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In My View

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UNCOMMON TEACHING IN AN UNEXPECTED PLACE

by Rebecca Shore



Abstract

Continued physical well-being is important, especially within the aging teacher ranks. The story of one veteran exercise instructor emphasizes fitness and weaves best classroom practices throughout the narrative.

Key words: *adult education, continuing education, teacher education, teacher certification, physical education*

Recent statistics on the profile of our present school workforce show an increase in the numbers of teachers and administrators over 50 years of age (Feistritz, 2011; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010). I found myself in this group 5 years ago, the same year my husband experienced a job relocation. More than just my home address and age decade changed; I lost my walking buddy of many years and, within a semester, had put on 10 pounds and had to buy all new sizes of pants and skirts. I also noticed that my mind was not quite as sharp, my mood not quite as sunny. So I started looking around for a reasonable way to get my aging body moving again.

Familiar with research tying brain health with physical health (Cotman & Berchtold, 2002; Cotman, Berchtold, & Christie, 2007), I knew I needed to take action. A flier in my mailbox advertised an exercise class with flexible class times, less than a mile from my house—close and convenient. In my frumpy, grumpy state, I decided to give it a try. It was there that I met Cathy, the exercise instructor. After three decades of working in schools and observing hundreds of teachers myself, I never expected my exercise teacher to be the one to inspire me to write about excellent teaching. But she did.

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“Jazzy Cathy,” as we call her, is a year older than me, but most people assume she’s much younger. After decades of teaching exercise classes, there’s not a shred of evidence of teacher burnout in her practice. She is as alert and full of energy as a kindergartener. Her studio offers 41 classes a week and she teaches 23 of them herself. She even teaches on weekends and holidays. (Her long hours are not necessarily uncommon for teachers. Who among us doesn’t work weekends?) However, in my 4 years of attending Cathy’s classes, she’s never been “out sick.” Not even once. In fact, the week before any major holiday, Cathy chimes into the microphone to the class, “This Sunday is Easter! Are we having exercise class?” And the class members respond routinely in unison through their heavy breathing, “Yes!” And we always do have class.

Best Practices

Over the years, I have tried to analyze just why Cathy’s teaching is so effective and have found that she regularly incorporates best practices into her work. While the curriculum is fairly standard, there is a common core across classes; her learning environment designs and instructional methods are what set her apart from other instructors. She is an organized and challenging taskmaster, but also creatively personalizes and individualizes her instruction, as well as infuses plenty of humor and novelty into her classes. She is a role model of good

health, high energy, happiness, and all-around genuine fitness—all qualities her aging clientele seek to develop.

Curriculum and Instruction

Much of the music and the movement patterns used by this international chain of classes are delivered to the individual franchises as part of a larger curriculum. However, the standards are not so strict that teachers cannot adjust classes when needed. Moreover, the students choose which class to attend, which size weights to use (if any), and just how much effort to exert on any given day. So there is some room for flexibility within the framework of the given curriculum. Cathy’s teaching methods and structuring of the environment motivate her students to work hard, moving each of us individually toward reaching our own goals.

Each 60-minute class typically begins with one or two songs for stretching out and revving up our motors, followed by 30 minutes of rigorous aerobic activity, 20 minutes of weights, and another 5 minutes for stretching and cooling down. Within the 30 minutes of rigorous moving around to music, Cathy always individualizes instruction by modeling a low-impact version of the movements. If we want to work harder, we do; but alternative moves are always an option. Some class members are careful to protect their knees; others use heavier or lighter weights. It’s up to us to choose what works best for us. This is not to say that Cathy doesn’t challenge us all. She frequently reminds the class, “Lower!” “Higher!” or “Wider!”

Because the movement patterns change from week to week or month to month, Cathy starts out breaking

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down the motions into smaller chunks, repeating until it appears that the class has mastered them. Even within a single song, if it looks like we “get it,” she will ramp up the complexity by adding some arm movements or an extra step or clap, adjusting to meet our exhibitions of mastery. It’s never “the same old thing.”

Certainly, nobody is mulling over a shopping list during her classes. Every brain is kept as engaged as the body in what is going on then and what is coming next. Cathy never stops the music to correct the moves, as a dance teacher might. One step to the left when the rest of the class has stepped to the right offers the immediate feedback needed to quickly adjust and refocus. And mistakes are rare, because her cueing of what’s next is timed perfectly—just soon enough that our brains can change gears in time to direct our bodies to change movements.

“Why do we have to learn this?” That’s never a question in Cathy’s classes, where she keeps the dance moves in the context of burning calories and getting fit. She keeps classes meaningful and flowing smoothly through her close monitoring and adjustments while we’re all moving. Using Cathy’s approach, the faster students can work harder and the slower students can take it down a notch, all simultaneously as we work toward our respective goals for improving our fitness.

The class schedule for her studio is always accessible—posted on the door of the building, distributed in fliers, and updated on her website. She also sends us email blasts and, yes, she’s on Facebook and Twitter.

Learning Environment

Cathy’s classes are almost always filled to capacity. The moves and even

the music may be the same used by other instructors, but her delivery somehow packs the place. We know to arrive early if we want a spot in Cathy’s class. Just looking at her motivates us to imitate her; she is one small bundle of muscles and skin on a skeleton with a smiley face on top. It is readily apparent that she loves what she does, every day. In one respect, the classes are routine; we know the basic structure (the bell schedule, if you will). On the other hand, the routine varies (what’s for lunch?). When the movement patterns within the classes change, which they do fairly regularly, Cathy always explains why. “We bend our knees to protect our backs!” “Lift your heels when you shift or you could hurt your knees!” She is an expert in her content area, and she tests our knowledge frequently. “What muscle group are we working now?” “Which one, Rebecca?” Nobody gets off the hook.

There is a constant feeling of renewal and rejuvenation going on all year long on both a micro and a macro level. Within her organized and consistent environment, she weaves in just enough variety to keep our attention from class to class and year to year. She rearranges desks regularly, so to speak. Within classes, she incorporates new strategies, such as leg weights instead of hand weights, balls instead of mats, face the right side, face the left. But every few months, she changes bigger things: the paint on the walls, the placement of the posters, the mirrors, or the sign-in sheet at the entry desk. Last year she even changed the flooring to a lighter shade and draped a dozen long yellow scarfs through the ceiling rafters. She did this based on research that lighter colors may be more motivating than the gray flooring and black ceiling that preceded the present environment.

Cathy’s priorities always are centered on instruction. Instructional time is valued above all else, and she lets nothing interrupt it.

Creativity and Fun

Cathy typically updates the exercise music weekly, adding a new popular piece from the radio or bringing back a favorite from a prior year. While the international chain provides a rich library of song selections from which to choose, Cathy’s selections are always diverse; a hip-hop song may be followed by a country number, followed by a rock song. She even manages to find upbeat classical music to use in some routines. She incorporates themes into many of the classes. For the New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day classes, she took all of the songs from the prior year that had maintained #1 hit status for more than three weeks and wove them into a routine to celebrate the passing of the prior year, jogging our memories and helping remind us of where we had been. On Halloween, she brought a funny hat or scarf or novel prop of some kind for every single song in the routines. She kept them hidden in a big bag up on her platform so we couldn’t see what was coming next, creating a captivating anticipatory set that was ongoing as she quickly changed props in the moment or two between songs.

The week after Michael Jackson died, she put together a special group of his songs for the classes. We were encouraged to wear a white glove or a black fedora to class, and most of us did. We thrilled ourselves (and sweated a lot) to *Beat It* (Jackson, 1982) and *Smooth Criminal* (Jackson, 1987), and attempted our own version of moonwalking. Some class members were in tears as we conducted our final stretches to *Man in the*

Mirror (Ballard & Garrett, 1987)—each of us wanting to “make that change.” We felt like we had participated in some sort of memorial service for him through the thoughtful and intentional organization of the music and movements.

Never once have I ever attended one of Cathy’s classes and not had fun. Never once have I left and thought, “Wish I hadn’t gone today.” That makes it easier to go back every day, even after late nights or with sore muscles. Every single class has been hard work, but enjoyable, most having plenty of laughter infused throughout. Cathy speaks in metaphors and similes, and her antics are oftentimes hilarious. “Suck in those belly buttons until they’re out there in the back parking lot!” “Squat like you’re Goldilocks trying out Baby Bear’s chair!” “Make sure your taillights are shining straight through that back wall!” She ignites our imaginations as well as our sense of humor, commanding, “You’re all models on a New York runway!” as we saunter forward and back, one arm extended overhead and one on our hip. I can assure you that not one of us would ever be mistaken for a New York runway model; but igniting our prefrontal cortices is part of the brain and body workout.

Personalized Learning

I remember hearing Ted Sizer (1990), one of my favorite education reformers, say at a conference, “Personalization is the single most important factor that keeps kids in schools.” This important lesson still stands as a critical piece for instructors to address in their learning environments regardless of the subject matter (Toch, 2010). Cathy knows every single class member’s name and feels free to call them out from time to time just to be sure we know that she knows we’re there.

It’s not unusual to hear over her microphone, “How’s it going back there today, Andrea?” “Hey, everybody, this is Kathleen’s first time, so introduce yourselves after class.” “Kim, how was your daughter’s wedding last week?” This personalization also builds community.

We know Cathy knows us, and she provides opportunities for us to get to know one another. Every few months she organizes a lunch for anyone who wants to attend, and our annual holiday party now attracts close to 100 people. Each year we participate in an event sponsored by the umbrella organization, where a large contingency of us (about 300 people) perform a routine. Cathy also incorporates a spirit of competition to encourage teamwork within classes. She has us shout on cue, count loudly, or engage in other responsive tasks. At particular points in various songs, she’ll have the right side of the class yell one word, then the left, the front of the room, the back. And it is established custom that whenever we turn to face the back of the room for a move, we go to the “rear with a big cheer!” “I said ‘a big cheer’ not a big rear! Now cheer!” Newcomers quickly learn that there are established rituals in our culture, and everyone is both seen and heard in this exercise class.

Cathy always finds something to celebrate and keeps watch for ways to increase meaning. For example, Fridays are “red shirt” days. Most of us, when we can remember, wear red shirts in support of our troops. When one of the other instructors was diagnosed with breast cancer, Cathy sponsored a massive class outside her studio at the mall to raise awareness for breast cancer research.

Cathy’s Uncommon Core

To look at Cathy in her midriff top and exercise tights, anyone can see the six-pack abs that many aspire to acquire. But those of us who are her students know that her uncommon outer core is just evidence of an inner core committed to not only *her* health, but *ours*. She believes that joyful movement is a key to longevity and well-being, and we are grateful that she has chosen a teaching career to spread this important message.

On a personal note, I am down from a size 10 to a 6, for which I am especially grateful at this ripe old educator age. I have much more energy, and I feel that I’ve gotten my brain back as well. Geoffrey and Renate Nummela Caine (2006) have maintained that the brain is virtually inexhaustible if it is healthy and engaged in something it perceives as meaningful and constructive. Improving our physical health includes our brains; so like a great sale, it’s two for the price of one—an important investment especially for educators. ■

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