

What Traits Make for an Effective Athletic Training Educator and Mentor?

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Column Editor's Note: A student's athletic training education often begins in the academic classroom, thus we must ask the question, "What traits make for an effective athletic training educator?" There is information available in the literature related to the quality of higher education faculty; however, this literature is limited in that the students' voices are heard, but typically through the eyes of the researcher who may or may not have his/her own agenda or bias. To address this limitation, I recruited two co-authors, each of whom have recently completed his/her undergraduate education in athletic training. To answer the aforementioned question, Burningham and Deru not only reflected on the experiences of themselves and their peers, but also examined pertinent literature related to effective didactic education.

The educational preparation of athletic training students is a daunting experience for athletic training educators (ATEs) as they are often faced with many external (eg, accreditation, lack of resources) and internal (eg, lack of comfort with a subject area, role strain) challenges. Regardless of these challenges, the success of an athletic training student is a multifaceted process, derived not only from the experiences they encounter in the academic classroom, but through exposure to diverse patient populations, healthcare providers, and high quality clinical instructors. A student's success is also obtained by engaging in and modeling the professional behavior of one's mentor(s), clinical instructor(s), and other well respected professionals.

A great deal has been published regarding athletic training students' clinical education experiences including the behavioral characteristics of effective clinical instructors,¹⁻² selection of quality clinical education programming,³⁻⁴ and the amount of time spent engaged in the clinical setting performing athletic training related skills and proficiencies.⁵⁻⁸ In fact, an entire issue in the *Athletic Training Education Journal* (volume 4, issue 1) was dedicated to clinical education supervision. These published works lead us to an understanding of the many facets of quality clinical education. However, the literature pertaining to quality didactic education experiences of students has been somewhat neglected.

After examining related literature and engaging in several informal discussions with athletic training students, multiple themes emerged regarding the traits of an effective athletic training educator. The four main themes are: 1) student and educator communication, 2) facilitating critical thinking, 3) professionalism, and 4) responsiveness to students. Each of these traits is explored in more detail below.

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR COMMUNICATION

Communication is the foundation through which all relationships are built. This is especially true between the ATE and the athletic training student. Student-educator communication is no longer confined to the traditional lecture.⁹⁻¹² As the paradigm shift towards technology in higher education continues, it is important for educators to stay connected with the students of the current generation who have become accustomed to quick information access and explanations through the use of the internet, instant messaging, and text messaging.¹³

Educators can and should use these technological advances to facilitate and enhance the learning environment. As with clinician-patient interactions, educators must utilize active-listening when interacting with students.⁹ Educators must listen to their students to understand their perspectives on various topics and concepts within the athletic training profession.¹⁰⁻¹² When educators

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demonstrate effective listening skills there is often a respectful dialogue that naturally develops and leads to a strengthening of the student's education and a positive mentoring relationship is fostered. For example, listening to a student's perspective on a technique may result in new questions and thoughts on the part of the educator that, in turn, triggers the desire to investigate the topic further via research. In this way, the educator develops a level of respect for the student, and a mentor-mentee relationship begins to form.

Also, through actively listening to students, an educator can identify strengths and weaknesses (eg, test taking ability) of students. With this knowledge, educators can develop lesson plans and course activities that fit a variety of learning styles to keep students engaged and motivated within the classroom and increase the students' level of understanding of the course content.^{9, 13}

How educators respond to students is also important in developing effective student-educator communication. An educator should not be condescending when answering questions or explaining concepts.¹¹⁻¹³ Nor should the educator express discontent when asked the same question repeatedly by students. Moreover, educators do not always express their thoughts in a manner that all students understand. The educator may need to use a different example for students to make a connection to a concept. Educators need to think back to when they were inexperienced students, and how new concepts (eg, pain theories) were completely abstract and difficult to comprehend, as if they were learning a new language. Patience and thorough explanations are important aspects of effective teaching; humiliating students will cause embarrassment and a lack of motivation.

The final key to effective communication revolves around educators being personable, but professional.^{9,11,12} This factor, though often developed outside of the classroom, will translate back into the classroom. Educators must show students that they are human and more than a one-dimensional figure. Contrary to popular childhood belief, educators do have lives outside of school that consist of family, friends, and hobbies. Sharing just a bit of one's life experiences allows students the opportunity to better connect with the educator and will foster a mentoring relationship. Students and educators should not look for friendship; however, a personable and professional interaction is necessary for an enjoyable learning environment for both students and educators.

FACILITATING CRITICAL THINKING

The next trait of effective educators is focusing on developing students' critical thinking skills.^{10,12-15} Critical thinking has been defined as the use of higher-order thinking, where learning results from independently working towards a conclusion, rather than accepting another's finished product unchallenged.¹⁴ It is the responsibility of ATEs to incorporate lesson plans that allow the student the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills early in their education. ATEs, however, should not feel like they have to go out of their way to accomplish this task. Educators can incorporate, within their current lesson plans, the connection between textbook theories to clinical practice

through case studies,¹⁶ past professional experiences, and recent current events; asking the student, "How would you handle the situation?"^{9, 11, 16} This simple connection may not necessarily be obvious to students, but after application to real-life situations, students will be able to relate and retain information better.

Once critical thinking is initiated, it must continue throughout the students' education. For this to occur and be monitored, goals or standards should be put in place across the curriculum for the student to reach.^{9-10, 14} These goals or standards should be discussed between the educator and student on an individualized basis, with encouragement from the educator.¹²⁻¹³ This encouragement does not need to be condescending, patronizing, or demeaning to the student; rather the encouragement should come in the form of the educator pointing out the positives the student has accomplished with the task at hand, but also challenging the student to think about possible solutions or inferences that can be drawn with regards to the situation.^{11,15} For example, a student has successfully set up their first application of sensory-level TENS for acute low back pain. The educator may point out that the parameters were set up well, but ask the student what complications could arise from the treatment or what the next application would entail. By using this method of encouragement, students have a sense of accomplishment and self-worth, and are encouraged to learn more to be better professionals.

Another way for educators to encourage students' critical thinking is to involve them in writing case studies, conducting research, and/or participating in professional presentations.¹³⁻¹⁵ While these are not of interest to all students, they are necessary to challenge students to expand their knowledge and skills outside of the classroom. When students are given more responsibilities outside of the classroom, they will also develop a sense of accountability and responsibility over what they learn and accomplish.¹⁰

PROFESSIONALISM

Within athletic training education there are many cases where ATEs are considered to be experts, or leading professionals in their content area. While a master's or doctorate degree may validate individuals as professionals within their field and qualify them to teach courses related to their education, educators must bear in mind that professionalism and respect from the learner's perspective does not come through a degree. Respect is earned through demonstration of professionalism which can be fostered by maintaining certain behaviors and attitudes including staying current in the field and holding students and self to high standards.

Effective educators stay current and infuse new information into their classes. As evidence-based practice is increasingly incorporated into the profession of athletic training, professionals need to keep an open mind to new ideas and concepts. It is also important to remember that traditional approaches and techniques may be outdated, or that evidence may suggest a necessary change in evaluation/treatment practices. This open-minded nature needs to translate into the classroom as well, between students and educators. Students expect educators to learn along side of them by considering new philosophies

presented not only in current literature, but also from student input. Students expect relevant, accurate, practical, and up-to-date information just like any other professional, and it is up to the educator to model this in the classroom.¹¹ Once this is accomplished, the educator will be able to gain respect and professional cooperation from students.

As discussed in the communication section of this article, nothing will destroy a positive learning environment faster than when the educator wants nothing more than to show the student how smart he/she is. The same holds true for those educators who hold students to high expectations of punctuality, preparedness, and professionalism; yet do not reciprocate the same level of expectation in their own conduct. Educators ought to be developers of life-long learning and should encourage students to become well-rounded individuals.^{10,13} Educators ought to instill the concept of professionalism early on into those who are the future professionals in the field, and should be a reflection of what is expected.⁹ From the concept of professionalism, educators can continue to foster the mentor-mentee relationship and can teach the student the importance of networking within the athletic training community; so as to “show them the ropes” of progressing in the profession and working with other professionals outside of their state or district.

RESPONSIVENESS TO STUDENTS

Communication, critical thinking skills, and professionalism cannot, and will not, be obtained unless a sufficient level of responsiveness is provided to students. Being responsive to students involves both accessibility and approachability, and making time to address student needs.

Less effective educators are inaccessible.¹¹ They are always too busy for the learner and find excuses not to meet with the student, (eg, “I have a meeting,” or “Not now, I have too much work”) and do not offer to reschedule or find another time to meet with the student. They rarely make an appearance to the learner (beyond the 50 minutes they spend in class), and then rush through presentations and the teaching sessions. In essence, when ATEs are needed, they are never around.¹¹ In contrast, effective educators take the time to develop meaningful lessons that use instruction time in the most efficient manner possible. Effective educators involve the students and engage them in a lecture or lesson. These educators answer questions and take the initiative to investigate questions that they do not have answers to, rather than trying to skirt the issue. Office hours are abundant, and the effective educator will schedule meeting times with students, answer e-mails and phone calls promptly, and demonstrate their commitment to the students’ education on a daily basis. These educators are responsive to students and take the time to send emails of encouragement during difficult times; encouraging students to continue persevering even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges (eg, examinations), or simply to thank them for a great class.

Finally, effective ATEs will commit time to self-improvement. If communication and professionalism have been properly established in the student-educator relationship, honest and

constructive criticism can be communicated to the student when educators set apart time to discuss developments to be made. Athletic training students especially expect this from their athletic training program director. No academic program is perfect, but when athletic training program directors set aside time to discuss strengths and weakness of the program with students, again assuming that communication and professionalism is well established and respected, both parties will benefit from these improvements.

SUMMARY

Effective educators are not authoritarians. The hands-on nature of classes, intimate class sizes, and close network of individuals requires educators to be mentors for their students. When educators are mentors, a higher level of communication and expectation will be established. Actively listening to students and taking their perspective into account will allow for a greater understanding of the student, the situation, and one’s self. Condescension should not be the hallmark of establishing control and dominance in the classroom. Rather patience and thorough explanation should rule the classroom and make it a safe and comfortable area for student development into an effective professional. The student-educator relationship can also be a personable yet professional one; that moves beyond the occasional smile while passing in the hallway. Going to work/school should be an uplifting experience, and can be one with a positive foundation in student and educator communication.

The job description of an athletic trainer requires an individual to be a critical thinker in order to effectively diagnose and treat an injury. Developing and fostering critical thinking skills is essential to becoming a professional and it is the responsibility of the educator to facilitate the development of these skills. Encouragement of critical thinking skills comes in a wide variety of educational projects, and the effective educator will employ at least one type within their lesson plans. One of the ways critical thinking skills can be encouraged in students is through the educator making the seemingly simple connection between textbook objectives and practical application a paramount objective in athletic training education.

Professionalism is a characteristic that needs to be taught to students and earned by educators. Professionalism does not come through receiving a degree, but rather how an individual conducts themselves. Effective educators must stay current within the realm of evidence-based practice and present the most current research to their students in hopes of making them effective professionals. Students expect high standards for themselves, and they expect these same high standards to be maintained by the educator. Educators must model the behaviors and attitudes they wish to receive in return. When this occurs a sentiment of respect is gained and the mentor-mentee relationship continues to be fostered.

Finally, the educator (as well as the student) must be willing to put in the time to work together and better the life of the other. Students should not be cast off and forgotten about but should have the opportunity to interact with their educators inside and

outside the classroom. Effective educators involve and engage students in classroom discussion and encourage one-on-one meetings with students to promote their education. Taking the time to interact with students in such ways will not only foster the mentor-mentee relationship but will allow the educator to make their own self-improvements to become even more effective.

The foundations of athletic training were constructed from mentorships. It is important for this foundation to remain constant and resilient as the profession expands and matures in the coming decades.

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