

# WELL THAT DIDN'T WORK: UNRAVELING THE CAUSES OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL LESSON

By Karin Kirk

**T**he locker room at lunchtime is a bustling hive of activity. We've got 25 minutes to transition from one lesson to the next, warm up, and eat some food. But what seems to take most of our time and energy is the requisite debrief: "So, how was your lesson?"

While it's fun to regale each other with tales of epic successes and brilliant runs, where the conversation really gets interesting is when the lesson did not go well. Sometimes one student lags behind, other times the instructor and client just don't click. Maybe something you've taught reliably for years suddenly fails to work. Or a client started off doing well, then hit a brick wall.

There are myriad reasons why someone may not be learning, and it's fascinating and worthwhile to explore what might be going wrong – because understanding the causes of educational missteps can help you prevent or correct them. So, pass the ketchup and gather round this virtual locker room lunch table while we explore the dreaded unsuccessful lesson.



At the beginning of the lesson, connect with each student individually and see what you can learn about their motivation and values.

## HOW WE LEARN

As outlined in "Learn the States of Motor Learning to Help Students Succeed More Quickly" (Fall 2016), there are three stages of learning: the cognitive, associative, and autonomous stages. In other words, figuring

stuff out, practicing it, and being good at it. Obstacles to learning usually occur during the cognitive stage – when we're trying to sort out what to do and how to do it.

The reason this is called the *cognitive* stage is because there's a bunch of brainpower involved. It takes a lot of mental work to learn a new skill, even when it's a physical skill. At this stage of learning, students are entirely dependent on the instructor to help them along.

Students need to understand what to do, and they need accurate feedback because they can't yet feel it for themselves. Consequently, the relationship between instructor and student is very tight during this stage. Students need a lot of information, feedback, and encouragement. Their learning is unsteady and vulnerable. And this is precisely why they may have difficulties along the way.

## WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF LEARNING?

Obstacles to learning can be rooted in many factors: the student's attitude, their trust in the instructor, their understanding of the task, their physical abilities, and the environment around them. You play a central role in every aspect of this relationship. Regardless of what your students bring to the table, it's up to you to guide them toward the most productive and fun situation you can create. Let's take a closer look at some of the key factors that can make or break a snowsports lesson.

## MOTIVATION, VALUES, AND WILLINGNESS

Before they even pull their boots on, students need to want to *try* to learn. Without that,

## AFFECTIVE ROADBLOCKS TO LEARNING

### Values

- The instructor has framed the lesson to reflect the instructor's goals and values, not the student's.
- The end goal, e.g., riding switch, is not something the student values.
- The instructor does not connect with students and does not relate to their values.

### Motivation

- Student prefers to do what they're already doing.
- The instructor is not able to tap into the student's motivations.
- Instructor lacks or loses credibility.

### Fear

- Of falling/injury
- Of looking stupid
- Of trying again when previous attempts failed

### Social pressures

- It's not cool to try.
- It's not cool to fail.

nothing else can follow. There are many reasons why someone won't engage in the learning process. Perhaps the whole notion of the lesson was someone else's idea, or the student thinks they are already good enough and don't need instruction.

On the other hand, maybe the idea of trying and failing is daunting. Skim the accompany list of motivation-related reasons and you'll likely recognize some from your own experiences.

## Whose Values?

The root cause of several of these issues can be a mismatch between the student's goals and what you are teaching. You already know that goal setting is a crucial part of PSIA-AASI's Teaching Cycle, but this is especially



## WHAT'S YOUR ADVICE FOR WHEN A LESSON GETS OFF TRACK?



Ever had a student who – despite your best efforts – just didn't "get it"? How did you handle it? What's your advice for fellow instructor who might have a similar experience? Join the conversation on The Community at: [tiny.cc/tglsgy](http://tiny.cc/tglsgy)



What to do when a student does not want to learn? Now it's time for you to diagnose what's behind this behavior. Is this student tired? Or uninspired by the task? Or is there a social reason he's reluctant to join the group?

true with students who are reluctant to learn. You'll need to dig deeper than just asking, "What do you want to work on today?"

Your first step is to dig into what the student really wants, which may or may not be the same thing as they initially state. From there, figure out how to connect their goal with something specific they can learn that will get them closer to their goal. Lastly, you need to describe that connection because it's most likely not apparent to the student. Each of these steps should evolve out of a mutual conversation, and will involve some close listening on your part.

For example, a teenage snowboarder wants to ride better in the bumps, but the first thing you notice is that he is woefully in the back seat. So you want to fix his stance, right? But if you start doing basic stance drills, the student may become bored because you are not addressing bump riding.

Make the connection between the task and the goal as tight as possible. In this case, you could do stance drills on an easy bump run instead of a groomer. Dial up the intensity of the drills so the rider is replicating the athletic style he is interested in.

As you work through different activities, be sure to explain how each part of the lesson relates to the student's overall goal. Keep the fun factor high and emphasize relevance all through the lesson. This helps gain buy-in and will be more fun for you, too.

### Fear

The only way to learn a movement is to do it. But fear inhibits movements, sometimes to the point where a person can't even try. While the emotion is complex, the resolution is simple. Make either the terrain or the task easier. Keep backing things off until the guest is happily within their comfort zone.

We tend to forget that riding and skiing can be terrifying for some people. These folks can still learn, but will make progress more slowly. That's okay. Just do what you can to keep them in their sweet spot so they can keep moving and learning. Setbacks can have a lasting effect on a fearful student (see "Breakthroughs and Breakdowns" on page 24), so it pays to be proactive and do what you can to ensure success.

### Out With the Old... Or Not?

The process of improving often involves giving up an old movement in order to develop a new one. For example, lots of skiers make perfectly functional wedge turns, but at some point they need to let go of that competency in order to learn something that will ultimately make them better. But in the meantime, the student can feel like they are going backward. Why should they give up something they are already good at?

Making a transition to a more effective, but less familiar, movement requires trust in the instructor. You can ease this tension by recognizing that the new move might not

feel great at first and reassure students that they are making progress despite being less comfortable.

Select terrain where there isn't a temptation to revert back to the old moves simply in order to survive. Lastly, recognize and praise success so students can tell when they are doing things right. In time they will begin to feel it for themselves.

### This Is Supposed To Be Fun?

We all know that instructors have our own culture. We think it's fun to spend hours skiing on one ski or doing toe-to-toe turns. But don't lose sight of the fact that your students probably do not share this idea of fun, and they may not be as thrilled as you are to dig into the nitty-gritty nuances of the sport.

Resist the temptation to get caught up in having your students do every single thing in textbook fashion, and keep playfulness and fun as the central themes in your lessons. It's okay if your student stems most of her turns when she skis off the groomed – as long as she's having fun and making progress, it's a success.

### UNDERSTANDING THE TASK

We learn physical movements by getting the idea in our head, trying it, evaluating the results, and trying again. Remember that the first stage of learning a new task is the *cognitive* stage because the brain is working hard to sort out new information

### COGNITIVE ROADBLOCKS TO LEARNING

- The explanation doesn't make sense – it's too technical or is framed in a way that the student can't relate to.
- Your demo is at too high a level and doesn't isolate the desired movement.
- Students think the terminology means something different.
- You've already taught them enough for the day. Their brains are full.
- The student does not understand how the focus you've given them relates to the bigger picture.
- The student has pre-existing knowledge that is at odds with what you are teaching.



It's blowing 40mph and we're hungry. Is now the right time to talk about a blocking pole plant?

uncover the disconnect. You'll need to help the student resolve that conflict before they can embrace the new information.

Pre-existing information can be hard to dislodge, particularly if the person values it. For example if a client was advised by a well-intentioned boyfriend or girlfriend that they should lean back in powder, your student may be reluctant to give up on that sentiment. If someone spent a decade learning how to swivel their hips through the turn, they are likely proud of that move. It's important to be respectful of pre-existing information and give students time to process new ideas.

### ABILITY, AGE, STRENGTH, TIMING, AND EQUIPMENT

If the student tries and fails, but remains in good cheer and is engaged with the learning process, then it's likely not an affective problem. If you ask them to explain it and they can, it's not a cognitive issue either. It's time, then, to examine the physical aspects of learning.

and new sensations. Your first priority when presenting new information is to keep things streamlined and clear so that the brain can focus on the task at hand.

Start by adjusting the lesson pacing. When your students are learning something for the first time, stick to just one topic at a time. Allow ample time and space for everyone to digest the information and practice. It probably goes without saying, but when your students are in the early stages of learning, it's especially important to eliminate jargon and make explanations as simple as possible.

Similarly, a clear-cut demo is essential. Our brains process new skills as a series of steps rather than one fluid movement. Accentuate that idea in your demo by breaking down each part of the movement rather than blending it together smoothly and invisibly.

If what you're teaching doesn't stick after two or three tries, change the mode of your presentation. Instead of a verbal explanation, try a visual one. Use analogies, draw pictures, or use sound effects. Essentially, try other cognitive pathways. Accomplished instructors have seemingly limitless ways of describing the same concepts.

One way to assess someone's understanding is to ask them to explain what they are trying to do, have them draw a picture of the turn, or have them point to

the part of the board or body they should be emphasizing. All of these tactics allow students to think about the concept without having to do it physically.

If your student is still stuck after trying from a few different angles, take a break and pick a whole new focus. Don't set up repeated opportunities for a student to be unsuccessful, because that just reinforces the idea that they aren't getting it.

Also, snowsports are supposed to be fun, right? Don't beat your students over the head with a task. If it's not helping create fun and learning, move on. If you were unsuccessful in teaching speed control via turn shape, think of a different way to encourage speed control. For example, try emphasizing rotational skills so the student can turn their feet farther across the fall line at the end of the turn.

### Cognitive Disconnect

Have you ever described a concept to a client and had them not believe you? Sometimes new information is in conflict with existing information, which is called *cognitive dissonance*. For example, skiers of a "certain age" might aspire to ski with their feet close together. So when you casually advise a hip-width stance, you might not even realize you've created a conflict in that person's brain. You may get several steps down the road before you

### PHYSICAL ROADBLOCKS TO LEARNING

- The task is too advanced for the student.
- The change being attempted doesn't address the root cause of the "bad" habit.
- The movement requires more strength than is available.
- The student is tired.
- Alignment or equipment is off.
- It's a quick movement being attempted by a slow-twitch person.
- It's a slow, gradual movement and they tend to stab their way through things.
- For children, they don't have the strength, size, or motor skills to pull off what you're asking.
- It's a subtle movement that is hard to see and feel.
- Students think they are doing it.
- They can't feel the things you are asking them to feel.

### Is the Task Appropriate?

If a student is not able to perform the given task, it may be too far of a stretch given their current skills. Sometimes this happens because you're not recognizing the fundamental issue that's holding someone back.

For example, let's say your student is washing out his turns with a flat edge angle.



Resist the temptation to give a ripping demo (unless that's the task!), and be sure to slow down and make the intended movement as clear as possible.

Perhaps you'd like to teach him to carve and use a higher edge angle. But how are the underlying body movements affecting the edge angle? Maybe his turn is washed out because he is twisting his body around and eventually the board follows.

So the washy turn is a symptom of ineffective rotary movements. Trying to change the edge angle won't get at the root cause, and it will likely be unsuccessful. This scenario is common for new instructors who haven't yet learned how multiple movements are related – or unrelated. That's why these lunchtime talks are helpful, so that you can learn from your peers about different ways to solve common problems.

### Check Alignment

Skiing and snowboarding rely on transferring weight from one foot to another and balancing on certain parts of the foot instead of the whole foot. These specific skills can uncover alignment issues that make certain movements a struggle. Have you ever had a ski student who could turn one direction but not the other? Of course you have. The root cause could be unequal strength from

left to right, or it may be alignment, or comfort level in committing weight to one foot.

In most cases, this issue resolves itself with continued practice. But it's important to help the student recognize that the issue is not a deal-breaker, and to have alternate methods to teach this same concept. For instance, instead of trying to pressure one ski *during* a turn, try the same concept in a static situation. Have the student stand and balance on one foot, then the other. Repeat this a few times and have them flex, extend, and bounce up and down on one foot. This can help isolate the physical movements without the added complexity of doing it in a turn. It can also help you pin down the underlying cause of the issue and give you more insights for how to address it.

### Considerations for Children

Compared to adults, children are super flexible, but not too strong. This has a strong influence on the skills and movements that children can pull off. These factors are profound enough that most instructors learn to accommodate children's movement patterns early in their careers.

A less obvious difference is that fine motor control is not fully developed in children, so they are unlikely to be able to make subtle and refined movements. Asking 8-year-olds to feather their edges is not going to bring you much success because it requires small, precise adjustments. On the other hand, hockey stops will work just fine because it's a large movement as well as a fun one.

### But I Am Doing It!

Expert riders and skiers excel at kinesthetic awareness. They know precisely what their body and board are doing at all times. Beginners lack that sensation, and for the most part, so do intermediates. Therefore, many students won't be able to feel the difference between what you are asking them to do and what they are already doing.

Here's where you need to give explicit feedback about what they are doing, and to what degree they are doing it. Suppose you're encouraging your student to flex her ankles upon landing from a jump. She may flex her ankles a tiny bit while taking the brunt of the shock in her knees and hips. Yet she feels like she's doing it correctly. You can clarify by showing her the difference between what she is doing and what you want her to do. It also helps to describe specific sensations she will feel when she gets it right.

### WEATHER, BIOLOGY, AND FAMILY DYNAMICS

Sometimes in our enthusiasm to shower our students with snowsports wisdom, we fail to notice it's just simply not the right time or place for them to be in a learning mood. The weather is awful; maybe the student is preoccupied, hungry, or in a bad mood. You probably are already familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which illustrates all the basic human needs that have to be met before a person can be in a frame of mind to learn.

Maslow's hierarchy spans physical, social, and psychological factors, from the simplicity of having to pee, to the complexity of being willing to fail in front of your family members. Often these issues have nothing to do with the lesson topic, yet they are still powerful forces that can shape someone's experience. Your best bet to recognize these factors is to set aside your own plan for the day and be in tune with your students.

Ask questions, listen to the answers, and observe all their behaviors, not just the ones involving skiing and riding.

## EXTERNAL ROADBLOCKS TO LEARNING

- Conditions are not well suited to trying something new. Flat light, grabby snow, insane wind.
- Student is tired, cold, or hungry.
- They got in a car accident/argument/etc., on the way to the hill.
- Their kid is in lessons and they're worried about them.
- They need to go to the bathroom.

## WHOSE PERSPECTIVE?

Okay, despite your best efforts, you think your lesson was a flop. Why do you say that? In some cases it may be true, but in other instances, the student might just have a different pace of learning than you expect. Everyone digests new information and skills in their own way. A student who appears to be barely making any progress may still be having the time of his life. Maybe the idea of tipping the ski onto the little toe edge has made sense but just not clicked completely. After lunch and a break, the student may go out on his own and totally nail it.

Your frame of reference for what constitutes a successful lesson is based on the cumulative effect of all the lessons you've taught. But for the student in front of you right now, all that matters is *their* frame of reference. Don't let *your* expectations for



Even though you might think students aren't progressing as fast as you'd like, they may be having the time of their life. It's the student's perspective that matters, not yours.

success get in the way of your student's definition of fun and learning. As with everything else in the lesson, it's the student's perspective that matters, not yours.

## A MUTUAL PROCESS

As instructors, we encounter an enormous array of variables in our jobs, and there's no way to make everything smooth and perfect every time. But dealing with those variables is how *you* grow.

Alongside your students, you learn more and more with each lesson you teach. You can vary your approach, experiment with new ideas, and look for the root causes of student behavior. All of this will expand your bag of tricks and give you more depth

in your movement analysis, instructional style, and ability to relate to people.

Let's face it, anyone can teach the ideal, bright, athletic, motivated students. The best way to stand out in your job as an instructor is to be able to succeed in tricky situations or to convert a downward-trending lesson into a successful one. At the end of the day, when the locker room storytelling time rolls around again, those are the tales that are the most fun to tell. <sup>82</sup>

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## THERE'S ALWAYS THAT ONE STUDENT....

You know that student who is late to the lesson, doesn't follow directions, is in the wrong group, and is on outdated gear? All of this makes your life difficult, right? The lesson would be so much easier without that *one* student.

But consider this from that student's point of view. Have you ever been the slowest, least experienced, least prepared person in your group? It's pretty miserable. Have empathy and use your educational prowess to make the situation as fun as possible.

### REACH OUT TO THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST:

- Cue in on the particular learning style or class dynamic that works for the struggling student and coach that way most of the time. Students at the top of the class will likely get it no matter how you approach it, so cater to those who are having a harder time.
- Peers can exert a powerful effect on learning. This can be a helpful force or a hurtful one. See if you can harness the positive energy of the group to be supportive and enthusiastic

for their classmate.

- Along those lines, some students will learn better from their peers than they will from you. Select another student to lead the way or to do the demo.
- Praise efforts rather than results. But be honest – don't pile on praise for something you both know isn't working.
- Take a moment to relate to the student one-on-one to let them know that you understand what's going on and that you are keeping a protective eye on them. "I know this is hard, but I'm here for you." "You're safe; I won't leave you behind." "You're making solid progress, and we'll keep working through this together."
- As you probably know from your own training, there is value in the struggle to master a new concept. But keep an eye out for the balance tipping from productive to destructive, where self-esteem and confidence go out the window. Do everything you can to prevent things from escalating to that point.