

TAILOR YOUR TEACHING: *One Style Doesn't Fit All*

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Ever think you're not getting the results you want from your teaching? Or maybe you've got your signature method wired and don't see the need to use anything else. Either way, you may need to rethink things.

Relying on a single teaching style can be comfortable, but also quite limiting. No matter how you feel about your teaching, repeating the same type of lesson won't necessarily work with every student or group.

Research has shown that using a variety of teaching styles is more effective in reaching a greater number of students with a wide range of abilities. To make instruction lively *and* helpful to a variety of students, be sure to explore different teaching styles.

[MILES OF STYLES]

So, what exactly *is* a teaching style? Technically, a teaching style is a method or approach that uses predetermined decision patterns and the roles of instructor and student to accomplish specific goals. When introducing students to the terrain park, for example, you'd likely use one approach with a 15-year-old computer wiz with no previous skiing experience and an entirely different approach with a 30-year-old former ski racer.

The style is like a vehicle you use to transport you and your students to a desired destination. Whether that vehicle is an SUV or a sports car is up to you as a teacher.

In thinking about style and objectives, consider nuances of the various teaching styles outlined here—command, task, reciprocal, guided dis-

covery/exploration, and personalized system of instruction—to find the description that best suits your current method. Assess what you're good at, but also try some of the other styles.

One way to understand the various teaching styles is to imagine them existing along a continuum, with the command style at one end and a personalized system of instruction at the other. These methods range from those requiring the least amount of student decision-making (i.e., command) to those requiring the most (i.e., personalized).



[COMMAND]

As its name implies, the command style of teaching dictates the actions of students, telling them exactly what, when, and how to perform a particular movement. Because of its simplicity and directness, the command style is often used when teaching new movements or striving to achieve immediate and accurate student performance. Assuming the role of the commanding force in a lesson, a teacher looks for uniformity, repetition, and accuracy—not individual interpretation. Inexperienced instructors commonly use the command style because it makes it easier to manage the learning environment.

While the command style might help students pick up the basic skills needed to perform a fundamental task,

there is a limit to the depth of learning achieved in this way. Students don't fully own a movement until they can independently apply it in all situations—and that requires adaptability and decision-making on the part of the student.

To apply command-style teaching in, say, a Level 3 lesson, you might use cones or flags to “dictate” where, on a given run, students should make their turns. You'd clearly explain to your students what they would be doing, how they'd need to do it, and when and where they would start and stop.

Another command drill is to use an “After Me” approach where you ask your students to follow you down the hill through a series of turns. If students maintain the spirit of the lesson with you serving as their teacher, they have to turn where you turn. To add variety, you can address the different types of learners (such as “watchers,” “thinkers,” “doers,” and “feelers”) in the group and appeal to different learning modes (e.g., auditory, kinesthetic, visual).

For upper-level skiers, you can promote rhythm, timing, and pole use with a “Shadow Dance” drill, in which students ski within the corridors established by the shadows of overhead chairlift cables. In an ideal situation, you would have three cable shadows to create two lanes. If the day is too cloudy for shadows, groomer seams also work well. The objective of the Shadow Dance is to have each student make a series of short turns while tapping the center shadow/seam with his or her downhill pole. The center shadow/seam provides a visual cue for the timing of the pole plant and each turn.



[TASK]

As with the command style of instruction, a task-oriented lesson puts you in the driver's seat in terms of directing students in targeted drills and activities. The main difference, however, is that in this approach you allow your students to determine where and when to stop, the number of repetitions they need to make to become proficient in a task or skill, and their desired pace during practice.

By empowering students to make such decisions, you help them develop self-awareness for how their decisions directly affect performance. A task-oriented teaching style can be productive because students learn through

their own exploration with the benefit of instructor feedback.

Task-style instruction is the first option along the teaching continuum that encourages independent decision-making by the student. For some students, it's a welcome relief from the sensation that the instructor is perpetually looking over their shoulder as they complete a task. For others, this method can be a little scary as they make their first moves out from under the instructor's wing. Be sensitive to the needs of students who benefit from extra encouragement and reassurances in terms of safety and success.

To combine elements of command and task styles of teaching, take your students to the top of a slope appropriate for their skill level and point to a target location below that's off to the side and out of the regular line of traffic. Direct your students to make a series of turns on the way to the indicated location and stop there. That much of the lesson is "commanded." The rest of the activity, though, gives students the "task" of determining their own speed, turn shape, and number of turns.

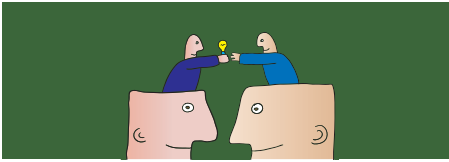
While not necessarily a complicated or creative teaching method, the task style provides a prime jumping-off point for students to transition from instruction that's totally teacher-directed to that which lets them adapt to real-life situations on the slopes. Skiers gain confidence by making independent decisions about movements that will help them navigate the hill. Beware, however, that the task style can backfire with young children because they often have trouble dealing with the kind of freedom such lessons offer.

With upper-level students, try combining visualization with simple movements. For instance, in a kids' advanced bump class you can create a task-based lesson by having students "build a house" out of parts of a bump that represent the peaked roof, gutters or troughs, doors in front, and windows on the side. Have each skier complete construction of a home by calling out one part of the building as he or she moves over each bump. At the end of a bump run, the individual should have a completed "house."

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[RECIPROCAL]

When it comes to feedback during a lesson, it can help to have input from someone other than the instructor. In the “reciprocal” style of teaching, students help other students. Once basic skills are learned and the focus is on application and fine-tuning, you can help facilitate peer feedback by pairing a student-learner with a student-observer.

First, explain the key points of a chosen exercise and then demonstrate the activity for students. Students can then “coach” each other while trading off between the roles of learner and observer. Your role as instructor is to ensure that observers understand the key points of the lesson in order to provide proper feedback for each learner’s performance. Observers will occasionally provide feedback on movements outside the designated focal points, which may only serve to confuse the learner. Therefore,

it’s important to remain aware of all responses and step in when it’s appropriate to redirect the conversation to a more pertinent line of feedback.

The benefits of using the reciprocal style are threefold: 1) student-observers have a chance to develop a greater understanding of the skills by analyzing and describing movements to their peers; 2) students can build trust among themselves and begin to rely on one another as a result of open and honest feedback; and 3) students are often more open to practicing the task with focused attention.

During reciprocal sessions, students get a feel for the added responsibility of being an “instructor” for a brief period. With younger children, make sure that feedback from student-observers is constructive and nonjudgmental. Before handing over this kind of power to young skiers and riders, provide several examples of useful words and phrases for observers to share.

Once you’re comfortable involving students in a reciprocal lesson, you can work this style into the context of the previously described combined “com-

mand/task” activity. For instance, have your students help set up cones for a series of wedge turns. Assign student partners based on a distinctive element such as a matching jacket color, height, etc.

Next, demonstrate a few wedge turns, and identify a particular focal point of the drill, e.g., a movement during which the inside ski tip leads into the turn before the outside tip. Explain what the proper movement looks like, and emphasize what’s not supposed to happen (i.e., the outside tip should not lead the inside tip).

Provide clear explanations and demonstrations so students have a fairly solid understanding of each task, and offer some examples of constructive feedback on key points. Have observers give learners several chances to practice their

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movements, and then provide feedback such as, “That was awesome: you did it exactly the way the instructor did it! Out of your first 10 turns, both skis stayed on the snow eight times.” Or, if the student wasn’t successful, the response might sound something like, “You were really close, but at the end of the turn it looked like the outside ski was in front of the inside ski.”

It’s likely that you’ll experience logistical (and even social) challenges by using a teaching style that involves peer input. Using partners may create a more social atmosphere than an educational one, so do your best to keep students focused by asking questions about their observations.



[GUIDED DISCOVERY/
EXPLORATION]

The guided discovery and guided exploration teaching styles create pathways that lead students to their own realizations. As the term “guided” implies, you as the instructor will sequentially lead individuals to an appropriate movement in much the same way you might use clues in a treasure hunt to direct a child to hidden treasure. In each of the styles, your questions and tasks should build upon one another to help students find their answers.

The major difference between the two styles is that guided discovery leads the student—via your instructions—to the correct form or answer. That is, the culmination of the responses to your queries, along with the accomplishment of assigned tasks, is designed to add up to a coherent result. While the questions and tasks build upon one another during the discovery process, guided exploration uses a more indirect way to

help students explore a range of possibilities before finding what they need.

To help students achieve success in each of these styles, you’ll need to anticipate questions and student responses. Give careful consideration to what will point students in the right direction, since inadequate preparation can diminish student morale. For example, if you send a snowboarder on a circuitous and challenging path in which it takes too long to get to the “discovery moment,” you’ll likely leave that student feeling as though he or she was sent on a wild goose chase.

When presenting each style, tell students to be patient and trust that the experience alone will help them better understand concepts you’re presenting. The strengths of each style lie in the discovery moment and the sequencing skills that lead there. With both styles, applying logic and cause-and-effect thinking can guide the students to the one correct answer. Simply asking review questions, however, is not a proper use of these styles.

Here’s an example of how these styles might be used in a Level 3 or 4 adult class with a goal of helping students figure out how to match their skis and explaining why this is an important skill to learn:

Instructor: Hey gang, I’m going to make a series of turns. I want you to watch me and then mimic what I do. [During the demonstration, the hope is that the students will notice how you’ve matched your skis at the turn’s finish. In all probability, some—but not necessarily all—of the students will exhibit a christie at the end of their turns.]

Instructor: Now that we’ve all performed this move, did any of you do anything different than you did before?

Student 1: I didn’t notice anything different. [Questions won’t always elicit the desired responses.]

Instructor: Okay, thanks for your input. Did anyone else notice anything different?

Student 2: I noticed that you had your skis parallel at the end of the turn and

I did the same thing as I finished up my turn.

Instructor: I’m glad that you noticed that little difference from what we were doing before. This slight variation can make a big difference in the way we finish a turn, so our next task is to figure out how we can guide the skis parallel to each other as we descend and get a sense of why this change would help. I’d like everyone, in their own time and space, to make a number of turns. As you make those turns, perform some with a parallel finish and some without. We’ll discuss our findings when we regroup by that stand of trees to the right.

At this point, each class member will perform a series of turns on his or her way to the designated finishing area.

Instructor: Would anyone like to share their thoughts or a description of what it’s like to match skis?

Student 3: It seems like when I went faster, the skis just matched by themselves. [This response shows that the student can describe the sensation of correctly matching the skis, but hasn’t discovered how the skis matched, and therefore has missed the goal of this teaching segment.]

Instructor: Good observation. If we increase the speed or go over a small roll, the dynamics of the turn will force the skis to align themselves. Let’s take a closer look at why matching skis is important. When we go back to making wedge turns, our legs and feet are basically turning toward each other. When we match our skis, though, what do you think is different about how we turn our legs? [To offer a clue at this point, you can lead students to an answer by saying something like, “Think hard about what happens to the inside leg when you match skis.”]

Student 2: It seems that when I turned both legs in the same direction, my skis went parallel.

Instructor: You’ve got it! This was the response I was looking for. If you can

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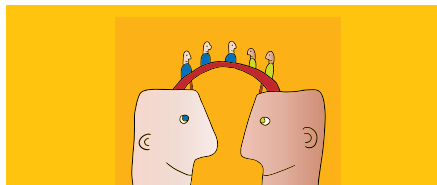
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recall what it felt like, would anybody say if matching our skis feels more or less natural?

Student 3: When I match skis, my hips don't feel as much tension as before.

Student 2: Yeah, I agree, and I also feel like I have more control over my speed when my skis are matched.

In this scenario, the instructor steered students toward discovering the correct answers to the given challenge. When one or more students miss out on giving the targeted response, it's time to back up and reconfigure questions or tasks into smaller segments so that there's a better chance for the students to uncover the information you've been working so hard to impart.



[PROBLEM SOLVING]

Similar to guided discovery and guided exploration, the problem-solving style of teaching gives students a challenge that can generate several correct answers. The emphasis in problem solving is on thinking “outside of the box,” and it encourages higher levels of cognitive thinking than guided discovery or guided exploration. Students are expected to discover their own answers to the challenges posed. This style is especially effective when teaching students to make tactical decisions.

In a bumps class for adults, for example, you could use a problem-solving approach to challenge skiers to find alternative pathways through the moguls. You can ask your students to navigate a slope full of bumps and then watch to see what happens. If your stu-

dents are typical, most will get caught in the vortex of the trough, increase their speed, and either ski out of the fall line or crash and burn. In the wake of such carnage, ask your skiers to explore other options for skiing the bumps with more speed control.

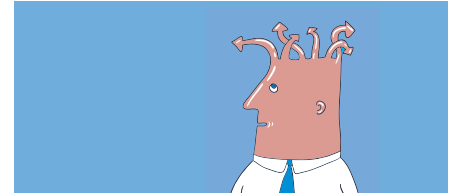
Maybe open the discussion with something like, “Would anyone like to ski the bumps with more control?” It's likely that most, if not all, of the students will answer in the affirmative. At this point it would be beneficial to explain the different parts of the bumps (including the crest, shoulder, trough, and sides). The true goal of the problem-solving teaching strategy, however, is for students to come up with their own solutions and pathways. The following example illustrates how this strategy might unfold:

Instructor: Now that you have the basics of Bump Anatomy 101, let's experiment with turning over the surface of different parts of the bump. For example, if you always approach the bump head-on, try a pivot and then slide into the trough. Then try approaching the bump from a side angle, making a slightly bigger turn by using more of the sides of the bump—where there tends to be more snow. If you usually make larger turns, look for places along the bump where you can turn quickly. Remember, our goal is speed control. Pick a speed you're comfortable with, and try to maintain it as you ski down the bump field.

Have students ski in their own space and at their own pace, and then regroup at the bottom of the run. Once you're back together, deliver the following discussion questions over the course of the next few runs and lift rides:

- Did anyone notice parts of the bump that they didn't know about before? Which parts? [Answers will vary.]
- How did starting the turn in a different place dictate your next move? Were you forced to pivot and slip, or could you make a rounded turn?
- Based on the shape of the bump, how did you decide on the best approach to maintain the same speed as you descended through the bumps?

Using such a series of question-and-answer sessions amid practice bump runs serves to illustrate the gist of the problem-solving style. One of the hallmarks of problem solving is that you as a teacher can expect to field an array of correct responses. Of those responses, however, some answers will reflect more effective outcomes than others.



[PERSONALIZED SYSTEM OF INSTRUCTION]

Remember that continuum of decision-making? Well, the personalized system of instruction (PSI) lies at the end of the spectrum opposite command style. In PSI, the instructor suggests logistical decisions, provides standards and tasks, and explains parameters. The student is solely responsible for mastering these tasks at his or her own pace, while also choosing starting and stopping points.

With this style, the role of the student is to self-motivate and self-evaluate. The instructor provides feedback and encouragement only when necessary. It's useful to give students tasks that encourage self-evaluation. For example, ask them to think about what's going on when they're balancing on one ski throughout a series of turns. Let them know that putting the ski down is a clear indication that the skier was not in balance over one ski during the turn.

One of the main objectives of PSI is to help students evolve into independent learners. Other goals include helping them develop analytical skills, encouraging them to work with others, and identifying personal strengths and weaknesses. Snowsports schools rarely rely on PSI because, as a teaching style, it requires more organizational time than most instructors have.

As an example, let's say you're working with a seasonal group (those who ski with you every weekend and holiday throughout the season) of proficient 12-year-old skiers. For this particular group, you could make short turns the focus of the practice session. Before

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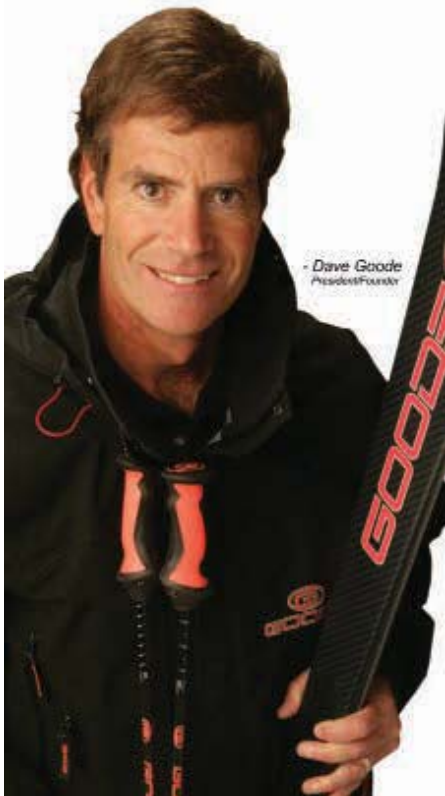
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practice gets under way, you'll want to set up several stations on a trail. (Make sure to adhere to your mountain's safety codes when you prepare something like this.) At each station, post a laminated card that lists the standards to be met for each task. For the first station you could set up flexible gates, plastic flags, or brushes to replicate a narrow corridor and encourage consistent distance between turns.

Two criteria that can be used to measure performance of this drill include keeping the torso directed down the hill and maintaining parallel skis throughout the turn. Since skiers may have trouble determining whether their torsos consistently face downhill, this exercise lends itself to pairing students so they can take turns observing each other's performance and offer feedback based on the standards set for each task.

Whenever possible, choose drills that provide opportunities for self-assessment, e.g., if you're teaching a mogul lesson, have students stop atop a bump, turn, and stop atop the next bump. Repeat this 10 times. If the students can't stop 10 times out of 10, then there's the feedback. No matter what you ask of them, though, the key is to make sure the moves are detectable, especially in the eyes of their fellow students.

The role of the student is to practice the task and self-assess his or her performance until mastering the drill. Set up other stations along the same trail so that you can stay in close proximity to your skiers. In the spirit of the personalized system of instruction, students choose the stations where they want to start, or they may even choose not to participate in a station. Partners can serve as observers and offer feedback based on the standards set for each task. As the instruc-

tor, you're still responsible for guiding each student's progress by giving him or her the final go-ahead to move on to another station.

Because PSI by design places emphasis on independence and self-reliance, it's important to establish trust and mutual respect before using this style with students. I recommend using this style for seasonal groups, week-long programs, or certification training programs.

[CONCLUSION]

When choosing a teaching style, base your decision on a number of considerations: the developmental stages and maturity levels of students, group dynamics, group proficiency, time constraints, and the objectives of the lesson. Effective and successful teaching can occur only when these deliberate choices are made.

Of course, the best way to familiarize yourself with all of these teaching styles is to jump right in and try them. Have a friend or colleague shoot some video while you're teaching a group of peers. Watch the video later to identify which styles you rely on most during a lesson. Then, the next time you're with a class, challenge yourself and try a style (or styles) that you've never used before.

Now that you're focused on the differences between teaching styles, it will be easy to make choices that don't simply leave your students' learning to the vagaries of luck and coincidence. Best of all, you'll be delivering effective and successful outcome-based instruction. **32**

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