

Reflections on Athletic Training Education Reform

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I would like to comment on what I have come to learn from being an educator in our current era of athletic training education reform. To start, I wonder if we are considering all of the modes of evaluation to gauge the success of athletic training education reform.

Assessing Education Reform

Might we be too strong on measuring changes in knowledge and skills and eliciting feedback from students going through our new programs? Have we put assessment of the logic of educational reform itself center-stage, i.e., improved health care of the physically active? I propose that we should consider repeating the patient outcomes research first completed during 1996-1998. Further, it would be prudent to survey employers, including head athletic trainers who hire graduate assistants, about their perceptions and observations regarding the current readiness of the young ATC to function as an entry-level professional. So I ask you this question: How well do you think ATCs compare to their counterparts of 5-10 years ago? I just hope that we are not likely to fall victim to what Bloom has called the paradox of reform without any real change.¹

I caution that we don't take an overly scientific or clinical orientation in our athletic training curricula, as is often the case in medical schools. It has become quite clear that the past emphasis placed in medical education on hard science that so dominated the medical educational scene, produces some undesirable outcomes.²



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You see, student doctors have traditionally been trained to see themselves as primarily medical scientists, and this has been found to be detrimental to doctors' overall patient care functions. I hope that our Athletic Training Education Programs don't prepare students simply and narrowly in athletic training skills and knowledge, ignoring their expanded roles as health care providers. You see, athletic trainers have a unique blend of different kinds of abilities that are applied to the practice of athletic training. What is needed or valued at any time depends on the context—at times it may be a practical intervention, at other times, diagnostic abilities, and at other times a caring attitude and understanding.³

Three Circle Model

Borrowing from Harden et al.,⁴ let me briefly describe a 3 circle model (i.e., inner, middle, and outer circles) which depicts these different abilities I just mentioned. The inner circle represents what the athletic trainer is able to do, e.g. the physical examination of a patient. This can be thought of as doing the right thing. Interestingly, it can be equated with technical intelligence, in line with Gardner's multiple intelligences model.⁵

The middle circle represents the way the athletic trainer approaches the tasks in the inner circle, i.e., appropriate analytical strategies. This can be thought of as doing the thing right and includes the academic, analytical and creative intelligences.

Lastly, the outer circle represents the development of the personal attributes of the individual (e.g. ethics). In other words, the right person doing it. It equates with the personal and emotional intelligences. It is particularly in this outer circle that some athletic trainers may excel and where one can distinguish the star performers from others. As you know, outstanding professionals usually have special personal attributes. Please, appreciate that professional expertise is just a baseline competence.

You need it to get the job and get it done, but how you do the job—i.e., the other competencies you bring to your expertise—determine actual performance.

Data from a number of studies suggest that, in general, emotional and personal competencies play a far larger role in superior job performance than do cognitive abilities and technical expertise.⁶ So, a student may have all the technical competencies in the inner circle, but still not be a good athletic trainer. The outcomes in the middle and outer circles mean that the student has to think as an athletic trainer.

Teaching Methods

Now, this three-circle model also acknowledges that there needs to be a range of strategies and approaches to both teaching and assessment. Drawing some parallels here, we cannot be all about teaching the right thing. Strategic approaches to learning, such as problem-based learning, can contribute to the achievement of the learning outcomes in the middle circle. In other words, teaching how to do the thing right. Role modeling can be important for the achievement of outcomes in the outer circle, thus teaching about the right person doing it.⁴

I am of the opinion that we need to take on a servant attitude to our students through mentoring and role modeling. This likely will have more impact on our students as professionals than the content we actually teach. So then, it is through changes in pedagogy that we may see true educational reform- a true repositioning of teacher and student.²

Thus, how athletic training is taught needs to be at the forefront of education reform. Our choice of pedagogy has consequences for the way we structure the curriculum, its contents, and its delivery. Pedagogy affects not merely what students take away, but also what teachers do, that is, how teachers project both their knowledge, and themselves, to students.²

Always realize that our choice of pedagogy affects how we and our students are positioned in relation to each other, and how expectations on both sides affect this relationship.² As you know, the lecture, for example, positions our students in the learning process very differently compared to problem-solving or self-directed learning. It's going to be essential that our students understand and appreciate these changing positions—especially when each of us is likely to be one of the few instructors on campus to approach instruction in this manner. Otherwise, the educational intent is unlikely to be fully realized, and the teaching and learning process goes on as usual. In other words, conventional and dominant roles and relationships will be the default.² So most importantly for us, our choice of pedagogy will have consequences for our relationships with our students and will play a major role in athletic training education reform.

Conclusion

I am absolutely convinced that the educators are the backbone not only of educational reform in athletic training, but also of the growth and development of our profession, and its professionals, as a whole. Please appreciate that our success as educators is measured by the success of our students in the profession. Let's thank athletic training educators for being the right people doing the thing right.

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