

Searching for excellence

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Daniel Coyle writing in his book *The Talent Code*, reported on two educational psychologists, Ron Gallimore and Roland Tharp. Gallimore and Tharp, who wanted to advance the reading and literacy potential for children in Honolulu. Their application led to the situation where they were provided with the resources to set up 'an experimental reading program at a laboratory in a poor neighbourhood in Honolulu.'

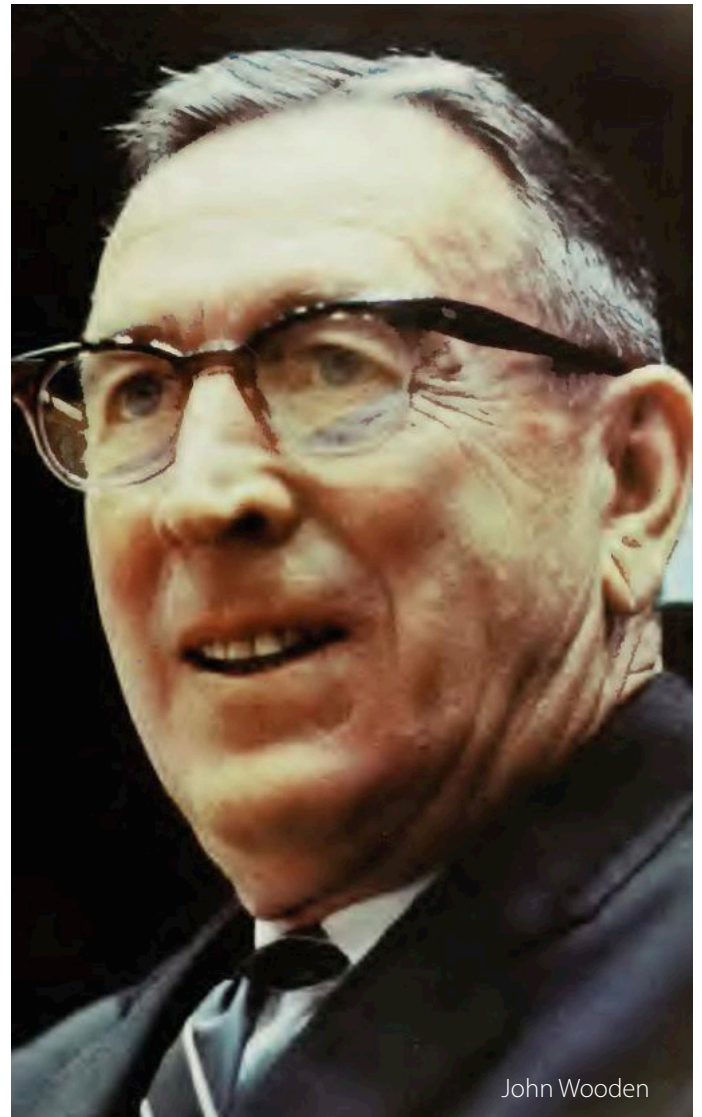
As highly skilled and knowledgeable educational psychologists, Gallimore and Tharp applied the best pedagogical theories of the day; the aim of which was to advance the reading and learning potential of each student. However, after two years of applying these 'best pedagogical theories' of the day, much to their great surprise and significant disappointment, Gallimore and Tharp found the reading and associated literacy achievements of the students they were teaching could only be categorised as being low.

Logically and appropriately, according to Coyle, Gallimore and Tharp began to question the education-based pedagogical methodology they had been applying. In their attempt to try to discover what the problem was, they decided that 'they would perform a detailed, up-close study of the greatest teacher they could find and use [these] results to help them' improve the reading and literacy outcomes of their targeted students in Honolulu.

Their search for the 'greatest' or 'best' teacher they could find unexpectedly led them, not to a teacher, but to John Wooden. Wooden was not what one would describe as being a 'classical teacher.' Wooden was, in fact, a basketball coach who had been named by ESPN (the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) in America, as 'the greatest coach of all time in any sport.' This decision was based on Wooden's coaching record. As coach, over a 12-year period Wooden won 10 NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) USA championships; seven of these titles were consecutive victories.

Within this time-period, his teams also won a record 88 consecutive games. During this time Wooden was also named national coach of the year six times. For Gallimore and Tharp it was Wooden they decided they wanted to speak to, and, if possible, collect data that would help them to develop strategies to improve the literacy learning potential of their cohort of students.

Contact was made. Much to their pleasure, Wooden agreed to meet with Gallimore and Tharp. This initial meeting progressed to where Gallimore and Tharp asked if they could observe and record what Wooden was doing; with the educational idea being so that they could better understand as to *how* and *why* he had achieved and continued to achieve his outstanding coaching results, and, of course, associated player performance outcomes. A coach self-evidently does not play the game.



John Wooden

What Gallimore and Tharp found in Wooden was an unassuming quietly spoken person who didn't present any lengthy talks or 'shouted motivational' speeches. He didn't present any extended 'chalk and talk' lectures. He was not one for either punishment or what may be referred to as presenting platitudinal praise or the offering of rewards or incentives. This fits in with the philosophy of William Hazlitt: 'Learning is its own exceeding great reward.'

What Gallimore and Tharp found in Wooden was a person who conducted intense, highly structured explicit five to 15-minute skill drills. During this time there were no lengthy



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stoppages, lectures or ‘motivational *‘you can do it, you’re the best,’ ‘we’re the best’* coaching talks.’ Whenever Wooden did stop a drill, which was not often, Wooden rarely spoke longer than from five to 20 seconds. Whenever Wooden did talk, it was for a precise purpose and the information he presented was explicitly focussed on the specific action of a skill.

What Wooden was constantly doing was providing immediate feedback that was concise, explicit, and unambiguously accurate. Coyle writes that initially: ‘Gallimore and Tharp were confused. They’d expected to find a basketball Moses intoning sermons from the mount, yet this man resembled a busy telegraph operator.’ They felt slightly deflated. *‘This was great coaching?’* they asked themselves incredulously. Even after coming to terms with this doubt and initial negative ambivalence about Wooden, and his coaching methodology, Gallimore and Tharp decided to keep on attending Wooden’s training sessions in their attempt to objectively

record and measure, with their quantitative science-based observations, as a means of trying to understand the *how* and *why*, Wooden was achieving such amazing, consistent and regular success; especially in such an unforgiving highly competitive and emotionally highly charged national elite performance arena; where success was *only* judged by one word, one result, and one outcome: *winning!*

In their quantitatively recorded observations of Wooden, ‘Gallimore and Tharp recorded and coded 2326 discrete acts of teaching. Of them, a mere 6.9% were compliments. Only 6.6% were expressions of displeasure. But 75% were pure information: what to do, how to do it, when to intensify an activity.’

As part of this process, according to Coyle, Gallimore and Tharp recorded that ‘Wooden’s most frequent forms of teaching was a three-part instruction where he modelled the right way to do something, showed the incorrect way, and then remodelled the right way.’ What was

amazing to Gallimore and Tharp, was that each demonstration by Wooden generally only took no more than seconds.

Gallimore and Tharp also observed that this ‘seconds-of-demonstration’ rarely, if at all, ever slowed down the intensity of the practice. Moreover, during most of his training sessions, Wooden had his players ‘running harder than they did in games, all the time’ and, in addition to this ‘no detail was too small to be considered’ as being unimportant. An example of Wooden’s explicit attention to detail included how the players wore their socks: ‘Wooden famously began each year by showing players how to put on their socks, to minimise the chances of blisters.’

The obvious rationale for this explicit ‘sock-wearing-information’ was to inform all of the players that incorrectly applied socks would cause blisters, and these blisters would, self-evidently, reduce practice time, player efficiency, learning time, coaching time, and potential success in each and every game played.

Wooden understood, especially in 'elite sports terms,' *winning was the only thing that mattered*. What that meant to Wooden was that the purpose of every game played, and the associated purpose of every training session only had one objective. The coaching needed to be based on one universal truth, that of advancing and continually improving skills. Ideology, petty platitudes or meaningless motivational styled statements, offered no value whatsoever. What mattered was the explicit skills and the drills; with its associated discipline, dedication, determination, intensity, frequency and duration.

However, even though the fact that the *only* goal of each game was to win, and the only purpose of each training session was to engage in skills, drills and practices that would increase the percentages of winning, Gallimore and Tharp saw in Wooden that he also understood what was of equal importance, every training session and every game had to be engaged in and played respectfully; and each and every player had to be self-motivated. All a coach can do is present the information. It is the player (who has to be totally committed) is the one who plays the game.

Applying the principles of the 'great coach' to a reading program

Gallimore and Tharp returned to their school, the Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) in Honolulu. Upon their return they immediately began to apply what they had learned during their time with Wooden. Their explanations were presented in short, explicit getting-

to-the-point demonstrations. Added to this Gallimore and Tharp informed the students that their success also depended on their own personal motivation and hard work.

Through the application of their 'new short and getting-to-the-point explicit methodology,' and associated student motivated behaviours, Gallimore and Tharp found that the reading scores began to improve, as too did the associated comprehension. In 1993, Gallimore and Tharp's KEEP project received the Grawemeyer Award, one of education's highest honours. The success of their program was chronicled in their book, *Rousing Minds to Life*. "It's not so simple as to say John Wooden made the school work – there were lots of dimensions to this," Gallimore said. "But he does deserve a lot of the credit."

Cognitive load theory

The research in the field learning has also shown that explicit teaching leads to a reduction in cognitive load. With a reduction in cognitive load, there is greater potential for learning and especially understanding to take place. Paul Chandler and John Sweller argue that an effective instructional method of information presentation, which is part of the explicit teaching process, successfully advances knowledge and understanding potential because it aims to eliminate the cognitive load of the learner.

When a learner is presented with information that is broad, and in terms of time, extended to many minutes of explanations, this leads to the situation

where learners are then generally required to 'integrate disparate sources of mutually referring information' which could include associated text, diagrams and unnecessary parallel information. The teacher, no doubt, will be thinking that their extended presentation, with its additional information will be advancing learning, knowledge and potential. However, this process will be having the opposite effect.

Such split-source information will tend to generate, what the literature refers to as a heavy cognitive load; which means learning potential and knowledge integration and, importantly, understanding will not be taking place. That is because whatever information is being presented, if learning and understanding is to take place, must be cognitively integrated. Therefore, to ensure cognitive integration happens, the teacher needs to emphasise that explicit micro step by step information presentation is transpiring. Further, Christine Edwards-Groves is of the opinion that explicit teaching helps students to be able to better monitor and, importantly, to also control, self-direct, self-regulate and self-manage their learning, when they are dealing with 'short bursts' of specifically presented information.

Once this information has been presented, in these short-explicit-bursts, it is then up to the student to do the work. As Anita Woolfolk points out it is the student who must engage in the learning process to benefit from the information being presented. The irrefutable fact is that no one can actually 'learn for someone else.'



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