

GENERALIST, SPECIALIST,

OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN:

WHAT'S THE SHAPE OF YOUR TEACHING PATH?

Whether they teach fulltime or part-time, instructors often fulfill specific roles within their ski and ride school. Some are good at everything, can teach any lesson, in any condition, to any type of person. Others have put all their might into excelling in one chosen area.



Which path is right for you? Well both, really. The early stages of working on snow works are probably all similar. We usually start out teaching beginners and branch out from there. Most of us spend our first few years getting better at more and more things. We learn how to talk to kids *and* adults. We teach never-evers in the morning, then bump lessons in the afternoon. Weekends we teach busloads; weekdays we teach privates.

THERE'S JOY IN DOING IT ALL

There's a joy in being a generalist. You get to work with all sorts of people and solve all manner of problems. The variety and rapid learning curve are addictively fun. At the same time, you're building the universal skills of your job, soaking up training and progressing through the ranks of certification.

If you're relatively new to teaching, resist the temptation to rush through this stage. We all know that crying children will test your patience, and spending a whole day in the beginner area is far from glamorous. But the work you do here will lay the foundation for everything else you do. Be wide-eyed and focus on becoming as versatile as you can. This will pay dividends through the rest of your career.

Once you have a few years of teaching under your belt, it will become clear to you which types of clients and lessons are the best fit for you. If you love the variety of getting a new type of student at every lineup, there's no need to change course. And, frankly, given how much the snowsports industry relies on converting beginners to lifelong skiers and snowboarders, veteran instructors who teach children as

well as introductory lessons are often worth their weight in gold.

As Ben Roberts describes in the accompanying "Be a Master of the Trade" segment, you can have a storied career by remaining open to all the possibilities that come your way. Or, as Karin Kirk points out in the "Do More of What You Do Best" segment, you can also have great success by narrowing things down and pursuing a particular specialty. Of course, some combination of these approaches is also possible, and you can have more than one area of focus.

LOOK FOR THE PERFECT FIT FOR YOU

If you're established in your snowsports career, have you made a conscious choice of your path? Or has a path chosen you? Are you happy with it? Are you taking deliberate steps to develop and refine your skills? If you've chosen a specific course of action, periodically take time to revisit your decisions. Don't change things constantly, but be sure to reflect on your decisions and how well they fit you. As you near the end of the season, now is the ideal time to take stock.

If you're in or approaching the later stage in your teaching career, how have your decisions worked out? Are there opportunities for fine-tuning? Whether as a specialist or a generalist, which focal points are the most rewarding for you and how can you spend more of your time working in those areas?

No matter what path you choose, remember that you're the one in charge. Enjoy its winding road and all the places it takes you. But most of all, never stop learning!



HOW TO BE A MASTER OF THE TRADE

By Ben Roberts

Early in my career I worked alongside several instructors who were true masters of their trade. These men and women had many years of experience and I was inspired by their talent.

Several were generalists; they served a diverse client base and skillfully took on any group or private assignment that came their way. Others were more specialized; one worked almost exclusively with adults looking for extremely disciplined instruction, another spent her winters high on the mountain guiding students of all ages through the most extreme terrain they could safely handle. I knew from watching them that I wanted to be really good at this job, but did that mean being a generalist or finding a specialty?

During my second season teaching, I asked each of them how they got so good. While their accounts varied, each had consciously decided to develop and maintain the spectrum of skills required for true mastery of teaching snowsports. The generalists explained that they were happiest and found themselves most in demand when working a little bit with everyone. The specialists described themselves as happiest when working in their niche; they were less content outside of it. These conversations helped me endure the challenges of my first few years teaching and they've continued to guide me as I've worked as both a generalist and a specialist.

Models of career development tend to break pathways into early, middle, and later stages. Understanding the role of the generalist is especially important in the early and middle stages of an instructor's career as you make decisions about job roles, training opportunities, and the overall direction of your career.

CERT GOALS OFFER EARLY-CAREER GUIDANCE

While each instructor's path will be different, four seasons of teaching is a typical timeframe for you to grow from a new instructor to a more mature level of skill development. Most instructors can expect to spend their first few seasons working primarily with children in

the beginner zone. While it may be frustrating at times, this makes sense from a business and learning perspective and is as good a place to start as any. From this humble beginning, with hard work, training, and a growing base of experience you will steadily improve and begin working with a wider range of students and types of lessons.

During this period, instructors often gain higher levels of certification and more diverse lesson assignments. This progression is reflected in the requirements of PSIA-AASI's certification standards; it's no wonder so many instructors use certification goals to guide their skill development. This increasing level of versatility makes you more valuable to your school, and the combination of work experience and certification make you more marketable when applying for jobs. Instructors at this stage have mastered the

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fundamental skills of their profession.

This early career period is when you begin to get a sense of what aspects of teaching are most (and least) appealing to you. As your career moves to a stage of maturity, you'll combine this personal understanding with your strong fundamental skills to become either a masterful generalist or perhaps move toward a rewarding future as a specialist.

POSSIBLE PATHS WIDEN AT MID-CAREER

Once you've gained ownership of the fundamentals of teaching snowsports, you'll have more options and pathways to consider as you strengthen this foundation. If you like the idea of being a generalist, continue working to become deeply skilled in the fundamental aspects of snowsports instruction. This pathway involves digging deeper into your experience and understanding of learning styles, technical concepts and movement analysis, equipment design, industry trends, and guest service.

You'll also want to get comfortable working with guests who have a wide range of ages, ability levels, and backgrounds. This approach may follow an established path, such as adding certifications and working toward becoming a school trainer and a divisional educator and examiner. It can be more specific to you and your situation and may simply be a matter of working hard to be skilled and in demand as the reliable and go-to instructor for any assignment in your school.

If being a specialist is more appealing, continue deepening your fundamental skills while also actively adding and refining skills in one or several specialty areas such as coaching racers or park competitors, working with specific client groups such as children, fearful adults, or yoga enthusiasts. Leading video sessions and working with bootfitters are additional potential specialty areas to explore. Both paths offer the rewards of continuing to learn and develop.



As a generalist, you may teach children in the morning and adult intermediates in the afternoon.

Becoming a generalist is an excellent choice if you enjoy the novelty of working with a range of students and types of lessons. The specialist approach is a great choice if you're excited about a specific aspect of snowsports and enjoy learning and developing new skills and applying old skills to new situations.

When making these decisions, reflect on both personal values and strategic considerations. In the personal realm, what aspects of teaching and the skiing and/or riding experience are most rewarding? Which students have you enjoyed working with the most? Have they been a diverse mix? Or did those students fit a more specific profile? Do you spend every day off playing in the park or backcountry? Or do you prefer a variety of snowsports activities?

Strategic aspects include the potential for a future move, your need for financial stability, and the nature of your career goals. A

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friend from the Midwest added Alpine Level I certification to her Snowboard Level II and Children's Specialist 2, knowing that this would help her get her foot in the door at her dream resort out west. Another friend prepared for a move into management, as he was starting a family and valued increased job security in the event of drought, injury, or a challenging economy. Co-author Karin Kirk took her career from this mid-career level of skill to a rewarding role as a guide on Bridger Bowl's inbounds hiking terrain.

RECOGNIZE OBSTACLES, EMBRACE OPPORTUNITIES

Do you find yourself saying things like “I can't relate to _____,” “I'm not good at selling myself,” “Other instructors know more about _____ than I do,” or “I always teach groups, one-on-one lessons are really awkward for me.” This is called self-handicapping. While it's human nature, it results in missed opportunities and can lead to gaps in your teaching skills.

Reflect on your perceived gaps and consider getting training or having a conversation with a fellow instructor who excels in that area. Challenge yourself to seek out and accept those assignments that are less comfortable and you will see your ability to teach them increase.

Branching out and being willing to be “comfortable being



Ski and ride schools depend on generalists and specialists to meet various student expectations.

GO WITH A PRO TOOLKIT HELPS YOU DRUM UP BUSINESS

PSIA-AASI's new “Go with a Pro/Promote Yourself” Toolkit – available at TheSnowPros.org – makes it easier for you to succeed as a snow pro by:

- Raising public awareness of the benefits of taking a professional lesson
- Spreading the word about *your* experience and expertise
- Helping schools, resorts – and you – attract new clients
- Supporting guest-retention efforts

For example, the toolkit offers snow pro guidance on using social media to promote yourself, *and* provides digital badges you can use to tout *your* areas of expertise and credentials. Other resources in the toolkit include a Go with a Pro guide and images, access to customizable *Tip of the Day* cards, media interview tips, and more.



uncomfortable” is critical for developing a wider range of skills and experiences. This process will help you progress as a generalist whose versatility beyond serving the core business of your snowsports school is valued and used. This process can start by simply saying “yes” to more assignments. If you feel like you're stuck in a rut, check in with your school's managers and let them know that you're looking for challenges outside of your regular wheelhouse.

Trying to excel in multiple areas can have limits. In order to develop and maintain your skillfulness in an area, you need to work in that area regularly. If you find that you're constantly “winging it” by working in many different areas, it's possible that you're branching out too quickly. Similarly, if you find it difficult to either maintain or continue developing skillfulness in your areas of expertise, it may be time to consider narrowing down the topic areas in which you're working.

Being a generalist can be a rewarding path in its own right, or an excellent way to develop and refine skills as you begin working to become a specialist. The accompanying article about specialists focuses on the mid to later stages of an instructor's career. Keep in mind that the same focus and dedication required of a budding specialist can be applied to becoming an excellent generalist. Pursuing mastery as either a generalist or as a specialist will offer a lifetime of challenges and rewarding experiences and accomplishments.

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DO MORE OF WHAT YOU DO BEST

By Karin Kirk

At morning lineup, what assignment do you hope for the most? Adventuresome kids? Aspiring freestylers? Big-mountain explorers? We all have certain types of lessons that are a perfect fit. Wouldn't it be great if you could spend most of your time teaching your favorite topics to your favorite kinds of riders and sliders?

If you look around your snowsports school, you can probably identify instructors who have done just that. I can think of several.

Dave is a former college racer who carves pristine arcs and helps his clients do the same. Gretta skis in the backcountry every chance she gets, and she has a knack for helping people gain confidence in tricky terrain and variable snow. Jessica majored in education, and of course she loves kids, but what's even more apparent is how much kids love her. Each of these instructors has clearly identified their own niche, and they have built careers around what they do best.

EXAMPLE SPECIALTIES

- Children
- Seniors
- Women
- Adaptive
- Park/pipe/freestyle
- Gates (i.e., race orientation) and carving
- Big mountain
- Biomechanical/technical expert
- Equipment/tuning
- Different cultures, nationalities, and languages
- Specialty products and services, such as weeklong camps or video analysis

WHY SPECIALIZE?

"Must be nice," is something I hear fairly often as I head out the door to lead a half-day, guided ski tour of Bridger Bowl's Ridge terrain. It is nice! The best reason to specialize is so that you can spend more of your time doing your favorite things.

Another advantage to specialization is that you can focus your training time and dollars. Most of us take a clinic or two each season anyway, why not invest that time into building depth instead of spreading it across several topics?



GRANT NAKAMURA

In some ways, adaptive instructors are generalists in a specialized field.



JORDY HENRIK

Taking a backcountry avalanche class is one example of building expertise toward a specialty.

Lastly, many snowsports schools offer higher pay rates for request lessons. Becoming a specialist offers you a better shot at building clientele and becoming known for your expertise. It's one way to stand out from the crowd.

IDENTIFY YOUR NICHE

A specialty is only viable when it's practical for your location, terrain, and resort. Are there needs that aren't being met? Are there things that you are especially good at that can benefit your snowsports school? Try to work within existing programs, rather than trying to build something brand-new from scratch.

It's important to do some soul-searching about your chosen path. Why does that type of work call to you? Is it something that truly speaks to you, intrinsically? Or are you attracted to the extrinsic benefits like pay or status? While those are nice perks, they shouldn't be your primary reasons for pursuing a specialty.

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FIND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

People become experts by bringing inherent abilities and traits to the table, by training and actively expanding their knowledge and skills, and by gaining real-world experience. Getting good at something is hard. Getting *really* good at something is even harder. But that's exactly what you'll need to do to turn your natural forte into a genuine career path.

The easiest place to start is with your own ski and ride school. Many schools offer training geared toward children, seniors, and adaptive lessons. Depending on your terrain, you may also be able to attend clinics to build skills in freestyle, bumps, or carving. Avail yourself to the most relevant training you can get at home.

Next, look to your division. There you'll find indoor tech talks, biomechanics classes, and clinics for many types of populations and terrain. Plan ahead, and prioritize the clinics that are best matched to your specialty. When you attend clinics, bring your A-Game. Be prepared, bright-eyed, and ready to soak it all in.

To really build depth, go after training and experiences beyond the usual offerings. Take a course in child development; go to a race camp; attend a backcountry avalanche class. Find courses that develop skills in ways that usual clinics don't. Specialized training is

highly valuable, and you'll learn tons while also building credibility. Check with your division to see how you can earn education credits for your "outside the box" education.

If you choose a niche that's uncommon in your area, you may not have a staff trainer or peers to guide you. If you are forging a path to become a yoga-based biomechanics expert, you may find yourself setting your own goals and evaluating your own progress. That said, don't ignore obvious helpful coaching and feedback, just because it's not a 100-percent match for what you're focused on. If you are all about running gates and your trainers offer some help with your off-groomed tactics, take them up on it. Don't get so caught up in your own path that you feel like regular clinics and training don't apply to you. They still do. Solid fundamentals of skiing, riding, and teaching are still essential to everything we do.

You'll know you're on the right path when all of this work feels exciting and rewarding. To succeed as a specialist, you have to be able to put in an extra push to build depth. Expect to train just as hard as you did for your Level II and III exams, but in a different direction.

FORGE A PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR MANAGERS

Don't forget you are still a part of your snowsports school. Regardless of your career focus, you'll still have to teach "regular" lessons too. This is a good thing — it's important for all of us to teach all kinds of lessons throughout our careers.

At the same time, discuss your career aspirations with your trainers and supervisors. If you're working hard to further your expertise, then hopefully the school will recognize that by giving you some relevant assignments. But plan to prove yourself to management first. Bring in return business, develop a track record of being safe, fun, and effective, and demonstrate that you really are extra good at this.

BUILD YOUR NETWORK

Expanding your network and client base can be painfully slow. Expect it to take several years before you feel like you're becoming established. Don't push it; nothing is a bigger turnoff than a self-proclaimed expert. Show your excitement for what you do, rather than talking up your accomplishments.

That said, here are some things you can do to help gain traction.

- ▶ **When you get a lesson within your wheelhouse, be sure to make the most of it.** Let the clients know that this is your thing, "This is my favorite type of lesson, this is what I put most of my energy into doing. I'm so psyched to be working with you!"



CHRIS KERR

Training with a peer is obviously way more fun than training alone.

YOU'RE OFF TO THE RACES WITH PSIA-AASI RESOURCES



Whether you're honing your skills as a generalist or building your credibility as a specialist, PSIA-AASI's education resources can help. *Core Concepts for Snowsports Instructors* and the *Children's Instruction Manual*, for example, are must-reads. Add technical manuals and teaching handbooks in all the various disciplines (alpine, snowboard, cross country, and telemark) to become even more well-rounded.

Specializing in freestyle? PSIA-AASI has a technical manual for that. If teaching children is your passion, you'll have several resources to choose from. Check out the *PSIA-AASI Accessories Catalog* at TheSnowPros.org to order materials that offer great guidance, whatever your instructional path.

Don't get so caught up in your own path that you feel like regular clinics and training don't apply to you. They still do.

- ▶ **List your specialty and credentials on your business cards.**
- ▶ **Write an article for your local newspaper or local wintertime publication.** Be knowledgeable and relatable, not self-promotional.
- ▶ **Reach out to established pros who are already successful in the same realm that you're aiming for.** They are potential mentors and sources of all kinds of information. Be respectful, and see what insights they can share with you.
- ▶ **If you have a client who is not a great fit for you, consider referring them** to a colleague who excels at that type of lesson. Perhaps the favor will be returned to you. And if you end up teaching that student anyway, take on the lesson with gusto and challenge yourself to exceed your expectations.
- ▶ **Be active within your chosen community.** If you want to work with ski racers, attend race functions. If you want to coach in big-mountain environments, spend your free time in that terrain. Becoming familiar with the people, terrain, and culture of your community is key to building credibility.
- ▶ **As you grow and learn, be aware of your own limits.** A challenging, specialty assignment might seem tempting, but it could also mean a high-profile failure. Credibility takes a long time to establish, but can be vanquished overnight. A thoughtful and strategic plan will serve you better than a daring one.

The path to becoming a high-end specialist is not particularly quick, but that's exactly why it's so worthwhile. The years you spend honing your skills will help you forge a career path that feeds your soul, exposes you to new ideas, pays your bills, and keeps you productive. Who knows, a revitalized career path might even prevent your parents from repeatedly asking you when you're going to get a real job!³²

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