

Dive In: My Journey Into Learning

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Introduction

To begin with, it is very helpful to have an organized, well-thought out plan when preparing to teach or instruct people. At the same time, one has to think ahead about possible problems or unexpected events that could take place when preparing for instruction. Being creative with the available resources and establishing effective ways of communication are crucial for learning to take place. These steps are a few aspects of learning I did not take into account when I began teaching swim lessons five years ago. I never looked at learning as a process. It was only when I realized that learning took place in a series of steps, as discussed by Roger von Oech in [A Kick In The Seat Of The Pants](#), did I learn to teach more effectively (1986). It was important for me to follow these learning steps and to view myself as an explorer, artist, judge, and warrior. If I failed to see myself in any one of these roles, I would have denied myself a valuable learning experience.

Facing the Unexpected

While I was lifeguarding one summer day, my supervisor approached me and asked if I would be interested in teaching swim lessons. Since I needed the extra cash, I willingly accepted. He explained to me that I would be teaching a class of five year olds which I saw as an added benefit since I love working with children. I began having a learning conversation with myself to think about what preparation is necessary to handle

such a task in a successful manner (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). I thought about the types of activities the children could learn from and how I would go about teaching them. When writing my lesson plans, I consulted my company Pro Pool Management's swim lesson manual for activities correlated to the child's age and skill level. I had spent a lot of time alone thinking and reflecting on how the swimming instructors taught lessons that I observed while lifeguarding. I analyzed the effectiveness of all their approaches and noticed that they all taught in a similar fashion with almost identical methods. I instructed my classes the first three years the same way with only a few minor setbacks such as behavioral issues and failure to pay attention. None of these issues posed any real problem. On the first day of my fourth summer as a swim instructor, I was faced with an unexpected challenge. This challenge restructured my views on learning and started me on my journey of learning how to learn.

In the summer of '97, I had a boy in my class named Charlie (fictional name). He was born with Down Syndrome. I did not know anything about this handicap except those who had Down Syndrome had distinct facial features. I showed up to class the first day expecting the class to be as routine as all the others I had taught over the last three years. I had all sorts of troubles immediately. I noticed Charlie's motor abilities and coordination were delayed for his age. I had to spend the entire class giving my attention to him in some way. I only got through half of my lesson plans, and I failed to give the rest of the class the attention they all appropriately deserved. By focusing most of my time and attention on Charlie, I was slowing down the learning experience of the rest of

the children. I could see the looks of disappointment on the faces of all the other parents. Charlie's mom looked embarrassed and upset. On top of all that, I could not understand Charlie's gestures or hardly anything he said. I was extremely frustrated the rest of the day and could not concentrate on my other lessons. My judge had failed me. I had been very happy and content with my ideas that had brought me so much success in the past that I failed to even consider new possibilities or other methods of instruction (von Oech, 1986).

My Explorer

I went home later that night and did some serious reflecting on what I could possibly do to make my present dilemma better. As von Oech states, "When you look for more than one right answer, you allow your imagination to open up." (1986, p.31) This is exactly what I needed my explorer to do for me. After some thinking I came up with a few ideas. First of all, I decided to learn as much as I could about Down Syndrome from the textbooks I had readily available to me at my pool companies main office. Next, I decided to talk to other lifeguards who taught swim lessons for my company to see if any of them had ever been in a situation like mine. I figured I could gain some valuable insights from someone else who had different perspectives than mine. Harri-Augstein & Thomas mention the importance of taking in other people's experiences and reflecting on them so you can come up with new ideas to make relevant to your situation (1991). My friend Stephanie had been in a similar predicament before. She suggested having a conference with Charlie's parents to discuss his behavior and learn the meaning behind

some of his gestures and speech. I talked to his parents and learned a great deal of information about Down Syndrome as well as useful tips for understanding Charlie's behavior. I still knew Charlie would require more attention than the other kids in my class and I did not want to take away any more time from their learning experience. Then it occurred to me that I had half an hour between my two morning classes. That time could best be used to give Charlie private lessons. I had to explain this to his parents without upsetting them. I did not want them to think that their son could not interact with normal children. I explained to them that since Charlie presented me with a situation I had never been in before that it would be better for everyone to implement this private lesson plan. I told them he would be reunited with his class halfway through the eight-week-long session. This seemed to please them.

My Artist

I had taken in and reflected on the information Charlie's parents gave to me. Now I had to utilize that information to come up with ways to improve Charlie's swimming abilities. Charlie's mother told me he was afraid of the water. He would tense up and had difficulty relaxing. She told me later in our conversation that Charlie was fascinated with bright colors and liked teddy bears a lot. I am glad she told me his interest because I wanted to find ways to motivate him and make him feel relaxed in the water. I had to come up with a way to incorporate Charlie's favorite things into his swimming lessons. In order to do this, I could not afford to be a "prisoner of familiarity" (von Oech, 1986). I decided to design a picture of a bear with many bright colors surrounding him. I would

then attach this picture to a floating device surrounded by plastic to keep water from ruining the picture. This way I could get Charlie to feel more relaxed and comfortable in the water.

My Judge

My judge had failed me before. My ideas for teaching Charlie how to swim seemed doable. However; I was not sure I had the confidence to implement my idea. I had put so much time and my best effort into planning my lesson and I did not think my self-esteem could handle a failure. Roger von Oech said it best when he stated, “The two greatest enemies of action are fear and lack of confidence” (1986, p.134). I was not going to let all my hard work and effort go to waste. I decided to give my idea a try.

My Warrior

On the first day of our private lessons, Charlie showed up in a pleasant mood. We sat by the steps in the shallow end for five minutes as I desperately tried to get him into the water. I had no such luck. I fought back the butterflies in my stomach and pulled out the floating device I created. His face instantaneously lit up. The rest of the lesson went better than expected. Charlie hung on to the floating device and kicked himself all around the pool. My ideas was a success. I continued to structure my lessons around his interest with great results. When Charlie joined the rest of the class after four weeks, he was immediately welcomed by the rest of the class. I was a little apprehensive about reuniting Charlie with the class because their skills were still more advanced than his. However, the class and I continued to support Charlie’s efforts. Lessons moved along

smoothly without hindering anyone's learning. By the end of our eight week session, Charlie's swimming abilities had shown much improvement. I made something happen because I took responsibility for my idea and I did what it took to make it a success (Von Oech,1986).

Swimming In Water Over My Head

I never thought I would be faced with another challenge as great as Charlie's. While I was working last summer, I was unexpectedly asked by one of the pool's residents if I would be interested in teaching her ten-year-old deaf son how to swim. I had numerous conversations with this woman prior to this one. She knew I was pursuing a career in the field of speech pathology. She knew of my experiences and the coursework I had related to communication disorders based on our prior conversations. She looked at me desperately, explaining how a specialist had worked with Karl (fictional name) but achieved little success. I reluctantly told her that I would think the situation over and let her know my decision in a couple of days. I sat there on the lifeguard stand for hours thinking about the ramifications of taking on such an enormous task. If a specialist had failed with Karl, how did his mother expect me to teach him anything.

The Lost Explorer

As I pondered the situation further, I engaged in many different learning conversations with myself. The further in-depth these conversations within myself got, the more my disabling myths started to emerge from the surface of my mind (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). I thought to myself I am way too inexperienced to take on a

predicament like this. How could the mother ask me to do such a thing? I have never even been around a deaf person before. So how could I even be expected to communicate with a deaf child? My explorer was stranded in the middle of the ocean with no compass or no map. Then it occurred to me why the mother asked me in the first place. It was not due to the fact that I was studying to work with speech disabled children. The specialist who worked with Karl before me was also trained in the same discipline. I had discussed with her in one of our conversations by the pool that I had just finished taking a course in sign language. This gave me a slight edge over the specialist considering this was Karl's primary way of communicating with the world around him. My confidence increased somewhat as I realized this had to be the main reason why the specialist had failed. Thus, I convinced my explorer to have an "inside outlook." According to Roger von Oech, a good explorer adapts the attitude that there is a lot of good information around you. Your explorer just has to find it (1986, p.25).

The Crucial Role of the Artist

If I was to succeed in instructing this child, the artist would play the most crucial role of the four learning steps for me. I would have to be more imaginative and more creative than I had ever been in my life in developing lesson plans. I reflected back on my experience with Charlie. I analyzed my triumphs and failures with him and tried to bring my artist out by transforming those ideas into something new (von Oech,1986). First, I decided to improve my sign language skills by practicing everyday. If that failed as a means of communication with Karl, or proved to be too slow of a process, then I would

use a writing version of “EtchaScetch.” If Karl’s mother was not going to be present because of work when communication problems arose, then we could communicate in the water quickly with this waterproof device. Finally, I had to discuss Karl’s interests and hobbies with his mother to base my lesson plans on.

The Hesitant Judge

Even though I had come up with some strategies for carrying out swim lessons for Karl, I still lacked the confidence to implement my ideas. The outcome of this situation was far more significant with greater consequences if I failed compared to the Charlie scenario. By this I mean that Karl’s disability represented the type of clients I would be working with in the future. If I failed with him, what does this tell me about my future chances of becoming a successful speech pathologist? I decided I could not go through with it. The possibility of failure was too devastating of an outcome for me to handle. I avoided Karl’s mother at all cost. I even scheduled off work days from the pool so I wouldn’t have to see her. The Attribution Theory draws a distinct line between two types of people concerning self-esteem (Slavin, 1997). Those with low self-esteem dwell on their mistakes and each new one acts like a rock dragging the person further down. Those with high self-esteem do not stand for failure. They will be persistent to avoid such an outcome again. I was determined to be the latter of the two. I would not fail. I realized I would rather make errors of commission than errors of omission. I could not do nothing and lose an opportunity like this one (von Oech, 1986). I made a personal learning contract with myself that nothing short of complete success would be acceptable

(Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). The rest was up to my warrior.

The Resilient Warrior

My confidence was approaching a new level the night before my first lesson with Karl. I did a lot of soul searching that evening. I began mentally visualizing myself reaching my goals with Karl (von Oech, 1986). I pictured Karl in my mind learning how to swim from my instructions. I imagined every possible drawback and how to remediate each one of those setbacks. I was not only motivated, I had “a passion for my idea.” (von Oech, 1986, p.119) This passion relied heavily on the fact that this situation dealt with my dreams of becoming a future speech therapist. I maintained a positive outlook at all cost during my lessons with Karl. I had more initial failures than I did with Charlie. Charlie’s mother was not present at the beginning of the first day. The weather was not as warm as it had been so I could not even get Charlie into the water. Without his mother around, I felt helpless. My sign language skills were not as developed as I had hoped. Communication between us seemed impossible. All of a sudden I remembered my “EtchaScetch” idea. Charlie instantaneously wrote me a message on the screen. I breathed a sigh of relief. This would serve as an effective means of communication until Charlie’s mother started coming to the lessons or until my sign language skills improved. Charlie’s mother never missed another day of lessons. My sign language skills improved rapidly as I observed the hand gestures between Charlie and his mother. As a result, Charlie had improved somewhat by the end of the summer. His swimming technique looked awkward but he could still swim and keep his head above water. All he needed

was more practice. At the end of it all, I stood victorious completely filled with my first real feeling of accomplishment.

In Retrospect

In conclusion, the main component I feel that is absolutely necessary to achieve one's goals is confidence. Somebody can be the most creative, imaginative, and intelligent human being around. All of those traits become meaningless unless he or she has the determination and self-esteem to see their ideas put into action. As I grew older, I continued to recollect and reflect on my experiences from those two summers and apply them to my life. For example, I have had to constantly depend on my imagination and creativity this year during my clinical work with my client. It is hard to come up with unique and exciting activities each week that will hold my client's interest and keep him attentive. Whenever my artistic abilities start to hinder, I draw on the strength and motivation I displayed teaching those two special children. After awhile, a suitable idea enters my mind. I found that the key is to never let your mind get stuck thinking the same routine way every day. This causes a person's creative ability to wither away. Also, It makes it near impossible to resolve a problem when your creative side is needed suddenly in an unexpected situation. For example, there has been a few instances where I had to instantaneously modify my therapy activities this year because they were uninteresting to my client. If I had not gone through these previous creative experiences, I would have been left completely dumfounded when these problems arose. Through all the discussions in class: von Oech's four roles, Harri-Augstein's learning conversations,

and Glasser's mental pictures (1986), I have truly come to the understanding of what it means *to learn*.

Final Note

The two situations discussed above were not necessarily the greatest challenges of my life. However; these situations presented me with my first gigantic problems I had to sort out entirely alone. It was not the success that made me proud. It was learning how to learn that made me content. I believe this ability is contained within each and every one of us. There is just one important lesson in life we need to remember:

“Never give up, never give up, never give up.”

--Winston Churchill

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Self Evaluation

In the process of doing this project, I figured out that learning is a process. I used to think it was something that happened all at once. I would study information for a test. If I memorized the information well enough, I would recall the subject matter on the test. I considered how much information I remembered on the test as learning. I did not learn until the process of doing this project that learning took place in a series of steps. Each step being equally important if true learning was to take place. I also learned that the experiences I wrote about could be reflected on and applied to similar situations I face today. In particular, I apply the creativity I used while teaching swim lessons to my speech therapy sessions. I need to constantly come up with innovative ways of keeping my client interested as well as improving his difficulties with speech at the same time. The most important lesson I probably learned was to never give up. I would not be a confident undergraduate speech therapist today if I had not accepted the two challenges presented to me over the last couple of summers. If you run from your fears, you will go through life without really accomplishing anything. I am glad I did not run from my fears.

What makes this project different from anything I could find elsewhere is the fact that it called for constant reflection and for an in-depth analysis of myself as a learner. I have never encountered a project that called for me to draw on an outside experience and reflect on what I could relate to my future profession. Outside my major classes, none of my other courses have provided me with the challenge I could relate to my field of study.

This project could be applied to practical everyday situations as well because learning how to learn is a continual process that I build upon everyday.

This project made me more aware of how humans learn how to learn because this project taught me how to learn. In the process of learning how to learn myself, I now have a better understanding of how others take in information and experiences. Through the peer editing sessions of this assignment I learned the importance of hearing other classmate's perspectives and their views on learning. An important aspect of becoming aware of how others learn is to become an open-minded individual and to count on others for a different angle they could offer on a topic. I never had anyone look over any of my papers before this project. Having others look at my paper gave me insights on different ways to approaching learning techniques and how I could incorporate those into my paper. Thus, by helping them learn, I learned a lot about how they learn when presented with information.

This project helped me move towards the goal of helping others learn because it reminded me of the confidence I showed when I was faced with two dilemmas. I was not afraid to fail. I had a positive mentality that no matter how long it took I was not going to let any setbacks keep me from reaching my goal. I learned to have a passion for my work as a speech therapist instead of just viewing what I do as a job. I learned to visualize my success in my head before beginning therapy sessions. I engage in learning conversations with myself on what I could do if a problem came about while I was giving therapy to a client. I think of ways to be creative in my sessions so I can quickly come up with an

alternative way of remediating a problem if an unexpected situation comes about. By taking all of these factors into account every time I approach my job as a speech and language pathologist, I am moving towards my goal of helping others learn.