

DON'T SELL THEM SHORT - Teaching the Exceptional Student

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ABSTRACT

In the course of an instructor's career, certain exceptions to the normal student may be encountered. A few such exceptionally poor or marginal students are mentioned in the paper with two discussed in detail. Observations on the methods of instruction and the progress of these students are made and some suggestions for instructing similar students are made. The conclusions drawn are personal, general and largely subjective, but worthy of consideration by all instructors.

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Sooner or later there comes a time when you as an instructor are approached by a prospective student who seems to be a most unlikely candidate for SCUBA instruction. Assuming that you can overcome the problems, whatever they may be, should these people be taught to dive? Most could easily be rejected outright; it is unlikely that they could pass a swimming test designed to screen out a moderately incompetent water person. What is it that persuades the occasional instructor to teach an exceptional, a really exceptional, student? For the purposes of this paper, an exceptional student is one with either physical or psychological problems that seem to make successful completion of a basic SCUBA course an unlikely venture. As such I would propose the blind, the one-legged and the non-swimming candidate and also the prospective student with a debilitating fear of the ocean. People in all these categories have been taught successfully, not all by me but by instructors that I know. Let me emphasize TAUGHT, not necessarily certified.

Why don't we turn these students away? For some instructors there is a curiosity, for others compassion, and for still others there is an opportunity to meet what appears to be the ultimate teaching challenge. Certainly the hours spent with an exceptional student often exceed all the bounds of economic good sense. To balance this the rewards can be correspondingly great. It is always a pleasure to take a healthy, well-co-ordinated, fit and water-oriented young adult and open the doors of the underwater world to him or to her but your role as instructor has really been just that, a door opener. With the exceptional student you function in a much more complex way and when your student is finally made free in your world of innerspace, you can truly feel that you have had a real part in creating something new.

Speaking personally I would not want to take on an exceptional student who was not reasonably well motivated. Trying to inspire a water-confident but unmotivated person is sufficiently frustrating. I've tried and have not been dramatically successful. The power positive motivation can give to people to overcome difficulties is virtually incalculable. As you build a climate of trust this further enhances the motivation. The whole procedure is going to take time and the financial rewards are not necessarily great. Your main returns will be a very real sense of satisfaction and a self-reinforcement of your position as an instructor in this sport of diving.

To further clarify I must confess to teaching in Hawaii, which is Paradise enow! My usual teaching site is a protected beach behind a small barrier reef. My classes are in the daytime and are all-ocean. It does no harm that the mean water temperature is about 73°F and the air temperature is usually in the low 80's. I am free of many of the problems I would encounter on the Mainland. Water sports at home are a pleasure, not an exercise in endurance. Although students get chilled, they can pick up a neat sun tan at the same time.

In this paper I will discuss in particular two exceptional students from my records. One was a total non-swimmer at the start of her training, the other a poorly coordinated elderly diabetic, a functional non-swimmer, afraid of the water. Both were, fortunately, highly motivated and although neither could have been called a good example of physical fitness, both were mentally prepared to learn to dive.

I was never too sure of the primary motivating force for my middle-aged non-swimmer, Kay. I think it was partly peer pressure from fellow faculty members who had signed up for the basic course, partly curiosity and partly a desire to meet a challenge of her own devising. In the case of the diabetic, Ed, the reason was more obvious. His job requires that he make periodic trips to an isolated Pacific atoll (what other kind is there?) for which trips he is unaccountably charged vacation time. There, because of the one-plane-a-week transportation problem he is stranded for a week, sometimes two, with absolutely nothing to do after his work is completed. No diving for the uncertified! His diabetic condition was as yet undiagnosed. In so doing he had put himself in a state of near panic on two occasions while attempting snorkelling. Please bear in mind that both of these people wanted to learn to dive. Both came to me. How flattering.

Believe it or not as you choose, teaching a complete non-swimmer to dive poses very little problem if that difficulty is not compounded by fear. Time if you can afford it, is on your side. All you, as the instructor, have to do is to throw away the rule book and start at the end instead of the beginning. After we had established Kay's good health and that her desire to learn was quite genuine, we made steady, even rapid, progress.

Kay went immediately into full SCUBA gear for her first water session. Special care was taken in choice of fins and mask to assure the greatest possible comfort to minimize personal problems. The mask selected was the old style US Divers "Pacifica" with the big front purge. We have found the ease of clearing this mask makes it nearly ideal for many of our students. Her harness was painstakingly adjusted and she was deliberately slightly overweighted to start. She then waddled down to the beach to begin her great adventure.

What would you think the basic fears of the non-swimmer and the functional non-swimmer are? I've found it's the problems of being unable to stay afloat and the inability to breathe when you sink. It seems pretty-obvious that SCUBA is the ideal way to attack these problems! The procedure is to start the student on the surface breathing through the regulator, holding both hands and facing the student, much as you'd teach a small child to sit on the bottom to blow bubbles, (all the time TRYING to look friendly and encouraging through your own mask) very gradually you both settle to the bottom in about four feet of water. (Remember that extra weights). My non-swimmer, encouraged to sink and able to breathe, quickly relaxed and studied sand particles, my toes, discarded soda cans and anything else that happened by, entranced.

Not so my diabetic. Breathing was fine, as long as his face was dry. As Ed tried to fold his 6'3" of rigid and angular body into three feet (low tide) of water, he got the lower part of his face wet. OOPS! ALL STOPS! With Ed this one simple step took a full two hour water session. Two hours just to get him to sit on the bottom, breathing through a regulator! He was obviously unable to keep up with his class in the water. The first compromise made was to arrange that he would attend all regular sessions but add extra sessions of water work by private arrangement.

Working with Kay, the non-swimmer, comparatively was a snap. In rapid succession she breathed, went to exhalation through her nose with the mask in place, added small

increments of water to the mask herself and cleared it and finally removed and replaced the mask and cleared it all without having taken the regulator out of her mouth underwater. The next step was to have her correct her buoyancy which gave her step by step drills in regulator clearing. Adjusted to neutral buoyancy, she began to use her fins and to learn to co-ordinate her kick underwater. With nothing to unlearn it worked beautifully. We had just reversed most of our normal procedures.

After becoming acquainted with the basic method of manoeuvring underwater, she rapidly caught up with the class level on the rest of her basic skills, still largely underwater. There wasn't a hitch. By the end of her first two hour water session she was buddy breathing with me.

The next session, a week later (this class meets on Sundays only) she moved to the surface, still using SCUBA, and at first with her vest nearly full. Gradually she shifted over to snorkel use and continued to practice kicking, albeit not too well to start with. In the days between classes I am sure she practiced. At any rate, we lent her a class vest to use with her mask and fins in her apartment pool. She made rapid progress.

It was of inestimable help that she was intelligent, verbal and well motivated. The mechanics of SCUBA diving came easily to her, as they do to their first open ocean day for skin diving skills. With her fins, her kick had improved so much that she was able to manage surf entries and ledge exits with no more than the routine assistance given her classmates. This was exciting. On this day we usually have a full complement of safety divers along stationed in the ticklish places. Kay did not avail herself of their services any more than any of the other students.

Uneventfully, I might almost say it became dull, she progressed to the end of the course doing all her water work with her class. Obviously you all know how easy it can be for a poor swimmer to manage diving reasonably well. It gives everyone a false sense of security. The checkout dive day came and Kay, instructor escorted, made a delightful dive with no problems. Certificates and cards were handed out. Did Kay get hers? Of course not! This had been discussed with her beforehand; after all she still couldn't swim.

It was fortunate that at this time we were preparing candidates for instructor training which enabled Kay to join the twice a week "swimming club" at our practice area. Here her basic training finally began. By now Kay was totally confident in the water, both on the surface and under it. She vigorously tackled laps with the staff members which gave her leg exercise. Next we removed her mask, leaving the fins and a partially inflated vest. (We had long since stopped reminding her to inflate that vest, and by now she frequently forgot). Finally the fins were removed, and this time Kay rather nervously put quite a batch of air into the vest and set out in three feet of water to see if she could, in fact, swim. The inflated vest bothered her and got in the way of the arm movements so, quite calmly, she took it off and merrily went on her way, rather jerkily but SWIMMING. Lo! Our non-swimming gal had finally arrived at the point where most SCUBA students start; able to tread water, bob, float and swim her necessary distances. (Side stroke seemed to come easiest).

So she got her card and celebrated by completing the course a second time "just for fun" so that she could be with her husband, just back from Vietnam.

In Kay's case the secret was simply a matter of opening MY mind to an un-orthodox

ORDER of teaching basic skills to a person whose only handicaps were an inability to swim and inner conviction that she couldn't learn because she could not stay on the surface. Using SCUBA immediately and in the order used simply blew the problem away. I've tried it since with good results.

With Ed the problem was more complex. Working with Kay and other subsequent non-swimmers had given me methods and procedures. Ed was my toughest challenge ever. (Incidentally, I don't specialize in non-swimmers but you'll have to admit that a non-swimming SCUBA student is something of a rarity and therefore memorable). With Ed we had an elderly functional non-swimmer, one who had been poorly co-ordinated all his life. Also Ed had badly frightened himself trying, uninstructed, to use a snorkel. He had exhausted himself into a hypoglycaemic episode in his at-that-time undiagnosed diabetes. In his words, it was a bad scene.

We were extremely fortunate that Ed's physician realized the enormous importance psychologically for Ed to meet this challenge at a time when his life seemed to be heading straight for nowhere. This doctor was wise enough to realize that the general improvement in Ed's health was worth a gamble. At any rate he gave conditional approval. I was fortunate in once again having a well-motivated and intelligent student. Ed understood the limitations imposed on him by his diabetes and he understood the disease itself which is not all that usual in diabetics. In fact he had learned by trial and error to control his problem largely by diet before he changed doctors and found out what the problem actually was!

At first my problem was to convince Ed that I had all the time in the world, no hurry, and that his repeated failures even to get his face wet were not going to upset me. I believe my line was, "we'll either get you under water today or stick around and get you under water tonight". I'm not normally a very patient person but SCUBA instruction has wrought some changes. Working with Ed really convinced me of the necessity for presenting a totally calm, wholly unruffled, never-failingly encouraging face to a student. He did get over his self-reproach; he accepted the fact that a pip-squeak female eight inches shorter than he and nearly as old could do it and was prepared to teach HIM. He buckled down and really got to work.

But oh, it DID take time and patience. Between each repetition of every drill we stood up and discussed infinitesimal successes and failures. We weighed every manoeuvre in terms of Ed's sugar levels. It gradually was borne in on me that this was very much a dual learning experience and that I was learning as much on my side as Ed was on his. Fortunately I had a minimal background in diabetic metabolism and things like this fascinate me, so we had some valuable discussions on energy levels. (Ed is capable of several hours of hard physical labour under our Hawaiian sun, simply using sips of Coca-Cola™ to balance his sugar needs).

Gradually we reached toward the goal of getting him certified before his next trip to the atoll. There would be no diving there for him unless he had his card. Once I finally got him into the water the next hurdle was air supply. Ed is a large-framed man and a heavy breather. He was provided with the largest bore snorkel available and he found it just barely adequate for his surface work. You must bear in mind that his residual fear level was NOT assisting him in any surface work and we tried to stay underwater as much as possible to start with. He developed a hang up about our class regulators and so he purchased his own-for class use. The psychological boost of his own regulator and gauge was augmented for him by suggesting a regulator with an adjustable flow feature on the second stage. I am not going to discuss the pros and cons of this feature, I can only attest that certainly in this case the real

value was a feeling of some sort of control, however small. It was real! His own pack, adjusted for his tall frame, was another help as was a large BC with tank inflation. (These were not standard equipment). Here again my personal feelings had to be put aside, this student had to be equipped to his preference. Step by step and with checks and halts, in whatever order seemed to be best to arrive at the desired goal, the standards of performance for certification were met. With his extra hours and his full attendance at the basic course, Ed made it and received his card. It was a great day for both of us. He went off on his next assignment and his only complaint was that he didn't get enough diving.

Drawing on my personal experiences and those of other instructors who have taught exceptional students, I can generalize a little. Teaching the exceptional student is stimulating, challenging and time consuming but in the process you learn too. You get reinforcement from THEIR enthusiasm and frequently they try harder. Your teaching techniques may get a thorough shuffling. You may find yourself reorganizing your basic course for the regulator, then mask and so on. Since my experiences with my exceptions, we now start with mask clearing as the first learned skill after breathing underwater.

Wherever possible take your cues from the student, rather than trying to stick to a rigid schedule. Flexibility is the golden word; if problems arise, you can skip a whole block of routine exercises and come back to them later, or never. NAUI very wisely does not rigidly structure the basic course. The handbook says "the following skills must be performed during the course ...". A swimming test, per se, is not required, but a level of competence emphatically is. Thou shalt not CERTIFY thy student until he meets that level, but it does NOT have to be on the first day of class.

Because of the enormous increase of "stand around and talk story" time involved in teaching people with physical and psychological (especially the latter) hang ups, I feel I'm lucky to work in Hawaii. Although my prime teaching area looks very much like the breakwater area near Monterey, the difference is very apparent in the ambient air and water temperatures.

Now I must speak out strongly and as an individual. Two years ago Tom Mount presented a paper here in San Diego which he called The Diver's Head. I quote, "if one were to select a ratio for the ideal balance of a diver, my opinion would be 60% head and 40% physical ability. The heavier weight is in favour of the head as it governs the physical response and control of the diver." I concur. A well trained THINKING diver who maintains a reasonable physical condition can be a far safer diver than one who is physically superb yet unthinking. Which group, after all, is the high risk group for automobile insurance? Are we going to be driven by fear of legal action to insist on ever more complex and demanding physical criteria or are we going to try to become increasingly aware of the more subtle problems? To know your limitations and to have the maturity to abide by and work within, that knowledge will prolong the length and enjoyment of a diving career.

I think we do a great disservice to a large number of people by basing so many of our standards and decisions on the experiences and conditions of one major geographical region and of one large population segment. Why does a diver have to be trained as if to dive in cold, dirty water when he doesn't live in that area and in all probability will be unlikely ever to dive there? We have been so brainwashed about our sport that we're in some danger of making diving like a club for which the

entrance requirements are so stiff that the club expires for lack of members. I am sure that there are many physical handicaps. Students who, with drive on their part and with patience and innovative teaching on the instructors' side, have surmounted the challenges, have been certified and who have gone on as safe and enthusiastic divers.

Both of the two divers I have discussed in depth are currently active divers. Kay recently called me in panic with an ear problem. Her doctor, a non-diver, had given her the classic "you'll never dive again" pitch. Fortunately there are other ENT men and she was referred to one who dives. Net result - a happy diver once more doing her thing.

Ed dives with us every weekend when he's not bopping around the Pacific Basin with tanks and portable compressor. Now that he's certified he's developed his own style. He clears his own special hand signals with his buddy for each dive and limits his dive to a total consumption of an Aluminum 90 charged to 3000 lbs. He uses this air for surface swimming as well as the actual dive because this represents his approximate energy limit. A few eyebrows were raised at first because this is unorthodox behaviour, at least in Hawaii. I was able to quell this when I mentioned having seen a NAUI instructor, from the Mainland, using his regulator for a surface swim. After all I know, and Ed knows, that he CAN use that pesky snorkel.

Ed also dives with an emergency supply of hard candy in plastic film cylinders tucked into both pockets of his BC. He can comfortably eat the candy underwater should a need arise for an energy boost at depth. He complains that the taste of candy and saltwater is nauseating, but it works. Incidentally, these little cylinders are pressure proof, or at least they stay dry inside, down to 130 feet as I discovered by accident. We are at present investigating the possibility of taking Cokes underwater in playtex collapsible nurseries. Except that I break up every time I think of Ed nursing away at 60 feet or so it might be an alternate solution.

Because of circulatory problems of diabetes, Ed has imposed some other limits. Following discussion with his doctor and with me, he abides by the regulation of no dives requiring stage decompression. He limits his depths. Every dive he makes is calculated as cold and arduous, that is, he uses the next greater time and depth for calculations. I emphasize that these limitations are self-imposed, are self-investigated and are scrupulously observed. Ed uses his head.

To stay in shape for diving Ed rides a bicycle and walks. His doctor is pleased with the overall health picture although still a little dubious about diving. The main point is, I think, that without the inducement of diving, Ed would be less likely to make as much effort to maintain such a good level of condition.

And so it goes. How do you balance your time and effort; against financial rewards or against job satisfaction? Are you, as a trainer of the exceptional diver releasing a hidden menace on the sport diving world or are you giving another human being a long lasting recreational activity that will enhance their enjoyment of life and improve their general health? We as diving instructors make this assessment. After all it is our names that go on those cards. I would simply like to enter a plea for the Geritol Kids and the well-motivated non-swimmers of the world who would like to join us in our world of underwater. Don't sell them short.

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