

The Zen of Teaching

A high school principal discovered that learning how to ski gave him new insights about teaching and learning.

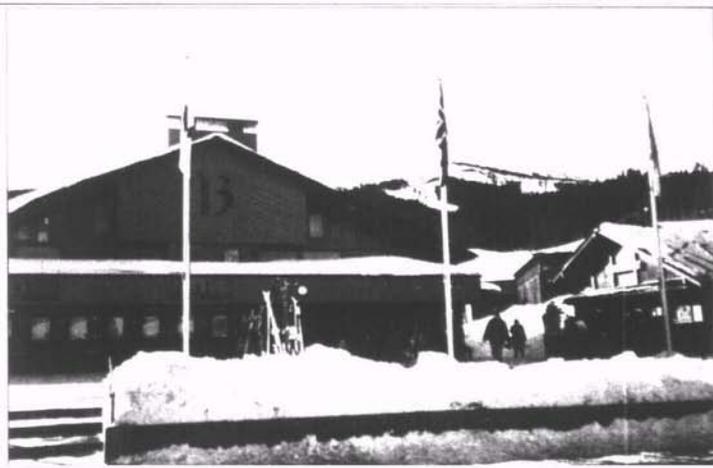
Photograph by J. Patrick Mahon

The call of the Rockies had led me to schedule a family ski trip to Colorado. I looked forward to the time together with my wife and two sons over Christmas. As the fall semester at my high school dragged reluctantly into December, the sugar plums of relaxation and snowy slopes danced in my imagination.

What was to be a time for family and fun also turned out to be a time for learning. After 21 years as an educator, I learned about teaching and learning in a profound way. This time the tables were turned—I was the learner—my classroom was Peak 8 in Breckenridge. I learned as I learned how to ski.

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The slopes were real classrooms for me. I had to deal with paying attention to instructions and demonstrations and then translate them into physical actions. I had to integrate the demonstrations into my bag of tricks. I struggled to turn and maintain my balance as the slippery skis slid downhill and I



Here's the lodge in Colorado, the perfect setting for an idyllic vacation, right? But on the slopes this administrator encountered failure and frustration until he met a great teacher.

experienced success and failure. I felt the frustration of falling (failing) and the seeming finality of muscular fatigue. As I struggled on the moguls, I experienced fear just as I did when I first looked down the long slope.

When school reopened after the holidays, I had a much better understanding of students as learners. I was an at-risk learner in ski school just as many students are at risk in real school. They too experience success and failure, confidence and fear, acceptance and rejection, freedom and frustration.

What really made the difference in my trip was what I learned about teaching from Paul Hagan, my ski instructor. After the first day, I almost became a ski school dropout. Suf-

fering from a bruised ego and posterior, I was sorely tempted to call it quits. I tossed and turned all night. Why had I come to Colorado? What had made me think I could learn how to ski? Was it worth the risks?

I called my physical and mental discomfort "altitude sickness." In reality I had a terminal case of ski-school phobia. I spent the next day cutting ski school and languishing as I tried to decide whether to take any more lessons. The next morning, I bounced back, clamped on the skis, and said, "I am going to learn how to ski."

Despite my firm resolve, I never would have succeeded without Paul. Paul is a superb teacher. He taught me how to ski. Mind you, I am not Jean

Claude, but I can ski now. Paul also taught me, the teacher, about teaching.

He was knowledgeable and soft-spoken, quick to praise and slow to put me down. "That's all right. Try it again, but this time put the weight on the outer ski. That's it."

He delivered the instruction in chunks I could handle, a little bit at a time. He also made sure that I had ample practice before he added new material. He sequenced the instruction, building each segment on the previous teaching and practice. "Remember when we said . . . now let's add this."

Paul understood learning styles. He gave excellent verbal instructions. He modeled moves and techniques. "Ski down this slope and wait for me by that clearing. Watch me as I come toward you." He gave me "feet-on" experience in what he was teaching.

He pumped me up and encouraged me throughout the lessons. *Encour-*

age means "to put heart into." He gave me the heart to try. He was careful to meet every approximation of correct application with specific praise.

Whether positive or negative, the specific feedback he gave me was timely. "That's right, you had the weight on the outer ski. Did you feel the

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difference?" (Notice the kinesthetic mode.) Or, "No, you were leaning forward in the turn. Stand tall with your weight on the outside ski. That's it."

Early in the lesson, I got the clear feeling that Paul cared about me as a learner. He wanted me to be successful. This is the mysterious dimension of the art of teaching—the bond between teacher and student. His caring was what made the difference. Because he cared, I was able to dare.

In spite of my problems with moguls (new learning) on the third day, I had enough courage, skill, and confidence after my lessons with Paul to fly on my own on the fourth day with my son. The first trip down the long hill without my teacher was scary, but Paul had given me sufficient instruction on the fundamentals. I shrieked with delight several times as I glided effortlessly downhill. I felt light on my skis as I twisted and turned my way to the bottom. And, I did not fall.

Fortunately, before I left Peak 8 on my last day, I happened to run into Paul. Was it really happenstance? I thanked him for being a great teacher.

Now I understand teaching and learning better. I will be a more effective administrator because I "know" more about the frustrations many of my students feel every day. I "know" more about those qualities which make teachers great.

I commend Paul for having educated a veteran educator. I challenge my colleagues—teachers and administrators—to learn something new. Make it something you know nothing about, skiing, nuclear physics, Buddhist theology; it doesn't really matter what it is. The process of trying to learn something foreign and new will teach you about teaching and learning. You will understand the Zen of teaching.

Good luck on your journey of discovery. May you learn, too. May you have the fortune to meet a great teacher along the way. □

J. Patrick Mahon is Principal at Shiloh High School, Gwinnett County, Georgia. Schools: 4210 Shiloh Rd.; Litonia, GA 30058.

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