

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE FIELD OF RECREATION

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Christine is a woman I have known for approximately 4 years. Though we both worked in separate areas of recreational programming, she has always been someone I admired, looked to for advice, and who taught me a lot about how to work with other people – staff, parents, and participants. When thinking about who to interview for this assignment, it became clear to me almost immediately who I wanted to interview and why. Christine has over 21 years of experience working in recreation. In fact, she left University to pursue her passion for the field, working her way up from a swim instructor to an Aquatic Coordinator of her own pool. Though Christine is not a teacher in the traditional sense, she is indeed a teacher – someone who teaches people an important life skill and who educates others on how to teach. She is a mentor and role model for those in her field.

My goal was to tap into Christine's teacher knowledge so as to better understand what she knows about teaching and learning and how she puts this knowledge into action. After analyzing her interview transcript, it is evident that Christine is not only passionate about her job and teaching others, but she also has very specific ideas about how to educate those she works with – staff and participants. Data analysis began with multiple readings of the transcript. Open coding was utilized and reoccurring themes were established and synthesized. I found six main themes that reoccurred throughout the interview that not only display Christine's teacher knowledge, but that also have direct implications on teaching and learning. The six recurring themes are: 1) love for teaching, 2) teaching is an emotional endeavor, 3) individualized student learning and teacher as chameleon, 4) learning is done best at a young age, 5) recreation activities teach/allow people to be in relationships with others, and 6) parents play an important role in enforcing student learning. In the following report, each theme will be examined and implications for teaching and learning will be given. In addition, I will also discuss some of the shortcomings of the data and how observations from previous work experience with the interviewee may answer some of the questions that remained after data analysis was complete.

## Findings

### *A Love for Teaching*

Christine's love for what she does and the people she works with is evident throughout the interview. When asked how she feels about her job on a daily basis, Christine responded with the following:

“Oh my, I am blessed. Blessed that I am part of people's lives in this manner... to know that I am helping a family who needs help, who needs help breaking through to their child, and we accomplish it... wow.”

Christine considers herself blessed to be helping and teaching people, especially individuals with special needs – individuals she brings up many times throughout the interview whether or not I prompted her with questions about working with students with exceptionalities. Christine also admits that her job is selfish, because it makes her happy and puts her “on a high.” When her students show progress and when they show that they have learned something, she is overcome by joy and happiness. These feelings are “the high” she feeds off of. For example, in a discussion of the considerations swimming instructors need to make before working with kids with special needs in the pool, Christine describes an experience with one of her very first students Matthew – a boy with Autism. Christine almost jumped out of her chair while telling me the following:

“He is swimming! Maybe it doesn't mean anything to anyone else, but to me it's this one piece of the window that we broke into. He is not a verbal child. So for him to swim and understand and use his body in ways we never thought possible. That's what I'm there for! That's the selfish part of me that's the driving force. It's rewarding.”

Christine not only exclaims her joy and love for her job through the tone of her voice, but also through the use of her words “that's what I'm there for” and “rewarding.” She also explains that though accomplishments like this one may not mean anything to anyone else, the accomplishments of her students mean something to her. They are the very things that inspire her to continue in her career - a career that she finds fulfilling. Teaching and working with others to help others

accomplish goals is clearly associated with a love and a passion experienced by the teacher in Christine's eyes.

***Teaching is an Emotional Endeavor – Heart and Soul, Caring, and Building Connections***

Another theme found within Christine's interview is the idea of teaching as an emotional endeavor. According to Christine, teaching is not only something that she loves and has a passion for, but teaching also involves emotions, connections, and feelings. Christine feels that those in her field should not remove themselves emotionally from those they teach/interact with and instead should put their "heart and soul" into what they do. When I asked Christine about what her future career aspirations were, she explained that she wants to teach those interested in entering the field of recreation and to specifically "teach them that you teach with your heart and your soul." At first I was not quite sure what she meant by this; however, it slowly became clear to me that this is related to her emotions and the expressing of her emotions to others.

Christine talks about teaching with heart and soul multiple times throughout the interview. One example came about during a conversation about teaching individuals with special needs. Christine explained that teaching is:

"...led not by your mental thinking, but your heart. It is truly guided by your heart. If you are going to go into every situation and detach yourself from the person... I don't think that works. Not for me anyway. I don't get how you can do that...not have a connection with them? If your love for kids is what it is, you will find anything to get through to that child. You have to have that passion and actually be there for the kids. It's not just about a paycheck. Anyone who teaches somebody, if you are not wholeheartedly there for the people you are teaching... well, people can tell and that person reads what you are giving off - even kids with special needs."

Christine already presumes that teachers have a love for teaching and their students; however, she goes a step further by explaining that if a teacher does love their students, then the teacher must form a connection with their students and do anything possible to help them. This later point will be discussed later in this report; however, what is interesting here and important to take away is Christine's idea of being genuine and doing things wholeheartedly. As she explains, the individuals

you are teaching, whether or not they have a special need, can tell whether or not you are genuine – whether or not you truly care about them wholeheartedly. Teaching, in Christine’s mind, requires not only a passion and a love, but also genuine and heartfelt feelings. After analyzing Christine’s interview multiple times, I believe that these genuine heartfelt feelings are what she means by heart and soul. Christine argues that “without heart and soul you can’t do anything in life.” In fact, she also suggests that not all people in her field understand this, specifically those who work at “head office” and who do not work directly with patrons. Christine suggests that these individuals need to understand that using your heart as a guide and showing emotions such as empathy, are very important things that do and should take place within the field of recreation. In fact, one of her goals is to try to get these people to understand that recreation is not just about money, but to remember that it is so much more.

Another example that Christine provides in regards to teaching and emotions came up when I asked her about her relationship with her staff. These staff are essentially her students, as she teaches them how to teach others. Christine explains that the relationship she has with her staff involves coaching and support, but also an emotional attachment:

“I try to be there for them. I’m their mother away from their parents. So you try to guide them and then your guiding them on how to teach the children and guide those children. So you are never far removed from staff. Some people remove themselves, but I don’t think you should. Some people hire, make them work, and never get involved. I am very attached to my staff. Huge attachment. It’s actually disturbing. I think I should go see someone for that (laughs). I get emotionally attached to them.”

Christine again mentions this idea of not “removing yourself” from the people you teach and instead building an emotional connection with them. She cares about her students and wants to be involved in other aspects of their life. In that sense she is therefore not only their teacher, but also a coach, a counselor, and a mentor – ideas of herself that she briefly discusses while giving examples of some of the problems she has helped her students with over the years (e.g. bulimia).

### ***Individualized Student Learning and Teacher as Chameleon***

The most prominent theme within Christine's interview is the theme of individualized student learning. Christine does not use these terms directly; however, her knowledge about the importance of getting to know her students so that she can teach them in a way that benefits them most effectively is indeed an example of individualized student learning. Christine notes the importance of beginning with trying to understand a student before one enters into a teaching relationship with them. When asked about what she thought teachers (swimming instructors) need to be aware of or think about before working with kids with special needs in the pool, she gives the obvious answer of safety. However, she also emphasizes the importance of figuring out what will work best for that child so that the instructor can help maximize the student's learning:

“I like to sit down and talk to the parents first or my staff have to sit down with the parents first. We need to find out about the child and what works best for that child. Cause you can sit in on any class and learn about Autism and Down syndrome, someone with CP...but you are just learning as if you are putting together a unit for a television. I can't stand that aspect of learning about special needs – its impersonal. You have to actually get to know the child, their quirks, and what works for them.”

Christine recognizes that teaching and learning requires knowledge that the teacher must seek from the student and parents. She recognizes that teaching is not as simple as following a manual, but it is more complex than that. Teaching requires person specific knowledge about individual student quirks, likes/dislikes, and strategies that could potentially work for the individual. In addition, Christine has an understanding that to gather this knowledge from students, it requires more than a teacher's ability to listen for words, but to also pay attention to the student's physical gestures and mannerisms. The goal of the teacher should not be to take their students at face values, but to “soak them [the student] in” in all ways possible. Clearly, understanding the students, where they come from, and establishing their needs is of the utmost importance for learning.

In addition to getting to know and understand students, it is also important for the teacher to recognize that what you learn about your students requires you to respond and alter your teaching

to meet or fit these students' individual needs. Christine explains this best when she suggests that her swim instructors "need to be chameleons." Teachers need to "manipulate themselves. If they have to be loud to get someone motivated, then they need to be loud. If they have to be soft to get someone to understand and to trust and to try something, then they need to take that approach. Not one thing works. There are different ways people need to learn." Teacher's need to find the right strategy, the "key to the door" that will help students learn, something that Christine equates with magic – a moment of profound understanding of what works.

### ***Learning is Done Best at a Young Age***

In the field of recreation, a recreation employee will often find themselves working with individuals of various ages. Participants in general recreation programs and aquatic programs range from preschool age to seniors. Christine provides some insight into her teacher knowledge about how people learn at different ages and at what age she thinks students learn best. Though Christine does admit that it is never too late to learn, specifically learn how to swim, she also recognizes that adults and seniors are faced with certain barriers to learning. Christine explains "it is a HUGE challenge to learn when you are older." As an adult learning something new, there is a tendency to "over process of information" and a tendency "to breakdown every component of the technical side." According to Christine, this hinders learning because it does not allow one to relax and release their body. Christine explains:

"You need to let go and release because it's the only way your body will work with you. Because when you're thinking too much it works against you. It's hard to move forward. For example, this summer I taught a mother, a mother of two, who never swam or put her face in and was petrified. I was able to hold her and tap at parts of her so she can know where I am and have a sense of release. Within 8 lessons, which is very short, she was swimming 5 meters with her face in. Cause once you're comfortable and letting your body float, you can move for hours."

In this quote Christine discusses an example of an adult who had this problem and how being scared or unable to be calm and "release your body" in water hinders learning. Christine believes

that children do not have these obstacles that hinder learning, as they are more “carefree.”

Christine sees a child as a “fresh clean slate” without fear or feelings of anxiety (feelings that adults acquire with experience and with age). Not only is a child’s brain “free of information”, but children are less likely to have health problems or physical barriers that prevent them from learning. Ultimately, Christine recognizes that learning at a young age is better; however, it is also a matter of being “ready.” Again, Christine acknowledges that all people are different and being ready to learn “is an individual thing.”

### ***Recreation Activities Teach/Allow People to Be in Relationships with Others***

Recreation instructors and recreation classes, though they do not teach the Ontario curriculum, still provide participants with valuable learning experiences. One of these valuable learning experiences relates to relationships and how to develop relationships with others. Christine has very specific ideas on what participating in recreation activities can provide for people, young and old. Relationships are at the core of Christine’s teacher knowledge. She explains that “the world is so confused with the importance of what we are here for. It’s about relationships and the changes we make in society.” Unfortunately, Christine feels that often people don’t realize that life is about “connections we are supposed to make with one another.” Christine argues that by participating in recreation activities, whether it be swimming or playing on a hockey team, one develops general life skills such as “socialization skills” – the ability to be with and communicate with other people. Christine emphasizes that this is the reason why recreational preschool classes are so popular with parents is because they teach “children, before they start school, how to be in a classroom, how to ask questions - its the beginning skills of things that happens later on.” Christine clearly sees recreation as a valuable experience that “prepare[s] you for life.” Christine notes that recreation is a “small introduction to socialization”, perhaps a training ground where socialization skills can begin to form. If a child is already in school, then recreation “reinforces



those things” that they have learned about how to be and act with other people, and provides individuals with an opportunity “to be a part of society in a different form.”

In addition, for those individuals who are older, recreation provides an opportunity to still feel “a part of something, of society.” Christine argues that “in an aging population this is particularly important.” It seems as though that Christine believes that human beings have needs throughout their entire lives that need to be met, including the need to be social. Christine explains why people continue to participate in recreational activities into adulthood and beyond:

“These people in their 80s they still come – they get to be social, meet people, support each other. A couple of ladies were crying the other day in aquafitness because one of the ladies had to have surgery. They were rooting for her. They were wishing her well. If you are home alone you don’t get that. But when you make yourself part of a community, society, then these people carry you forward. They guide you, help you, speak to you, make you feel important.”

Recreation is clearly associated with the benefits of feelings of belonging and community, something that many people of all ages search for. Learning to socialize and being social is not something that only young people engage in, but it is a life skill that is carried forward throughout one’s life. Christine therefore views recreation programs and facilities as not only a place for learning about socialization, but also a place to practice and maintain this skill.

### ***Parents Play an Important Role in Enforcing Student Learning***

The final theme that can be found within the interview is the idea that parents have a role to play in student learning. Christine mentions parents various times throughout our interview and even goes so far as to say that her biggest frustration is “stupid parents.” When Christine refers to “stupid parents”, she is referring to parents who do not try to understand the problems their children are experiencing in learning how to swim and also to those parents who do not realize they need to help their children by enforcing or providing an opportunity for practice. Christine explains:

“...learning goes on 24 hours a day. The parents are the extension of what goes on during school or lessons. If they are only reading in school and only

swimming at swimming, then when are they practicing? When are they learning? They won't get as far as when parents take more responsibility and try to reinforce what they learn at school and at swim. I know it's hard for some people...time, language, ... but still."

Christine clearly believes that parents are important in student learning. Parents can help their children by enforcing learning and encouraging practice. Christine recognizes limitations such as time and language, but still places a certain amount of responsibility on the parent to be involved in student learning. In a conversation about why children fail and about conversations she has with parents about failing students, Christine explains that she often asks parents how often their child has practiced. Christine believes that practice does not just take place during a weekly lesson, but practice should also take place outside of lessons. Therefore, Christine suggests that parents should bring their child to the pool to practice between lessons. Clearly, Christine equates practice with developing skills, as she explains that the student who "has been practicing every single day" will be the better piano player or swimmer. Christine illustrates that in order to build a foundation of knowledge and develop skills, "you need to have practice and study time – just like school. Sure you can have natural born talent, but most of us still need to practice."

### **Implications for Teaching and Learning**

Various implications for teaching and learning can be gained from an analysis of Christine's interview and the knowledge she displays about teaching and learning in her field of recreation. These implications are associated with the six themes drawn from interview data. Firstly, Christine's understanding of teaching being something that one should be passionate is important for teachers to acknowledge. The profession is full of many challenges and Christine admits this when she explains that she wants to teach others to "persevere through all the challenges you face, cause there are so many." Having a love for teaching not only helps you get through and persevere through these challenges, but also "puts you on a high" and can be the driving force that keeps you going through trials and tribulations. Therefore not only is it simply important

for a teacher to love what they do, but it also makes one's job more enjoyable and perhaps makes one more able to get through various challenges – to persevere and trudge on.

The second theme of teaching as an emotional endeavor is directly related to the first theme. Christine not only loves and has strong emotions about her job, she also believes that you need to be genuine and show this love for your students – who, despite their background or if they have special needs, will know if you truly care about them and their failures and successes. According to Christine's teacher knowledge, a teacher should not remove themselves from their students, but should let their heart guide their teaching. It is ok for teachers to use their emotions to make decisions and to get attached to, form connections with, and care for their students. Teachers need to consider this aspect of their teaching and need to listen to their emotions and feelings as they teach. Emotional responses while teaching are just as valuable as teacher knowledge of content, policies, etc.

I personally have already implemented some of Christine's knowledge about teaching as an emotional process and have tried to form connections with my "students." A prime example is my group of summer staff that I have worked with for over four years. These individuals are not just staff that work for me three months out of the year, but they instead have in a sense become my children – individuals who I have invested my time in and whom I have made connections with. From the beginning I have sought to be a teacher who counsels and who shows that she genuinely cares about who they are as people, not just as staff. My staff have also felt this connection, as they have come to me with issues that include flunking out of University, coping with family illness, and breaking-up with their significant others. I truly feel that they come to me because they know that I care about them as human beings and about all aspects of their lives. Though perhaps forming these types of personal and emotional relationships with your students in a typical classroom may be considered by some to be crossing a line, teachers in the classroom still must find a way to make connections with their students, show that they care, and teach with their heart.

Another implication for teaching gained from Christine's experiences and understanding is related to getting to know one's students. Getting to know your students goes beyond asking questions, but actually involves "soaking them in" to establish who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how they will learn best. Teachers must actively seek to do this when they first meet their students, whether it is by asking students questions about themselves, or by observing them and their mannerisms, behaviours, and emotional responses. Another way of finding out more about a student could be to speak with parents – something that Christine does for her children with special needs. However, once the teacher learns detailed information about each individual student, it is not enough to teach all of these students the same way. Teachers must employ teaching strategies that specifically target a student so that they will learn best. Christine articulates this when talking about students with special needs:

"You need to teach and not teach the same way all the time...you'll never reach or breakthrough to everybody. If you have 10 special need students and are teaching all of them, you still won't be teaching them all the same. They are all different. You really have to really find yourself for that person – contort yourself. You have to adapt to your surroundings and what you are given. I truly believe that's how you feel and how you approach the person, it's not just textbook. It's more than that."

Therefore teachers must "contort themselves" or become "chameleons" to reach all students.

Teaching is a constantly evolving practice, and it evolves and improves not only with our experiences, but also with the knowledge we gain about the students we are working with.

Teachers need to be flexible and comfortable with teaching in a variety of different ways. In a sense, we are performers on a daily basis, putting on shows to help all of our students in the audience. I would like to adopt this in my own practice, specifically in recreation. As a preschool instructor, one of the most common things I have to do is work with preschoolers who have never been in a classroom setting before and who have often not developed enough language skills to always get across how they feel or what they want. Using observation and talking with parents will allow me to better help these young children and use strategies that will cater to their needs.

Christine also notes that learning is best done at a young age and that older students experience additional problems or barriers they must overcome in the learning process. What does this mean then for teachers of older students? There are many implications here that should be considered. Firstly, it is important to learn about these students as you do with any other student. In fact, older students probably come with more baggage than younger ones (as Christine seems to suggest). Secondly, if you have established that a student has a fear or anxiety about learning something, it is important for the teacher to build a trusting relationship with that student, again, by showing that you genuinely care. The student needs to feel at ease and as if they can rely on their teacher for comfort and care. This may take some time, but the teacher needs to actively engage in trying to do so. I have never taught adults; however, if I do in the future, I feel that it would be important for me to take a similar approach suggested by Christine, and to consider where my students are coming from, why they are choosing to learn later in life, and to make a meaningful connection with them.

Relationships seem to be considered the cornerstone of recreational activities for Christine. Recreational activities allow participants to engage in activities with others, while also learning important socialization skills – skills that young students take with them beyond their recreational experiences and into their youth and adult life. Therefore, an implication for teaching would be for teachers to encourage interaction with others inside and outside of the classroom. If recreational activities have the power to teach students important life skills like socialization and communication skills (which I too believe they do), then teachers need to be promoting recreational activities to their students. Learning does not just take place in a classroom where teachers teach curriculum content, but learning occurs in all sorts of activities whereby people get to “be” together and experience things with each other (e.g. swim class, preschool, camp, etc.). This is something that as a recreational program coordinator and a camp director I often tried to explain to the parents of my students. I have always felt that it is important to talk to parents about

the positive aspects of recreational programs and the ways in which they can benefit children – one of these being the development of socialization skills. I have often received many phone calls from parents who are apprehensive to put their children in certain programs. Besides ensuring these parents that staff are qualified and that our centre is an engaging and safe place to enroll their children, I also always point out the benefits of children learning and playing together – something that I do not think should be underestimated.

A final implication for teaching is recognizing the importance of parents in students' lives and the role they should play in enforcing and encouraging learning outside of the classroom. Christine explains multiple times that what frustrates her is parents who don't take the time to understand what their child is struggling with and the role they could play in improving their child's learning. As teachers, what does this mean for us? Or perhaps a better question is, how do we get the importance of parental involvement in the learning process across to parents? I think a good place to start here would be to try to form a relationship with parents. Open houses, parent nights, and class blogs can all allow for teachers and parents to begin a dialogue about students and classroom learning. By beginning with informing parents of what goes on in the classroom, open dialogue between teachers and parents can be initiated. Teachers and parents can begin to form a relationship and eventually teachers can hopefully begin to make specific suggestions for parents on how to enforce learning that is done in the classroom.

### **Shortcomings**

The interview contains various shortcomings – limitations as to what can be established about Christine's knowledge about teaching and learning. One of the most significant examples of this is the lengthy conversation Christine and I had about "failing students." There are indeed certain aspects of this conversation that I feel do contain a certain degree of teacher knowledge about failure in relation to teaching and learning. Specifically, Christine discusses that not failing a

student who has not been successful in building a foundation of skills creates more problems for that student down the road. Christine explains:

“The skills are not there. If you are building a pyramid, and your base is not there, then the higher you go, the more unstable you are, the weaker you are... you collapse. So for example, my son, he doesn't read well. He doesn't learn how to read [pause]... he doesn't get the phonetics. What good is it if he is not where everyone else is, but they let him through? What does it do for him? It digs him deeper? It's not fair to him. It does a disservice to children.”

Here we can see that Christine recognizes that failing a student allows that student to identify that they need to continue to build their foundation of skills in order to move forward. Nonetheless, from analysis of the interview transcript and observations of her experiences at work, it seems that Christine's ideas of failure are almost simply a mantra. I feel that she takes the stance she does to protect herself from the many parents that give her kickback. Christine needs to build a tough skin and having a “I'm not going to back down” attitude allows her to get through the very tough situations she faces on a daily basis.

## **Conclusions**

It is evident that Christine has a certain degree of teacher knowledge. In addition, her knowledge has implications for teaching and learning in the field of recreation, and for all teachers, regardless of the industry they teach in. Loving your job, genuinely caring for your students, learning about your students to better teach them, recognizing learning difficulties at different ages, acknowledging the importance of recreation for teaching social skills, and finally encouraging parents to take more responsibility in their child's learning, are all ideas that can be applied universally to teachers everywhere. Whether you teach swimming, or math, or a second language, keeping in mind all of these pieces of teacher knowledge can help make us better teachers.