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Learning Environments and Teaching

Many years ago I had the good fortune to attend a college convocation speech given by The Dalai Lama. One thing he said has stuck with me all these years. He said something along the lines of (paraphrasing) "Americans are always asking me questions like, What is the best way to…? or What's the easiest way to…? It is very American to look for shortcuts or to think that one thing above all others is the key to success, but the world really doesn't work that way." Complex systems, situations that involve nuance, and frankly anything that involves groups of people, each with their own backgrounds and needs, are best approached with a large toolbox rather than a single purpose tool like a hammer, even when the hammer is used creatively.

As fencing coaches we wear many hats but fundamentally we are teachers of a very complex sport, and as such require a very large toolbox. Our broader goals usually include 1) having the student learn to fence, referee, armor, etc. 2) having the student develop athleticism and be healthy 3) having the student have fun and love the sport and 4) Oh right, and some of us need to be paid for this too, but that's another matter. If we just look at these first three goals, we need to recognize that there is no single key to success (hammer), and instead integrate a variety of concepts and skills (a bigger toolbox), and that takes an effort on our part.

The first thing we need to do as coaches is to know our stuff so we can teach well and safely. We need to learn, study, and develop our own skills as fencers and then as coaches, and there is no end to this. We need to keep learning. Now we add students, and they have certain fundamental requirements. They need to be kept safe, or rather, we need to actively keep them safe. This is the first stage of creating a *learning environment*. I'll be discussing two types of learning environments in this essay actually. This first kind is the physical space and general vibe or philosophy of the team or club in which the students learn and practice. The room should be free of tripping hazards, have equipment in good working order, the uniforms and other fencing equipment are safe and in good repair, etc. Students need to be kept not just physically safe, but emotionally and mentally safe too. It is our duty to provide a space that is free from bullying and harassment, all the bad "isms" like racism and sexism, and is overall inviting to all potential students.

Next we get down to business. We're there in the gym with our students, everyone feels comfortable and safe, and something has to happen to move us toward those three goals. How we act next depends in part on the experience level of the students. Complete beginners need full supervision and the coach does a lot of active teaching. More experienced fencers can learn and improve quite a bit on their own through practice and experimentation and the coach may be more focused on honing skills or guiding the students rather than teaching entirely new skills or concepts. (Note that this also helps fencers to learn how to independently solve problems on the strip and rely less on strip coaching.) Either way, there is likely to be some benefit from combining coach-led teaching and student-led discovery, especially for the majority of fencers who are neither taking their first lesson nor elite competitors.

We can actively and directly teach the students. This could be a lecture on terminology. It could be a demonstration of a skill using a classical teaching method or EDGCC (Explain, Demonstrate, Guide, Correct, Critique.) The coach and a partner are in front of the class. The coach explains and demonstrate a new action, and then the class practices that action. The coach offers suggestions, makes corrections and perhaps shows more variations of the action or puts the action into different situations.

We can also indirectly teach by creating a situation for the students that facilitates their learning or improving without our direct input. This is the second type of *learning environment*, at least in how I see it, which is the way the class or lesson is organized in relation to the learning goal. Constraints led coaching styles are all about creating this second form of learning environment. The coach puts a restriction or sets some sort of goal for the student in their bout, such as "Your goal is to set up and score with a parry and riposte. Find different ways of making it work. I don't really care how you choose to do it." This is also where a discovery method may be used, for instance during a lesson, if the coach parries the student's attack enough times, the student may discover how to make a feint attack. This is also where training bouts are used. The coach creates the situation that fosters learning and improvement by directing the students to do certain training bouts. (A training bout is like a drill but you keep score, and often has restrictions, such as the fencer on the left is the attacker, the fencer on the right is the defender. Fence to five points, then reverse roles and repeat.)

Having designed an environment (group class) where the students are actively engaged in their learning and development through some sort of constraint or opportunity for discovery, the coach can now observe, correct, motivate, and guide the students as necessary. In this case, there should be less need for active teaching, but there are certain times the coach should step in to help or even halt the entire class. One reason is of course if there is anything that appears likely to cause injury. Another is if the coach determines that there has been a miscommunication and the students don't seem to understand the task at hand. If it seems that multiple students are having the same sort of trouble in the drill then halting the class to address the group as a whole is more effective and efficient than trying to help them all individually.

A learning environment such as a group class can often easily be transformed into a testing environment by including some sort of metric, evaluation, or accountability. Within a drill for instance, ask to see if the fencers can perform the action correctly and successfully three times in a row. Can they then apply the skill in a training bout? Later during open fencing, ask them if they are having success with the action in their bouts, and why or why not. Have them keep notes on their progress in their fencing journals.

Over time, it is your relationship with your students that helps make all of this work smoothly (or not smoothly). Students are more likely to actively and fully participate, take risks, and maintain their motivation when there is a positive and professional relationship with the coach that is built on support, mutual trust and respect. This requires among other things honesty. Always shouting "You got this, you can win if you try." even when the student is losing badly to a much stronger opponent may sound like encouragement, but when the student loses there is erosion of trust. Instead, saying "This will be a tough bout and you will probably lose, but do your best not to rush and to learn from the experience." is better and fosters the development of trust, and later when you say "Yes, I think you can win this next one." the student will know that you genuinely mean it and aren't just being a cheerleader.

Finally, we can look at how practices are often run the way that they are. Maybe a practice includes games, a warm up, dynamic stretching, footwork, drills, training bouts, open bouting and the opportunity for individual lessons. Each of these stages combine to help the coach and students reach their overall goals. They are opportunities, too, for the coach to use different tools to facilitate the learning process. Whatever the stage of the practice, break out your big toolbox and ask yourself to look at it from the perspective of an active teacher, an indirect teacher, an evaluator, and a supporter. Which role or roles do the students need me to fill? Should I teach this actively and directly, indirectly, or try to combine the teaching styles? What style do I usually use and should I try switching? Is it a good time for an evaluation? Asking yourself these questions will help keep your practices interesting and productive and will also help prevent the feeling of being stuck in a rut.