” (3). Effective fitness professionals incorporate a problem-solving approach with their instruction, which involves much more interaction and exchange between client and personal trainer (1,2). Effective personal trainers are more adaptable and opportunistic in pursuing strategies that positively affect the learning needs of each client. Skilled personal trainers show great flexibility

and adaptability to teaching a new exercise technique and modifying promptly to the client’s ability to learn (2). If the technique is not working, the proficient personal trainer will recognize the client’s learning barrier and modify appropriately. McComas (4) highlights that effective personal trainers often need to move out of their comfort zones and challenge themselves to be less constrained in their teaching strategies with clients. In addition, Stadulis (6) states that outstanding professionals are reflective, responsive, and resourceful. He continues that resourcefulness in teaching is the ability and willingness to investigate, research, create, and solve problems.

GUIDING LEARNING THROUGH CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS

Guiding learning through classroom interactions centers on the learning environment a personal trainer creates for clients. One of the critical factors in any educational setting is establishing a foundation for learning (7). This foundation begins the moment a client walks in the training facility and how he or she is greeted by the personal trainer (such as with a smile and/or handshake). Effective personal training involves developing a learning environment where client questions and

KEY WORDS:

teaching; instruction; training; professionalism

Taxonomy for Effective Teaching

Table 1
Taxonomy of personal training teaching excellence

The following taxonomy is provided for each personal trainer to be aware of several essential evidence-based fundamentals of personal training excellence. Each domain provides some objectives for highly effective personal trainers to self-evaluate his/her personal training skills in that domain.

A. Professional values

- Are committed to improving client learning
- Are committed to the personal training profession
- Demonstrate high levels of professional conduct
- Treat all clients compassionately and equitably
- Exercise discretion in dealing with matters of confidentiality

B. Professional knowledge

- Are knowledgeable about the educational disciplines in which they work
- Keep abreast of educational change
- Have an understanding of existing technology and its implications for personal training

C. Professional development

- Participate in a range of professional activities as a part of their continuing development
- Adapt their business on the basis of critical reflection and evaluation of their teaching (see Table 2 for a self-study personal trainer performance review)

D. Content of teaching

- Base the content of their training on clearly defined objectives and learning outcomes
- Incorporate their sound subject knowledge in how they train their clients

E. Practice of personal training

- Plan their training sessions using relevant research and industry standards
- Establish expectations for clients
- Use a variety of assessment strategies
- Relate assessment strategies to learning objectives

F. Management and instruction

- Effectively sequence learning activities
- Manage personal training times to achieve planned client outcomes
- Create and maintain a positive, challenging, safe, and supportive learning environment
- Are skilled at motivating and engaging clients

G. Consideration of individual needs

- Respect their clients as individuals and adapt training sessions to learning needs of client
- Understand that each client has diverse abilities

Taxonomy compiled from concepts obtained from article references (3,5-7).

Table 2
Self-study personal trainer performance review

It may be beneficial for each personal trainer to monitor his/her teaching effectiveness with a self-study performance review as noted in section "C" of Table 1. Candidly answer the following questions.
Do you have learning objectives for each client's personal training session?
What teaching methods (mini lecture, brainstorming, DVD, demonstration, discussion, problem solving, or a combination of teaching methods) do you use to achieve client objectives?
How do you assess each client's progress?
Do you ever change a personal training session based on client feedback? In retrospect, did you feel this was the appropriate strategy?
What are your major strengths and weakness as a personal trainer? How are you addressing them for self-improvement or change?
In what areas do you wish to expand your knowledge and education?
What professional growth activities are you doing?

comments are encouraged. With this positive exchange atmosphere, the personal trainer will learn more about the abilities, experiences, inhibitions, and background of the client they are training.

MONITOR LEARNING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Highly effective personal trainers are much more proficient at assessing and monitoring client's progress. In addition, they can deliver relevant and useful feedback. The skilled personal trainer is very responsive to the client's learning and understanding. As a constructive consequence, the highly capable personal trainer makes sure that the client is aware of what objectives have successfully been attained and what areas of improvement are needed. Mouratidis et al. (5) highlight that positive feedback is more likely to increase genuine motivation from the client when it is perceived as honest. The authors continue that correlation and experimental design investigations indicate that positive competence feedback (e.g., "that is a great squat the way your knees track over your ankles") yields a significant impact on motivation of the client toward learning.

ATTENDING TO AFFECTIVE ATTRIBUTES

Highly effective personal trainers treat clients with admiration and exhibit

care and commitment toward them (2). Instead of attempting to dominate the training session, which creates distance between client and personal trainer, the skilled fitness educator displays an open receptiveness with the client. Hattie (2) states that skilled personal trainers are passionate about their training and are very client centered toward achieving success of the client's outcome goals.

INFLUENCING CLIENT OUTCOMES

Effective personal trainers are involved in mastery learning (instructional method that presumes that all people can learn if they are provided with the appropriate learning conditions), enhanced self-efficacy (belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner to attain certain goals), and increased self-esteem of their learners (2). Hattie continues that by encouraging clients to master the movement, they will develop the self-concept to want to achieve more momentous outcomes. Rather than encouraging clients to just do their best, the successful personal trainer is regularly engaging the client in goal-oriented challenges that leads to a much deeper understanding of the knowledge (i.e., not just being able to perform the movement but know what muscles are involved and how they are adapting to the exercise).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Personal training involves a tremendous knowledge base of several vast topics, an enthusiasm toward teaching, a caring attitude, an ability to motivate others, a love for learning, and a desire to make a difference in the lives of others. Highly effective personal trainers are masters of their subject area and exhibit their expertise through the success of their clients. They believe that it is a privilege to be an ambassador of such an empowering profession and delight in the obligation to continually improve on it.



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