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COMMENTARY

What John Wooden Can Teach Us

Was the 'greatest coach of the 20th century' a crafty wizard, or a master teacher?

By Ronald Gallimore

Some call John Wooden the Wizard of Westwood because his UCLA teams dominated college basketball in the 1960s and early '70s. But to that, Coach Wooden says, "I'm no wizard. I am a teacher." He says he learned to coach by applying what he learned as a high school English teacher. Coach believes the principles of teaching are the same for classrooms and courts. Teaching academics or athletics, he insists, is more effective if these fundamentals are followed. Can classroom teachers learn from this master of basketball teaching? Yes, say researchers who have studied his work.

During Wooden's final season in 1974-75, Roland Tharp and I spent 30 hours recording the coach's words and actions during practices. We were motivated by an interest in how the teaching practices of master teachers aligned with what researchers were reporting then. We wanted to expand the scope of our investigations to include case studies as well as experiments and surveys. The major challenge in case studies is finding a candidate whose credentials and accomplishments warrant a claim of master practice. We wondered, who near our University of California, Los Angeles, campus might be a credible master of teaching that we could study?

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, after his team won the NCAA basketball championship (its 10th) on March 31, 1975.
—File photo by AP

Here are the simple facts: At the beginning of the 1974-75 basketball season, John Wooden's teams had won nine NCAA championships, including seven in a row from 1967 to 1973. He won with teams of great or modest talent. The season we studied his teaching was one that many believe to have been the most challenging of his career. The fact that the 1974-75 team won UCLA's 10th NCAA basketball championship is among the greatest accomplishments in the history of intercollegiate athletics, because no one thought the Bruins that year were talented enough to win even their own conference title.

At his retirement following the 1974-75 season, John Wooden was widely regarded as the greatest teacher of basketball. In 1976, we were confident that we had selected a master teacher to study. We still are. That view was reaffirmed when he was named the greatest college coach of the 20th century by ESPN's expert panel.

Four years ago, Swen Nater (one of his former players) and I began interviewing Coach about his teaching practices. What we learned from these interviews and from observing his practice sessions in 1974-75 suggests that Wooden's principles and practices align with the findings of teaching research. It also supports the claim that he is a master teacher.

Like all researchers in any decade, Roland Tharp and I constructed in 1974 an observation code that reflected investigative concerns of the time. We wanted to know if the practices of a master teacher reflected contemporary (at the time) behaviorist ideas of effective teaching, and, if so, what form they took with highly talented and motivated students. Wooden seldom reinforced anyone in the form of praises and scolds, as we had expected. Instead, three-quarters of the teaching statements we recorded were packed with information and knowledge.

Roland and I were puzzled by how he could so quickly respond to an error with information-rich statements—what Coach himself described as "corrections," which he regarded as a positive way to teach. His corrections came two or three times a minute, and each was rarely longer than 15 seconds in duration. About 10 percent included a demonstration. He never lectured. For example, a young center hesitated after taking a rebound. He was supposed to wheel and pass the ball to begin a fast break. Coach immediately corrected him: "Pass it to someone short!" We later learned that Coach was ready with concise, timely corrections because he had carefully planned in advance what instruction the young center and others needed.

Coach teaches that "failure to prepare is preparing to fail." He learned as a young high school teacher all the things that can go wrong unless lessons are well-planned. Over the next five decades, he kept detailed records of every lesson (practice), using them to identify what did and didn't help his players learn. His approach was similar in some respects to the Japanese practice of "lesson study," which also focuses on carefully preparing instruction to address anticipated student errors and misunderstandings. The result for Wooden was fast-paced, information-rich lessons in which not a moment was wasted. When a player struggled, Coach was ready to respond. "Pass to someone short" was a byproduct of detailed practice plans. Bill Walton—a Hall of Famer and former UCLA player—once wrote that games seemed slow because Coach's practices were so fast-paced, well-organized, and challenging.

Coach kept notes on each individual player and used this information when planning practices. He planned for each player, as well as the team as a whole. He took notes on players' development, what each was struggling to learn, and prepared instruction in advance of practice. He paid special attention to the less-talented, seeking ways to keep them learning, so they remained active, engaged practice participants. His approach was consistent with these findings from research: Teachers who more frequently do classroom assessments to identify misunderstandings have students who achieve more. More-frequent progress checks help a teacher to be ready with corrective instructions, illustrations, and demonstrations. The teacher who does not anticipate student struggles can only hope that an effective correction will come to mind at the moment it is needed most.

"You can't teach knowledge you don't truly possess yourself," Wooden insists. He believes, as many do, that teachers who know their subject matter can more effectively grasp what confuses students and respond with more and better explanations, demonstrations, and examples. They have developed what Lee Shulman has called pedagogical content knowledge, or knowledge for teaching—the kind of knowledge that is comprehensible to learners.

Skills or concepts? Coach Wooden believes the former are the servant of the latter, but no less important.

Mastering knowledge for teaching does not end with college graduation. Contemporary research and professional-development standards identify continuous improvement of knowledge and practice as the key to more-effective teaching. No matter how good their preservice preparation, teachers have to keep learning once they start teaching.

Coach Wooden, then, practiced what is now a standard for high-quality professional development. For most of his long career, he chose every summer an area on which to focus his attention. He did library research first, and then systematically surveyed experts he had identified based on the results they achieved. He analyzed his survey results to discover ways to improve his plans and practices. He did this every year of his career, including his final season. When Coach urges others to continuously improve, he's preaching what he practiced, and it aligns with the standards for continuous teacher learning and development adopted by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Staff Development Council, and the Learning First Alliance.

Coach Wooden is renowned for using repetition, so that his players became automatic in fundamental skills. Less well known is his belief that automatic fundamentals are the foundation on which imagination and initiative flourish. There's a striking parallel between Coach's pedagogy and contemporary views on teaching mathematics. It is not a perfect analogy because the subject matter differs in fundamental ways. But examining the parallels may sharpen the appreciation of his approach.

Consider, for example, Coach Wooden's hope "to be as surprised as our opponent at what my team came up with when confronted with an unexpected challenge." The desire to be surprised by his players' methods of solving problems is analogous to contemporary ideas on math instruction. If students are taught only to memorize solution methods, any deviation in problem structure may stymie them. If they are taught to understand conceptually the underlying mathematics, they are better prepared to devise ways to solve problems as the need arises. Skills or concepts? Coach Wooden believes the former are the servant of the latter, but no less important.

There are many reasons students struggle to achieve and teachers to teach. Overcrowded schools, difficult neighborhoods, limited resources, and other social and economic disadvantages are among a very long list. Every citizen should join the struggle to redress these problems. But Coach Wooden also believes that, in the classroom, it is better to concentrate on what can be done than on what can't. He says: "I learned to focus on studying people, especially young people. I study the way they react, the way they are motivated, the way they are frustrated, and the way they work. This will help me discover the way they learn, and when I discover that, I'm halfway there."

Coach turned 95 in October, and he is still teaching. He often quotes a poem by an anonymous author that he first learned in the 1930s: "No written word, no spoken plea can teach our youth what they should be, nor all the books on all the shelves, it's what the teachers are themselves." During his legendary coaching career, John Wooden demonstrated that student learning and achievement are not the results of wizardry. They are the products of research, planning, continuous improvement, subject mastery, effective pedagogy, and the intangible example of a dedicated teacher.

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PHOTO: Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, after his team won the NCAA basketball championship (its 10th) on March 31, 1975.

—File photo by AP

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