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I'm a tinker-er. Unless I have the chance to take something apart -- whether it's a geometry problem, a research article, or an old computer -- the information I'm supposed to learn from it doesn't stick. This is by no means an implication that I don't require instruction. I do...very much so. Before I tinker to my heart's content, I usually need a demonstration, an example -- a clarification of the goals involved in the particular learning exercise. Then, I'll mimic until I'm sure I know what I'm doing. Thereafter, I go wherever my five senses lead me. How did this translate with my learning and teaching experiences?

Learning Experience: Volleyball -- The Overhand Serve

It was an amazing afternoon of not-as-much-pain-as-I-expected. Kristin was an awesome instructor. We went through step-by-step the proper way to serve overhand. First, she would stand next to me and demonstrate the move. Then, she allowed me plenty of time in between each move to practice. After we had gone through the movements, she watched as I attempted to bring everything together, giving me feedback on my movements. I asked a ton of questions, not just about the overhand serve but also about volleyball in general and about her career as a volleyball coach. She was extremely knowledgeable and patient. When answering my questions, she also paralleled my learning experience with those of the younger students she had coached, which was really interesting. Kristin even explained some of the physics of volleyball.

In the end, her teaching style reflected my learning style perfectly: the lesson was hands-on; she demonstrated and explained everything; and she gave me time to practice. I haven't had enough practice to go my own way yet and probably won't for a while to come, but Kristin gave me the confidence to keep trying by providing me with adequate knowledge and positive reinforcement throughout our lesson.

I had so much fun, I called up a friend that very evening and spent half-an-hour going through a series of "Did you know that..." volleyball questions. And fortunately (for my friend and I), she didn't know some of the information I was happily trying to impart to her.

Teaching Experience: Mandarin Chinese -- Ni Hao Ma?

The last time I had to teach anyone anything was in middle school. I taught a bunch of sixth graders about dental hygiene. I brought in some of those red tablets you can swish around your mouth, so that afterwards any tartar or plaque on your teeth shows up pinkish. I had to write a lesson plan and devise a back-up plan in case I began losing their attention. ...It was a seven-step lesson plan and I don't remember a wink of it. So, I was at a complete lost at how to teach Susanne to speak Mandarin Chinese.

I had asked Susanne once at the end of class whether there was anything in particular she wanted me to cover. She mentioned the tones in Chinese. Yikes. I didn't know anything about distinguishing tones in Chinese. I hear them naturally. So, I looked around for books that taught Mandarin Chinese and came upon a few books that covered sounds and tones -- I picked the ones with the pictures and the charts, and even then, it was still really complicated. I gave up on pronouncing the alphabet in Chinese and stuck to learning the different tones.

The next issue was "Where do we start?" I didn't know that either. The only thing I was sure of was that I had to teach her to ask where the bathroom was (it was during our chat together that I realized it would be good to also understand the directions that comes after asking the question). I decided to wait and ask Susanne what she wanted to know how to say. Afterall, I didn't know her very well and what I think is important might not be what she thinks is important. I didn't want to waste her time by teaching her a whole bunch of stuff she didn't really want to know.

Susanne was terrific. She was open to talking about her experiences and remembered the situations in which she would have liked to express something in Chinese. We built our lesson from those experiences, and she was really patient when I had to sit and think a while about the different

intonations. She has a great ear and was really quick at picking up on how a person can use a certain phrase in different ways.

My "method" was in many ways similar to how I learn, by demonstration, by practice, and then by asking questions. Yet, there was a great lack of structure in my lesson with Susanne, which is not something I would have entirely enjoyed as a student. I hope she didn't mind the lack of "we're going to cover this, this, and this, because of this reason and that reason." In hindsight, I should have e-mailed my intentions to have a more question-based lesson to her beforehand. (Please excuse my lack of foresight, Susanne!)

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