Reflection – Two Springs Teaching for Mt. Kato Ski Area

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May 2, 2014

"We'll have you shadow Tom," said the friendly head of the Mt. Kato ski school, Paige Pearson. "He's got a lot of experience. He's been teaching here for years."

"Okay," I said. I had never taught skiing to anyone before, other than to friends. And if truth be told, I didn't perform well as a teacher. My attitude was "You'll figure it out, just go for it!" and then to offer a few tips and tricks later. This kind of experiential approach resulted in my wife flying down the hill at top speed before she would finally become uncomfortable with her velocity and fall over in a huge plume of snow.

Fortunately, she wanted to learn to ski more than she valued a few bruises.

I was excited about the opportunity to shadow an experienced ski instructor. I walked over to the rental shop and grabbed my skis; then I met Tom, a middle-aged, charismatic fellow with one of those quick smiles that makes one suspicious. (Is he permanently happy, or he just spent too much time mastering his facial musculature?)

Schools often make field trips out of Mt. Kato. Throughout the spring, they send busses full of middle and high schoolers to go through the "ski school" program. When the kids get off the bus, they are taken to a lounge area where an instructor puts on a video about ski hill safety – what the signs mean, not to stop out of sight from above, not to merge into a trail without looking uphill, and so on. The instructor then teaches them how to fill out a rental form and put on a wicket. The kids are then escorted to the rental shop, where they attempt to put on boots. It looks a bit like a bunch of ducklings just hatched. "WHO NEEDS HELP PUTTING ON THEIR BOOTS?" was a regular call of mine at the start of the day.

Back upstairs, Tom had just put on the video and was describing the various parts of the ski. "This is the tip of the ski. This is the tail of the ski. Listen up, there's going to be a quiz at the end! This – this narrow part here – this is the *waist* of the ski. And this is the binding…"

After we walked the kids down to the rental shop and helped them put on their boots, we were finally outside. Tom walked the kids over near the bunny hill, where the hill sloped enough to maybe get a bit of glide on skis. I would later learn that each instructor has their own personal favorite teaching spot of the hill, and for most, steeper is better, especially when it was cold and the skis weren't sliding very well.

Tom had the kids surround him in a circle, and taught them the various positions of skiing. First was the wedge, which he sometimes referred to as a pizza. "All right, so see this, this is a number *one* wedge. This is a number *two* wedge. This is a number *three* wedge, really wide…"

Next was the "duck walk," where students pointed their toes out. This was a sort of reverse wedge, used for climbing uphill. (In skiing, a wedge always points downhill.) Tom then had the students walk around the circle, first in the wedge, then in the duck walk.

Finally we got to the skis. He quizzed the students on the various parts of the ski. He told them about the binding and that to get your ski on, you needed to make sure the back lever was up. We put on one ski and shook it around, then put on the other ski and shook it around. Then we learned to fall and how to get up.

Learning to get up on skis is very difficult for kids. Youth these days (I am clearly falling into the "grown-up" stereotype of looking down on the next generation, but I do believe that kids are spending more and more time inside and becoming less and less athletic) are not very coordinated, and having skis on their feet just makes it worse. After falling over, the students were instructed to lie on their side and rotate so that their feet are pointed downhill and their heads uphill. Then, they roll onto their stomachs, kick their feet up behind them, point their skis out, and put their feet back down. Hopefully, this results in their toes out, and their skis forming a nice reverse wedge. Next comes the hard part – students do a pushup, push their butts into the air, walk their hands back, and stand up. The student should result facing uphill and with their skis still in a reverse wedge.

I realized that many students are incapable of doing a pushup. And it's not just the overweight students, or super-skinny kids. In this particular instance, a girl who was maybe 9 or 10 could not get up. I quickly learned that though Tom is quite cordial to adults, he has little patience with kids. He speaks with authority and with little kindness. He was trying to help the girl get up, and it went a little like this: "Okay, now roll onto your

stomach. Now kick your feet up and point your toes out. No, your toes. Look. Look at this. Is this your toe? That's your heel! Kick your toes out! Now put them down. Come on, do a pushup!"

The girl began to cry.

Eventually Tom succeeded in getting her and the other students standing. We then skied around in a circle, practicing scooting across the top of the circle, gliding down and trying to use the wedge shape to turn, scooting across the bottom, and then attempting to duck-walk back up. About half of the students seemed to be getting it; the other half were not so fortunate. Many of them fell over, some laughing, some frustrated and near tears. Some couldn't figure out how to walk uphill and kept sliding back. I jumped in where I could to offer advice.

We headed over to the lift. Tom gave a brief lecture on the lift – "Okay now here's the lift. This big thing down here, that's the bullwheel. That's what powers the lift. Now I'll go up first, and I want you all to leave one chair empty behind me. Then go out in front of the chair, sit down just like you're sitting down in a chair at home. And the next person, leave one chair empty behind them. Now when you get off, there's a little ramp up at the top. You just lean forward, keep your arms out front, and ski down off the ramp, and turn to the left. I'll be waiting up there and I'll tell you what to do. If you don't get off, your legs will hit a little bar and that will stop the lift…"

All of the kids got on the lift and I followed the last one up. As one of the last on the lift, she was not one of the naturals. As we approached the ramp, Tom instructed her, "Okay, lean forward. Stand up! Get off the lift! Get OFF THE LIFT!" The girl meanwhile began going around the wheel, while Tom was yelling at her to "GET OFF THE LIFT!" Just as the lift operator stopped the lift, she jumped.

It was only a fall of a few feet. She was fine, but I was not. I could not believe that something so fun as learning to ski was being transformed into a horrible experience.

Once the lift resumed, I skied off and we began the on-hill lesson. Tom had the kids, one-by-one, ski down and stop, ski and stop, and then turn to the right till they stopped, where he waited. Slowly, with much falling and much frustration from Tom, most of the students learned. We went back up once more, and once everyone was able to make it down successfully, Tom told them about the various runs and let them loose. I guarantee I wasn't the only one glad to be rid of him.

This first experience raised the issue of ethics in teaching and influenced how I treated the students in my lessons. Just how much responsibility does one have as an outdoor educator? I would guess that as the amount of time with students decreases, most instructors think their importance, or responsibility, decreases. But is this necessarily true? There's a great Ted Talk by Drew Dudley called "Everyday Leadership." It's short but well worth watching: http://www.ted.com/talks/drew_dudley_everyday_leadership. The basic premise is that we all change lives, every day. Though not mentioned in Dudley's talk, it's similar to chaos theory in mathematics. Some systems exist in which tiny changes will completely alter the end results, in very unpredictable ways. As humans go through life, we interact with each other. Some interactions might be lost in meaninglessness, but others – though they may be small – can change somebody's life forever.

If this were true – this "simple but important" idea – then educators need to rethink interaction with students, because a minute of time with somebody is enough to alter the face of humanity. Sometimes, this interaction must be harsh and punitive, letting a student know that a certain behavior is not constructive. But there is no rational for directing such harsh treatment against nervous first-time skiers, already completely out of their comfort zones and with instructors they have never met - and especially when such students have done nothing wrong.

I began teaching my own lessons the next time I was at Mt. Kato. Since then, I've taught around twenty lessons, and helped out with "stations" when Mt. Kato had larger groups. (The stations are basically a course that allows large numbers of students to go through the below-lift training efficiently.) But at the end of my first spring of teaching at Mt. Kato, I still felt I was far from mastering the ski lesson.

There are definitely innate challenges to teaching a group of students to ski. One is that students learn at completely different paces. Instructors group students into those who have skied and who have not skied, but of those who have never skied, some "get it" right away and others struggle. The only control an instructor can place over this is how many students they teach. This is usually not up to them, however, because many of the instructors (like myself) are part-time and show up only when they have time. Paige divides the number of

students per instructors and so the number of students in the lessons changes every time. I noticed that once I had more than 7-8 students, there was a large increase it stress and difficulty.

There are a few essentials to the success of the lesson. One is allowing the students time to master techniques below-lift before taking them on the hill. This might seem obvious, but it is challenging when dealing with impatient 7^{th}-8^{th} graders. The first component to mastery is a slope allowing for enough glide that students are slightly uncomfortable. As I mentioned, instructors have their personal areas of the slope that they prefer, but I only found one area that was really ideal, and it was almost always in use by another instructor. The other areas were either in the middle of ski runs, too far away, or too shallow.

Students must also master the various positions of skiing. This includes the "wedge" and the "reverse wedge." A trick I picked up from another instructor, Pat, is to have students get into an athletic stance (knees bent, weight centered or slightly forward, with arms out front). Another trick I was taught from attending a Mt. Kato ski instructor clinic is that turning starts from the toes, not from the upper body or even the hips. "Point your toes where you want to go" was very successful language with my students. Still, students do not understand these positions until they are actually doing them, and many struggle even then; this is the importance of a slope gradient that allows for practice. Some students can be corrected again and again, and obviously want to learn, yet not "get it" for a while. This was especially apparent in the reverse wedge or duck walk, the skating-like position for walking uphill. No matter how much I would stress that the inside ski edges need to be biting into the snow, students would slip and slide and fall, making the same mistake over and over. While I do think I need a better way of explaining this, students just need the time to practice.

As I discussed above, the personality of an instructor can make or break the lesson, and enjoying teaching and being patient are essential. Learning something completely new will take time. In one of my lessons, a school chaperone was watching and helping with the below-lift lesson. One student was having a lot of difficulty, and on the verge of tears when she could not get up after falling over. I stuck with this student and encouraged her, helping her up. I am always positive and encouraging to the students and I have never had a reason to be negative. Even if being negative made students learn faster, which I do not believe it does, the side effects of making what we're doing less fun and making students less interested in skiing would counter it.

The student who was having difficulty began to do better, and on the way to the lift the chaperone told me that I was doing a good job. “You’re very patient,” she said. It was great positive reinforcement for me.

Another example comes from teaching a student who never got out onto the lift. She was mentally and physically handicapped, unable to really bend her knees. She was one of two students selected to work one-on-one with an instructor. So I went with this student and a chaperone to the slope and went through the basics of the lesson.

The student was having a lot of trouble, both emotionally (finding sliding on even one ski very scary). When I finally got two skis on her, and was trying to teach her to stand up, I realized she really wasn’t physically able to do it. She began to cry. The chaperone and I helped her up and told her that we were just going to ski a bit down the hill back to where it’s flat. She refused, and I told her that I would help her. She finally agreed and I skied backwards pressing my palms against hers. She was delighted once we started to move. “You’re skiing!” I told her. Her smile and shouts were all I needed to know that the “lesson” was a success, even if she never made it on the lift. Shortly thereafter I left to help other students, but she still smiling and her chaperone was helping her skate around on the flat ground.

Many of the other instructors obviously enjoyed themselves, too. I recall one instance where I finished a lesson the same time as another instructor did; he obviously enjoyed the kids, and I had seen parts of his lessons and everyone seemed to be having fun and doing well. “I noticed that you seem to really enjoy teaching,” I said. “It looks like the kids do really well in your lessons.”

“Yeah, it’s fun.”

“I notice a lot of the instructors out here don’t seem to enjoy themselves. There’s way too much yelling at the students. It seems like encouraging the students and making them like skiing goes a long way.”

“Yeah, and I think it’s a testament to how you live your life, too,” he said. “If you’re yelling and angry all the time… I’m just happy.”

Let's contrast that with a couple of other stories. This spring, I wanted to shadow another instructor. There is definitely not a culture of instructor collaboration at Mt. Kato, and I got the impression that I was thought of as somehow inadequate by making such a request.

Nonetheless, Paige had me shadow another seasoned instructor, Pat. Pat did not seem to enjoy the students much and was very formal around them. I did find the structure of his lessons much better than Tom's, and my personal lesson structure closely resembles his. Yet I feel he gave a terrible lesson – and here's why.

Pat was rarely positive with the students, and his negativity really came out above the lift. We were trying to get each student to ski down the first part of the slope and stop. One student obviously wasn't able to stop and he continued to go faster and faster. "Stop! Stop! Stop! STOP!" Pat shouted. Meanwhile the student yelled, "I can't! I can't!" Eventually he fell. Pat skied down to him and leaned close. "I don't want to *ever* hear you say that again, you understand me? I don't want to *ever* hear you say 'I can't.'"

There were no reasons for this abuse; the student was simply having difficulty. That Pat didn't even offer anything constructive ("make a bigger wedge!" or "try to point yourself to the right!" might have helped) shows *his* inadequacy, not the student's. Since, I observed Pat raising his voice to students from afar, though I couldn't discern details.

The second example comes (again) from Tom who, apparently, doesn't just stop with yelling at students to jump off of ski lifts. At one point I was leading a group of students just down from the lift. I came to stop right near Tom, who was standing over and pointing his finger in a student's face. "YOU HEAR ME? DO YOU WANT TO GO DOWN IN THE SLED? BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T LISTEN TO ME, YOU'RE GOING TO END UP WITH THE SKI PATROL UP HERE, AND THE WAY YOU'RE GOING TO GET DOWN THIS HILL IS WRAPPED UP IN A TOBOGGAN! DO YOU WANT THAT?" I didn't know the context, but knowing Tom, I have a feeling the student did little more than fail to heeds Tom's instruction, probably because he was not "getting it."

I had a conversation with Tom and another instructor once, asking them about their approaches. "Well, the thing I find is, man, you just gotta yell at 'em," Tom said. "They just don't listen. You've just gotta keep yellin' at 'em." I do have to commend Tom on one thing – at least he stays true to his pedagogical approach.

So in the above examples, it's possible that the lesson *structure* was similar to my own. Yet the personality of the instructor can turn a nerve-wracking experience like learning to ski into something fun, or something terrible.

Here is my process once we get the kids outside:

Below the lift:

Find a slope steep enough that the kids are slightly uncomfortable.

- Arrange the students in a circle and ask their names.
- Have them practice the duck walk, pigeon toe, and active stance positions (briefly). Simplify terms as much as possible and be consistent.
- Put on right ski, slide back and forth, practice same positions as above, then go twice around the circle counterclockwise.
- Repeat process with left ski (go counterclockwise).
- Demonstrate falling and how to get up. (A capable student volunteer can help students pay attention and also feel more able to do the task.)
- Have students go around the circle twice clockwise, and twice counterclockwise, with skis on. Stress the wedge position on the downhill, and turning. Also stress the importance of being "on edge" for walking uphill.
- Once all students seem able to stop and turn, take students to the lift. Discuss getting on / off the lift.

On the slope:

- Once at the hill, have students move forward and then turn right until they stop. (One at a time; try to find a spot where students won't crowd each other. At Mt. Kato this was difficult.)

- Repeat with a left turn.
- Have students do garlands to the right (head to the right, but in the pattern of a wave.)
- Do garlands to the left.
- Ski down the hill.
- Take students up the lift one more time, and instruct students who "get it" to wait for you at the bottom.
- Assist students who are having trouble. I got quite good at skiing backwards holding a students palms while they attempted to steer right and left and stop.
- Inform students of the routes they are allowed to go on, and end the lesson.
- Continue to help students still having trouble.

What can Mt. Kato do better?

Many of the negatives I found in other instructors' teaching could be solved just be asking: *what are we trying to do in teaching youth to ski?* The current Mt. Kato model screams "to make a profit!" Everything is geared toward efficiency. Instructors are encouraged to get to teaching students quickly, with very little training. There is very little oversight of instructors, and anything seems acceptable.

We should, rather, be focused making skiing fun, showing students that overcoming obstacles is both possible and enjoyable. (From a business standpoint, this is also good practice – students who enjoy skiing will be the future's ticket-buyers.)

I would have a half-day or full-day orientation for new instructors, lead by at least two experienced (and *good*) instructors. Such an orientation would focus both on the lesson structure, and also on being positive and encouraging to students. It would incorporate successful tricks like telling students to turn with their toes and getting into an athletic stance, and how important slope gradient is to mastery of technique.

I would also take new instructors on the slope and show them the process there, like what garlands are, how far students should ski down before turning, and so on. This prevents instructors having to learn this on the job, at their students' expense. Only then would new instructors shadow an actual lesson, where they could see

the theory put to practice before beginning teaching. Such an orientation would allow inexperienced instructors the skills to jump into their lessons and teach successfully.

As is the case most places in education, instructors at Mt. Kato need to collaborate and be professional about what they do. They need to realize the significance of their interaction with youth, and work constantly to improve their lessons. Mt. Kato does offer Sunday night ski clinics for instructors, but many instructors can only make some of these, and there isn't otherwise a culture of collaboration at Mt. Kato during work hours. Some might fear a "standardization" and lack of ability for teachers to personalize their lessons; I disagree. Collaborating allows instructors to know what works, and then incorporate this into their own personalized approach.

What's next?

I will probably continue to work at Mt. Kato. Next season, I will bring these issues up to Paige and see what the management's opinion of this is. I will also continue to work on my teaching, testing new approaches. And hopefully, I am rewarded not only in my own lessons but in finding more peace and less yelling on the slopes.