



Teaching to the Newcomer

By Lawrence Biscontinini, MA

Before Class

As aquatic fitness professionals, we know that it is standard practice to arrive early to class. Doing so ensures that you reach those new participants before they get into the pool. Newcomers really may feel more comfortable in the more remote areas of the pool, and we need to respect that. When possible, try to:

1. *Welcome* newcomers to class by introducing yourself when students approach the pool. Ask them their name! (One way to remember a newcomer's name is to repeat it three times immediately in your reply; this can also personalize the experience for the student.)
2. Use an *interactive personal technique* to help break the ice. This technique requires that you find out, and remember, one personal piece of information about a newcomer and then incorporate it later during class. This not only shows that you have remembered this client's name, but can also make her feel part of the group. Make sure, however, that you ask nonthreatening, open-ended probing questions, such as "What types of aquatic classes have you been taking?" or "What is your experience with aquatic fitness?"
3. *Recommend* key safety issues pertinent to that particular class. For example, in a class with noodles, advise a new client about proper grip and placement, including the reasons why these issues are so important.
4. Offer *suggestions* about where the newcomer might position himself/herself during class. If the class is choreography-based, suggest a place up front where he can see you – and you can see him or her – to expedite class integration. If a new exerciser is not familiar with the equipment being used in class, suggest taking a place somewhere on the side of the pool toward the front to allow visual access of you at all times without distracting the die-hard members front and center. Nonetheless, be sensitive to the fact that some extremely shy and nervous individuals may prefer to remain in the rear of the class. Respect their wishes, and remember to take extra care to observe them continuously throughout class.

5. Encourage *personal interactions* by posing nonthreatening personal questions of the class at large. For example, ask a few seasoned participants if they like the new music you are debuting that day and see how the newcomers react. If one of them smiles or shakes her head, it may be appropriate to ask the same question of her.
6. Share *empathetic personal anecdotes* with newcomers. Whenever you learn a piece of personal information about a new client, share something about yourself so the client feels there was a sincere reciprocal exchange of information. This ice-breaker makes you seem more human and helps decrease the boundaries between teacher and student.
7. Start a *mentoring system* by introducing each new member with a seasoned student whose permission you have previously secured. They may exchange phone numbers or email addresses, valuable information from a student's perspective, and generally come to look out for each other. This also makes seasoned participants feel important with an expanded role and allows you to be able to say you have instituted a mentoring system when you teach!

With January New Year's resolutions ubiquitous, aqua classes tend to enjoy full pools with new faces. When preparing to teach our group fitness classes, we sometimes overlook these newer participants who most need our help: the new attendees who invariably stake out a place in the back row. Sometimes we forget how uncomfortable these participants can be in light of a new class. They are wearing almost no clothing, standing near other unknown people, and adjusting to what is most likely unfamiliar territory. Whether new to exercise or just fresh faces in our own classes, these students tend to gravitate to the far recesses of the pool where they are unable to see and hear efficiently. It is a Catch-22 situation when these newcomers who probably *most* need our help often get the *least* amount of attention. As aqua professionals, our job includes finding ways to reach out to these back-row participants while still giving our seasoned students the class and attention they have come to expect. Here are some proven practical strategies that can help you extend a hand to even the most timid participants.

During Class

Here are some suggestions to try during class:

1. Use the *sandwiching technique*. When giving appropriate, positive feedback and motivational cues, mention the newcomer's name in-between, saying the names of two regular participants. For example, "Deborah (veteran member), your form is always great in class! Jeff (new member), excellent posture. Connie (veteran member), you are working so hard!" This technique ensures that everyone, whether seasoned or new, gets recognition and motivational attention in a nonthreatening manner. Instantly, the newcomer feels integrated into class because of the teacher's comments.
2. Vary everyone's position and space throughout the class. The "front of the pool" doesn't always have to be the *front* of the pool! For example, in a class with

choreography, try having students face alternating directions in the pool so they all experience front, back and middle orientations. This technique trains kinesthetic awareness by teaching participants to relate to class dynamics that continually change in a comfortable environment. New participants will quickly gain comfort from having experienced different areas of the class. You should also vary your own position throughout class to keep everyone alert as you teach from different areas, if appropriate.

3. During the class, you may wish to integrate information you learned about one of the newcomers when practicing the interactive personal technique before class. If, for instance, you learned that one of the newcomers is a nurse, you may say "Hey, gang, we're in safe company today because Nancy is a nurse!" By integrating such personal tidbits casually during class, newcomers are made to feel part of the group and everyone relates more personally to each other.
4. Use terminology that participants can readily understand while learning proper form and kinesiology. For example, instead of intimidating new participants with cues like "Try to isometrically engage your transversus abdominis as you rotate in the

horizontal plane with the superior part of your core," take the advice of Bernadette O'Brien, an aquatics instructor based in New Jersey. "For that," she states, "I would say 'squeeze in your abdominals and just rotate the upper body like a lid twists on a jar without the jar moving.' Teach in language that makes sense to them so they can relate it to their body immediately and even take it away with them."

With the New Year upon us and new participants in our classes, aquatic professionals need to remember to create sincerely welcoming experiences for everyone.

5. Although you are using simple language, educate them. To simplify things for newcomers, cue using lay terms first, then follow with the technical terms. For example, I use the following cue to teach newcomers proper core stabilization: Lay cue: "Class, I want you to think of squeezing a lemon behind your belly button against your spine as making lemonade." Technical cue: "These are your deep transverse abdominis

muscles and this compression action engages them and makes you stronger." This technique not only helps both new and seasoned participants follow you, but it also helps fulfill our role as true educators in fitness.

6. Pay attention to the *form* underneath the water surface. It is common for new participants to dress in loose clothing due to shyness or body image issues. While it is important to respect this preference, you need to keep a keen eye on these participants to prevent injuries because it is harder to observe proper form when someone is underwater. Instructors should encourage everyone to dress in a manner that is most comfortable so long as it does not hamper the safety of the activity being performed.
7. Remember how much of a *visual role model* you are to the newcomer. Consider how your own clothing choices affect newcomers. Often times, the first thing new participants notice is the instructor's appearance, and they most probably will learn to copy you. You should dress in a nonthreatening way that allows participants to see moves you demonstrate from all anatomical positions and planes. Hair, footwear and other gear should always be

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professional. If performing barefoot (as is common practice in some aquatic mind-body classes), proper foot hygiene is essential. Instructors who display a positive and professional image send the best possible message to both new and seasoned participants.

8. *Demonstrate* moves in a way that is “user-friendly” for newcomers. We all know that it is important to teach exercise progression and modifications at a level that’s most appropriate for the majority of the class. That said, it is easy to lose sight of how your novices in the back row perceive such instruction. This is not the time to show off your own incredible flexibility, choreographic creativity or contortionist genius, since newcomers can be instantly put off by such displays. Remember that your goal as fitness professional is to create – in every class, for every participant – a feeling of success by including moves that everyone can perform safely. Furthermore, when you offer progressions of exercises to increase intensity for seasoned members, be sure to remind and double-remind the new participants to “stay with the first option.”
9. Take advantage of the final stages of class to provide *added customer service* to new participants. Use the cool down time to summarize the purpose of the class and compliment newcomers for having completed the experience. Positive verbal feedback can be specific, such as, “Katrina, your form was just awesome today. I think we all can learn from that!” It can also be as general as “I want to tell all of you that it is always rewarding to teach to a class that moves as cohesively and beautifully as you all did today.” Such cues, coupled with using their names, include the newcomer as part of the group experience and also underline what you have accomplished as a fitness professional.

After Class

After class, make one last effort to exchange dialogue with your new participants. “You’ve got to make that the most important time,” advises Petra Kolber, 2001 IDEA Group Fitness Instructor of the Year. She says “new participants will most remember their impressions from the first five minutes and the last five minutes of class. So, make these last precious minutes memorable.”

1. To encourage dialogue with new participants, ask one or two open-ended questions, ones that cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” For example, instead of asking “Did you like your first experi-

ence at water fitness?,” ask instead “How do you feel now compared to how you felt before class?” or “What did you like most and least about the class?”

2. Ask newcomers about their *specific fitness goals*. This can help you bond with new students while also ensuring that their goals are realistic. For example, if a newcomer tells you that she wants to drop three dress sizes in a week to attend her upcoming college reunion, you can gently relieve her of that goal and substitute it with one that is more attainable. Again, it is best to ask open-ended questions so that newcomers can take a moment to reflect. For some participants, just being asked to verbalize their feelings about this new class experience can be part of the learning process itself.

Some Tips for Teaching Newcomers

- Get to class early to introduce yourself to new participants.
- Ask newcomers one personal item about themselves and work this into conversation later in class.
- Use humor during class to help newcomers relax. (Remember that angels can fly because they take themselves so very lightly!)
- Vary the class dynamics by changing participants and your own positions during class.
- Try using an interactive personal technique.
- Share some empathetic personal anecdotes.
- Ask open ended questions before and after class to encourage conversation and thoughts about the new experience.
- Create a positive “micro-experience” for each newcomer so they all experience some success.
- Assign mentors from the existing participants who would welcome this additional responsibility of helping newcomers adjust to the ways of the pool.
- Remember to dress and portray yourself in a professional and non-intimidating manner.
- Always use language that is inclusive of both the newcomers and the seasoned participants.

3. Whenever possible, be sure that either you or the new mentor follows up. If your facility rules permit, call or email newcomers within 24 hours to inquire about soreness, adherence and overall feelings. A new participant who receives sincere, caring individual contact from an otherwise busy instructor can quickly become a devotee for life. In today’s competitive fitness market, your success truly depends on customer service. When a newcomer feels valued as a customer, mutual success is almost guaranteed.

With the New Year upon us and new participants in our classes, aquatic professionals need to remember to create sincerely welcoming experiences for everyone. The aforementioned techniques will keep everyone feeling part of the aquatic group regardless of previous experience in the water. Ultimately, the pool will become the welcoming environment point of departure for people to achieve their realistic goals, not only in the water, but when dry as well. ▀

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Author

Lawrence Biscontini, MA, is an International Spa Consultant and Mindful Movement Specialist. Lawrence works as an AFAA Contributing Writer and Certification Specialist, and has established fitness history by being the first professional to win multiple Instructor of the Year Awards from ECA (2009), IDEA (2004), *Can Fit Pro* (2004), and ACE (2002). He has presented at past AEA conferences. Lawrence is president of his company, FG2000, and works for Beamfit, Gliding & Bender Ball, Power Systems, and others. His newest book is *Cream Rises: Excellence in Group and Private Education*, and his dvd entitled “20-20-20: The Complete Workout for Desperate Housewives,” was rated a top release for 2009 by IDEA. Today, Lawrence mentors fitness professionals from all over the world who seek his expertise at helping them grow their career in fitness. Find Lawrence and his resources at www.findlawrence.com.