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Can "Withitness Skills" Improve Instruction and Safety for Those Who Coach or Train?

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Abstract

"Withitness skills" developed by Kounin in the 1970's have been emphasized as an important classroom tool for student management and instruction. (Kounin, 1970) "Withit" instructors develop the ability to know what is going on in the classroom. Improving awareness in the classroom may reduce misbehavior and improve instruction. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how "withitness skills" may be applied to coaching and personal training to improve coaching methods, training techniques, and safety. "Withit skills" include withitness, overlapping, momentum, smoothness, group focus, behavior monitoring techniques, and the ripple effect. By improving "withit" skills" the level of skill performance may increase which may lead to more success during competition and fewer injuries.

Keywords: athletes, behavior monitoring techniques, coaching, group focus, momentum, overlapping, ripple effect, smoothness, withitness

"Withitness skills" developed by Kounin in the 1970's have been emphasized as an important classroom tool for student management and instruction. (Kounin, 1970) "Withit" instructors develop the ability to know what is going on in the classroom. Improving awareness in the classroom may reduce misbehavior and improve instruction. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how "withitness skills" may be applied to coaching and personal training to improve instruction and safety.

1. Can "withitness" be used in coaching and personal training?

Coaches and personal trainers teach skills that require constant attention and feedback. Their focus is on skill pattern performance and how the skill may be improved. In most cases, preventing misbehavior is not the primary goal; instead these professionals focus on evaluating technique, improving skill performance, and safety issues. Important "withit skills" include visual search and tracking. Coaches and trainers must be constantly searching with their eyes observing skill technique and safety issues. While auditory, visual, and kinesthetic processes are occurring, coaches and trainers will be evaluating the movement and providing feedback that may improve skill performance. An additional concern is safety. Because these skills involve performing physical movements improved safety awareness by those who supervise skills is needed. These professionals must be aware (withit) of what is happening and create a safe learning environment by preventing injuries to those who are performing skills.

2. Withitness

"Withitness," was a term developed by Kounin (Wuest. 1999) to illustrate a teacher's awareness of what was going on concurrently in the classroom. To the unsuspecting learner, it would seem as though instructors have been blessed

with a skill indicative of a rare physiological state where they have eyes located at the back of their head. Coaches and personal trainers must be aware of what is going on during practices or competition and develop anticipation skills to improve performance, assist in the process of reducing injuries to participants, and winning the game.

3. Overlapping

Kounin described overlapping as attending to two or more events at the same time. The ability to attend to multiple events may include giving a lecture while patrolling the room to prevent student misbehavior. This term has evolved into "multitasking". Coaches and personal trainers participate in multi-tasking whether in practice sessions or during competition. Additional goals for this group would include safety issues related to preventing or reducing injuries that occur during practice or competition by improving multi-tasking skills.

4. Momentum

Momentum involves the flow of the lesson. Not only does the teacher need to know what is going to happen next, but must be prepared for unexpected changes. Maintaining high levels of student interest and engagement may be challenged by a number of occurrences. Students may introduce variations in the assigned task, work mechanically on the task without giving it much thought, try to create some excitement through fooling around with a classmate, or engaging in other forms of misbehavior. Kounin suggests reducing satiation by providing students with a feeling of progress, offering students challenges throughout the lesson, and being enthusiastic. Variety reduces satiation and alleviates boredom. (Kounin, 1970) Practicing during the week to prepare athletes for competition on the week-end also requires moment. These concepts relate to feedback provided to athletes by coaches who constantly set goals for athletes and together with the athletes strive to reach those goals. Throughout this process athletes are provided feedback on skill performance or game strategies. At the same time maintaining the momentum to provide the best learning environment for those involved to be successful during competition.

5. Smoothness

Smoothness is closely related to momentum. Classroom consistency involves the transitioning from one learning activity to another without a lot of disruption. Instructors should avoid going from one task to another without direction; this may include "flip flops" where the instructor closes one subject, begins another and then jumps back to the previous subject. Kounin suggests that instructors avoid "dangles." Interruptions, or inadvertently leaving something unfinished and returning later are identified as dangles. He also suggested teachers minimize "truncation". This is experienced when the teacher is interrupted, leaves the topic and fails to return to it. (Kounin, 1970) Once again these principles relate well in coaches and personal trainers who have transitions related to physical activity. These transitions are more effective if performed with smoothness and without loss of momentum.

6. Group Focus

The focus of any educational experience involves student engagement. Lessons need to be well thought out, while the presentation of material needs to be stimulating to evoke high levels of interest. Students are enticed into the learning experience through careful planning and a basic concept of instructional design. (Kounin,1970) Planning practices and develop practice plans are equally important when organizing for competition. Some coaches believe that you play how you practice. If you have good practices leading up to competition athletes may have better performances. Most experienced coaches have the ability develop team focus and athlete engagement in addition to instilling the will to win.

Behavior Monitoring Techniques

Withitness involves knowing what is happening or what may happen. It involves preventing problems before they begin. The person incharge should:

- Always be alert to sights and sounds.
- Arrange the participants within eyesight of the coach or trainer.
- Scan the surroundings while working with individuals or small groups. When assisting one individual maintain a position where the most participants can be seen.
- Briefly acknowledge misbehavior at first detection; let others know that you know. Do not let misbehavior escalate before action is taken.
- Coaches, and trainers need to continue to improve in their ability to effectively handle two events at the same time. Do not becoming engrossed in one event and let other unnecessary events occur due to neglect.
- When instructing one group the person incharge should be able to acknowledge difficulties participants outside of the group may be experiencing. This includes handling distractions from outside the practice or training areas.

7. Ripple Effect:

Kounin believed how a teacher handles one student's misbehavior influences the other students who are not misbehaving. The end product here is to promote good behavior. This idea is an effective coaching or training tip.

Improving Safety by Using "Withit skills" In Coaching and Training

- Teach proper technique and monitor skills when performed to promote skill development.
- Use peripheral vision to detect any unusual skill movements or misbehavior when working with a group.
- While working with groups select a position on the perimeter where you can see all or the greatest number of participants.
- Stay alert at all times
- Use safety warnings at the beginning, throughout each skill taught, and at the end of the activity
- Treat and document potential injuries as soon as possible.
- Preplan emergency procedures "prepare for the worst scenario".

When introducing new skills or relearning previously acquired skills the following "withit" techniques may be use:

- Conduct demonstrations
- Provide constructive feedback
- Utilize drills to practice the skills being taught
- Provide opportunities for practical application of the skill (situations during competition)
- Develop a plan for instruction whether it is practice or competition
- Post rules for behavior, issue safety warnings, have an emergency plan

For those who work in areas of training physical skills, litigation and accountability remain a vital consideration. "Withitness" skills may not only improve skill performance, but reduce the risk of injury and liability issues.

8. Withitness skills for trainers who work in resistance training

"Withitness" is also a safety practice that involves the processes of anticipation and observation. The purpose of "withitness" is to prevent the occurrence of injuries and improve instructional techniques. One of the primary modalities of resistance training is weight training. Below is a list of "withit" techniques specific to weight training:

- Selection of weight to be lifted
- Demonstrate and teach proper technique
- Monitor posture and joint alignment (biomechanics) while lifts are being performed
- Frequently monitor stress placed on joints and lower back
- Provide opportunities to warm muscles before lifting heavy weights and cool down afterwards
- Use a step progression and progress at a reasonable rate

Do not forget weight training basics teach proper stance, grip, and lifting technique. Resistance training professionals emphasize proper technique by providing the following: demonstrations of the exercise, emphasizing techniques to prevent injury to those performing the exercises, and tips for those who spot various exercises. Additional "withit" instructions include safety warnings, demonstrations, and tips specific to each new lift for those performing lifts and their spotters.

With proper spacing, participants performing resistance training exercises may participate without injuring others. Coaches and trainers should check equipment and facilities at the start of each training session, during each session, and at the end of the session to assist in preventing accidents. Additional "withitness" skills related to weight training involve the process of observing the speed of weight and path the weight follows. Slow bar speed may indicate fatigue is prevalent and the lifter is close to failure in exercise completion. If the ends of the bar bearing the weight are uneven, the participant should stop the movement and place the weight on the floor or rack with good technique or assistance from a spotter. Then, the trainer adjusts the grip or weight and continues with the exercise. Don't forget the emergency plan.

9. Withitness skills for trainers who work in power training

Plyometric training involves the performance of skills that generate powerful muscle contractions. Before powerful contractions are initiated, a quick stretch of the muscle fibers involved should be performed. The muscle power is generated by the elasticity of the stretched muscle in its attempt to return to normal length combined with the muscle

contraction of the same muscles. Some of the critical "withitness" elements related to plyometric training include the number of jumps and the height or depth of jumps. Training progressions should first utilize a level surface, then progress from low jumps to progressively higher jumps whether jumping up or down from boxes (depth jumps) or both. The impact of surfaces and the number of foot-strikes should be considered when monitoring and developing plyometric programs. Concrete surfaces provide the highest impact; avoid performing jumps on concrete.

The coach or trainer should establish a pre-test for lower body strength utilizing the performance of 3-6 repetitions with near maximum weight and proper technique. A pretest should be completed by the coach or trainer to assist in the process of determining strength readiness for participants. Upper body plyometric exercises may be performed with medicine balls. "Withit" instructors begin by counting the number of throws and start the program with few repetitions, fewer sets, lighter medicine balls, and then progressively increase the intensity in all of the previously mentioned areas.

Spacing participants is a critical issue when utilizing medicine ball throws. It is important to constantly observe the spacing of participants for a safe training environment. When coaching or instructing plyometric activities, instructors should direct their focus on proper breathing, specific technique, step-wise progressions, provide feedback related to skill performance, and motivation. Again do not forget the basics such as proper stance and technique in the movements being used. Power training professionals emphasize proper technique by providing demonstrations of the exercise, tips to improve power skills, feedback on progress, and safety warnings.

10. Withitness tips for new coaches

For those just entering the professional field of coaching or training it is typical to want to teach at all times. A major component of effective teaching and leadership comes from one's ability to observe. Qualitative analysis is a key factor in recognizing inefficiencies in training technique or procedures. The purpose of developing the ability to perform systematic qualitative analyses of selected athletic performances and/or other human movement will validate the worth of instruction.

Through the acquisition and practice of observational "withit" skills, the facilitator will become better able to detect and correct technique faults that may compromise performance and/or result in athlete's injury. In addition, all professionals involved in human performance should stay current, be aware of the latest research findings pertaining to the biomechanics of selected sports. Remember, you do not have to teach all of the time to be successful. You will be surprised with the knowledge you will gain by employing well designed observations of your athletes. (Hinrichs, 2006)

11. Conclusions

The acquisition of "Withitness skills" may improve instruction and safety for coaches and trainers. This paper has demonstrated various ways that these skills if used properly may improve instruction and safety. The problem seems to be where, when, and how they should be taught. One suggestion would be to include these methods as part of coaching or trainers certification. Withitness principles and training certification should be taught by certified coaches or trainers with several years of experience. The process of teaching coaches and trainer's withitness skills would be enhanced by the development of labs and videos that modeled correct and incorrect methods of instruction.

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