The successful practice of sport psychology requires a diverse skill set. It is widely accepted that both training in psychology and kinesiology is necessary for any applied practitioner. Which domain deserves precedence is an age-old debate and likely one that will simmer forever — both fields of study are important. Too often lost in the discussion about quality training of future practitioners and effective service to athletes and teams are the principles of education — more specifically those of teaching and learning.

These principles being overlooked is not unique to the field of sport psychology. In his book, *Golf and the Spirit*, M. Scott Peck (1999) lamented over the lessons a golf professional gives, sharing that both he and the golf professional probably, “received no training in the subject of teaching and learning. Psychotherapy is mostly about teaching and learning, yet when I was in training as a psychiatrist, I received no instruction about it” (p. 155). Many helping disciplines spend significant portions of time instructing future practitioners on theories and principles that are core to their domain. Unfortunately, little time is spent learning how to effectively communicate these ideas to others. Too often, acquiring this wisdom is left to trial and error in practice.

This system is particularly unfortunate for the practice of sport psychology. Typical to the work of a sport psychology practitioner are: (a) teaching mental skills to individual athletes; (b) conducting workshops for groups or teams; and (c) giving educational presentations to coaches, athletes, organizations, and parents. All of these activities are situations in which the sport psychology consultant is an educator. The classroom may not be traditional (e.g., it could be an athletic field, locker room, or gymnasium), but at the core, it is a classroom filled with students in need of leadership from a teacher.

With this in mind, a wise practitioner should have a solid understanding of educational philosophies and principles. It is this knowledge that differentiates an “information giver” from a “teacher.” Knowing how learning happens can guide a competent professional throughout his or her applied work. To demonstrate this point, the following are two examples of educational concepts that, if understood and embraced, can benefit anyone working in the field of sport psychology:

**Constructivist Learning Theory**

Constructivism posits that we “construct” or build knowledge in our own unique ways by
Curriculum Mapping/Understanding by Design (UbD)

This process highlights the importance of “beginning with the end in mind” (Jacobs, 2004; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Applying this “Backward Design” method proceeds in three phases. First, a teacher establishes the learning goals for a workshop. This initial step identifies what the learners should know, understand, and be able to do after the workshop and how the content you want to teach should be prioritized to fit within the workshop’s limited framework. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) provide a useful process for establishing curricular priorities. They suggest three questions are asked as one progressively focuses on the most valuable workshop content:

1. What should participants hear, read, view, explore, or otherwise encounter? This knowledge is “worth being familiar with.”

2. What knowledge and skills should participants master? Sharpen choices by considering what is “important to know and do.” What facts, concepts, and principles should the athletes, coaches, etc. know? What processes, strategies, and methods should they learn to use?

3. What are big ideas and important understandings participants should retain? These choices are the “enduring understandings” that the learners should retain after the details of the workshop may be forgotten.

Each of us is the sum of our own unique personality, beliefs, and experiences, which in turn influence our likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, and understanding of the world. Interacting with the world around us and by making sense of what we experience (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Fosnot, 2005). Further, each of us is the sum of our own unique personality, beliefs, and experiences, which in turn influence our likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, and understanding of the world. When we encounter something new that challenges our existing notions, we must change our basic framework for thinking about it. Like people who watch a film together and emerge with different opinions and ideas about the film, we filter new events through our own system of beliefs, preferences, and experiences. Clearly, then, learning is both an active and a reflective practice. So what does this mean for the sport psychology professional?

The following are strategies and suggestions for designing a sport psychology workshop using a Constructivist framework:

- Seek out learners’ (e.g., athletes’, coaches’, etc.) understanding and prior experiences about a concept before teaching it to them.
- Encourage communication between the presenter and the workshop participants as well as between the participants themselves.
- Ask follow-up questions and seek elaboration after a participant’s initial statement/response.
- Have learners think of situations – or place them in situations – that might challenge their previous conceptions and will create contradictions to encourage discussion.
- Wait long enough after posing a question so the participants have time to think about their answers and are able to respond thoughtfully.
- Provide enough time for students to construct their own meanings when learning something new.

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Answering each of these questions will help determine the best content for a learning session and create concrete, specific learning goals.

The second phase of Backward Design involves creating an evaluation of learning objectives. This step determines how the teacher will know if the workshop participants are “getting it.” Finally, after the desired results and learning objectives are decided, planning for the best methods of teaching are determined and instructional strategies and learning activities are designed. Consider what are the best exercises, problems, or questions for developing abilities to meet the learning goals, how workshop participants should practice using new knowledge to develop the focal skills, and how they can apply their learning. Devise active and collaborative exercises that encourage athletes, coaches, parents and others to grapple with new concepts in order to “own” them. Overall, an increased understanding should be facilitated, not rote memorization.

The educator who focuses strictly on today’s lesson or the current activity fails to create a dynamic learning environment.

There are many ways to present the ideas of mental toughness – activities, lectures, writing assignments, discussions. A clear understanding of what the learners should know and execute at certain times throughout the season will make clear how and when to introduce the concepts of sport psychology.

Reading texts about mental skills and psychological theories is also necessary for the sport psychology professional. Couching applications in proven educational principles will lead to more successful behavior change. Too often, the application of sport psychology is falsely perceived as “Freudian probing” or “motivational speaking.” Efficacious practice of sport psychology lies somewhere in the middle and, more often than not, is grounded in sound theoretical principles.

A text influential to the lead author during graduate studies was Ellen Langer’s *The Power of Mindful Learning* — neither a sport psychology text nor a counseling book, but rather 192 pages loaded with information that provided insights useful in working individually with athletes, maximizing the educational value of workshops, and ideas to share with coaches. The book serves as a regular reminder that it is not our job to simply give information to athletes, but to set the stage for their learning.

Whether we call ourselves a psychologist, kinesiologist, or consultant, we are all educators. Challenge yourself to sow the seeds of learning in your applied practice. Take time to dig deep into the theories that inform us how to teach and how individuals learn. When coaches and athletes genuinely learn how to be motivated and resilient on the playing field, a rising tide of trust and enthusiasm is created for your practice and the field of sport psychology.

References


**Ed Kingston unexpectedly passed away in October 2011. AASP offers our condolences to his wife Laura, son Jack, and daughter Reese.**