

Effective Teaching for Fitness Success

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Researchers have studied how people learn new motor skills. Apply their conclusions to help clients succeed.

Fitness professionals often find themselves in the role of teacher. Whether you are introducing a new client to the equipment, teaching a yoga asana or leading a dancing class, you are teaching. Researchers have studied the many factors that influence how people learn new motor skills. Here are a few of their most important conclusions on effective teaching.

Clarify your goals

People new to teaching may mistakenly believe their goal is to "cover all of the material." But, just because you give people information doesn't mean they will remember it; they may not even understand it. Your real goal as a teacher is to have the learner understand, remember and use the information. In the case of motor learning, you want the learner to be able to execute the skills you are teaching.

You may have other important goals, as well. Personal trainers want clients to feel successful and motivated to develop a regular exercise habit. Group exercise instructors want clients to find the experience worthwhile and to come back for more classes. So, while you may need to "cover some information" in your work, your real job is teaching and motivating.⁴

Introduce a new skill clearly

When you are teaching a new skill, such as using an exercise machine or learning a stretching position, begin with an explanation of what you are going to do and why. Keep explanations short and clear. Be sure to give safety guidelines for preventing injury. Explain the skill in terms of what it is accomplishing.

If you are describing a movement, focus on the goal of the movement, rather than limb position, if possible.³ For example, you would not teach someone how to use an elliptical trainer by describing when to bend and straighten the knees. Instead, you would emphasize moving the pedals around in a smooth, steady motion.

Showing resistance moves or exercise positions requires more focus on limb position, since that is the point of the motor skill. While performing squats, for example, you might ask the client to focus on bending the knees only to 90 degrees. Keep descriptions brief and simple.

Adapt explanations to each client

Get a sense of your client's exercise and sport history, and build on that experience. As you get to know clients, you see that some like lots of explanation, others like to watch a demonstration a number of times and some learn by doing. Pay attention to what works best for each client. Some clients pick up new motor skills quickly, while others progress more slowly. Adapt your pace accordingly.

Allow opportunity for focused practice

Clients can't learn new motor skills unless they practice. After you give your explanation and demonstration, let clients practice the skill. Don't talk much while they are concentrating on the new skill. They will learn a great deal during practice. If you distract them from focusing on their movement, they will learn more slowly.³

Give helpful feedback

Once clients have tried the skill, give feedback. Your feedback should provide reinforcement for what was done well, correct errors, and motivate clients to continue practicing and improving. The more "negative" points about errors should be sandwiched between reinforcement and motivation.¹ For example, "Your breathing and timing were just right on the first four lifts. Remember to keep breathing, even as the exercise starts to feel harder. You'll find the work easier now that you are learning how to breathe correctly."

Limit feedback to a few simple points. Decide which errors are the most important to correct. Select the one or two changes that would improve safety, occur earliest in the movement sequence or are fundamental in some other way. Phrase your feedback positively: "Remember to breathe," rather than, "Don't hold your breath."

References

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