

LECTURE 2

Instructional Skills for Small Groups

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Instructional Skills for Small Groups

The construction of programmes following the consultation process is the main thing you will be expected to do as a fitness professional. Making sure these programmes suit the needs of the client is vital. Once created, you will also be delivering the sessions to the client to ensure they are happy with the exercises selected and understand the techniques well etc. This lecture covers all of the aspects you need to consider in terms of the skills you need as an instructor.

So what goes into this process to make it go as well as possible? We will start at the beginning with the session preparation process...

Session Preparation

Planning your programme ahead of time is important. When you're busy on a gym floor shift one of the difficult things is finding time to plan each session. Entering a session unprepared is an easy practice to fall into, but very important that you don't.

Make sure you turn up early, plan the session fully, and ensure the space and equipment you require are available. Ensure you set out your working week to allow enough time for adequate preparation for the sessions you have on your shift. Of course, there will be in-session amendments as you progress with a client. Some of your plan they will find easier than you thought, and some bits harder. However, having the session planned and ready is important as a structure to work from.

Consider any issues you know of, the equipment available, the aspirations of the client and have a contingency prepared also.

Client Preparation

Clients should be made to feel welcome, and that you are pleased to see them. A handshake or an embrace is great... whatever is appropriate for you and your client.

For a client to be fully prepared for the session ahead, you should brief them prior to arrival. If there are any specific plans such as fitness testing, they should be made aware of this too so that they can be prepared.

Clients might need to be told what kind of footwear they should wear, and to bring a towel and water bottle etc. If they have any underlying health concerns such as asthma then they should also have their inhalers with them, and you should be made aware of this.

At the very beginning of the actual session, you should outline the programme ahead, what they can expect and what you will be looking for from them. Also, you will want to carry out a verbal PAR-Q as their health status may have changed from when they completed the PAR-Q, or since the last time you saw them.

**Can you think of anything else you need to be aware of in session planning?
Maybe the time of day...will the gym be busy?**

Instructional Ability

The next thing for us to consider is our actual instructional ability. We need to ensure that our guidance, advice and plans are delivered to the client in such a manner that they are clear, concise and manageable. This will ensure the client can have a good chance of success. The best programme, poorly delivered, is unlikely to get results, yet a basic programme instructed well will likely be well-received.

For this reason we will next look at Communication...Exactly what do we need to do to make sure our programming is relayed well...?

Verbal ability - to be able to relay tasks is vital in the success a client is going to have. If the demands are put across in a way that your client understands they will get better results.

Simple and easy terms for the clients to understand are important. The term 'shoulders back and down' is an example that is easier to understand and remember rather than 'retract and depress your shoulder blades'

Motivation - is one of the main things you need to support your clients. You can increase this by making sure the delivery of your coaching is motivational - celebrate the wins and push your clients.

Teaching points - and technique cues are useful for clients as they help them to perform their exercises well. Remember to keep these cues simple and easy to remember for when clients are training on their own.

Corrections - will inevitably need to happen when a client isn't doing something correctly. Try to be positive in your delivery and highlight what they are doing well so that it isn't all negative.

You should offer easy teaching point reminders during the set and leave conversation for when your client is resting, this way you help them remain focussed.

Be generous in your corrections and adaptations. Each client is different and requires unique corrections. The important thing is to make sure your client is prepared for when they train alone.

How you deliver your corrections, encouragements or teaching points is important. You should make sure that your tone of voice matches the content of what you are saying. For example if you are praising a client, doing so in a flat, monotone way will not fit the content of what you are saying.

Visual observation - of a client's technique is something to consider. If they find visual learning easier then demonstrations may be useful.

Monitoring - you should be monitoring your client's technique at all times. You'll need to observe from different angles and vantage points to make sure you can correct errors. If you are not happy with your client's technique you should stop them and correct it. It's important to remember however, that as well as correcting them, you need to explain the corrections.

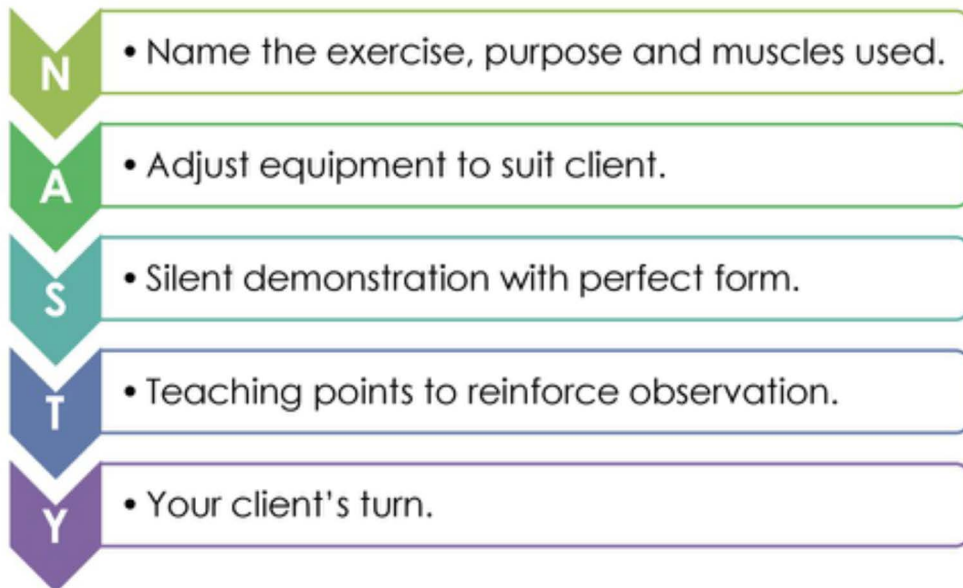
Body language - is very important in that it can enhance how you are saying things and portraying your feelings. How you stand, hold yourself and your confidence in eye contact will all help make you more engaging.

Ensuring Good Technique

Ok, so as an extension of communication we need to think about the delivery of teaching points and exercise demonstrations. It is very important that the instructor is diligent on ensuring good technique.

You will find your own way to deliver exercise technique to clients but there are also many tried and tested methods. Among them are the acronym **NASTY**.

Instructional acronym



The Three Stages of Learning New Skills

Cognitive



The first stage is the 'cognitive stage', where the beginner focuses on what they need to do and how to do it. The client closely pays attention to the feedback given and works to improve technique. This stage is usually inconsistent in terms of exercise performance and is very much a learning phase. We need to be good at recognising technique errors and correcting them.

Motor



The second stage is the 'motor stage', where after lots of practice the client's exercise performance starts to improve. There will still be an element of thought that goes into the performance, but it is becoming more 'learned'. The technique fundamentals have been established. You may need to be ready to offer good teaching points and reminders.

Autonomous



The third stage is the 'autonomous stage', where the skill has become automatic and largely subconscious. At this point you will likely be offering advanced cues and motivation, and very little in terms of actual teaching as the technique is well learned.

Spotting

In several instances it will be necessary to 'spot' your clients as they lift weights. Indeed, this may be something you do frequently while on shift. Spotting involves providing hands-on assistance in order to help the lifter avoid injury, progress in weight, and remain safe. A spotter also provides motivation while assisting the client.

As a spotter you should consider the following ...

- Communicate well with the lifter as they may need your help.
- Know when to help, and how much to help.
- Reinforce technique with 'guidance' of the weights. Make sure the client maintains control unless absolutely necessary.
- If safe, help them get past their normal 'max' if in a strength training environment.

Things you need to be an effective spotter ...

Strength

You should have the strength you need to assist the lifter. You should never need to lift the entire weight but if you did, you need to be prepared and able

Communication

You need to be in communication with the lifter throughout the lift, being attentive to them.

Position

Be in the right position to spot and make sure you are ready to assist.

Fatigue

Make sure you can recognise the signs of fatigue, for example the speed of the lift slowing down significantly.

Specificity

Make sure the way you spot is specific to the exercise. For example use an alternating grip on exercises with a bar for better grip or spotting the elbows on a dumbbell press rather than the hands.

Safety

Safety of both yourself and the lifter should be the priority.

Understand the Intention

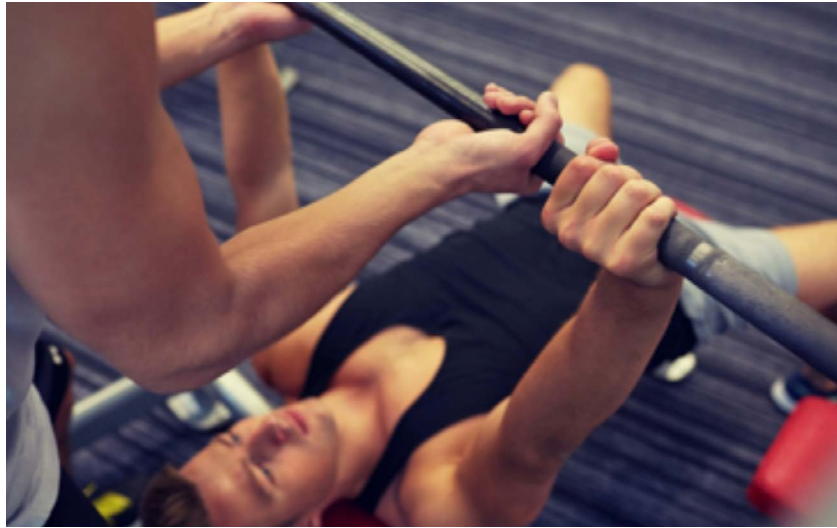
Make sure you understand the clients intended outcome before you begin, for example how many reps, time under tension etc.

What other exercises should we spot, and what ones should we avoid spotting?

We **should** spot exercises such as:

- Bench press
- Lying tricep extensions
- Dumbbell shoulder press
- Front squats
- Chest flies

These exercises all carry a risk of injury should failure occur, and all are spotted differently.



We should **avoid** spotting power exercises such as:

- Cleans.
- Snatches.
- Jumping exercises.
- Kettlebell power exercises (swings etc).

These exercises are quick and powerful and carry a risk of injury for the trainer, as well as the exerciser, if they interfere.



There will be specific situations, such as when using forced reps, or when the client is working on specific eccentric timing that you need to offer more assistance than normal when spotting. As a general rule, you shouldn't need to interfere too much with the weight or its travel path. You should limit your involvement to enough that the bar doesn't stop for too long, and certainly doesn't travel back towards the client. But make sure the client is the one doing the work.

When spotting dumbbells, you should be aware of where you should spot from and understand there is added complexity with the extra piece of equipment being used. For every exercise, a general rule will be to not impede the hands or travel-path of the lifter. Communicate well with them and if you are unsure of anything at all, ask for help...

Offering small group training sessions can be a really good way for the gym to offer clients a fun and engaging training experience. There is obviously going to be a limit to the training specificity you can offer to each individual client but there are considerable benefits to this type of environment for the client as well as the instructor. There are however, certain additional skills you may need to consider when working with groups, rather than individuals...

- **Correctional skills** – you might find it harder in a small group to offer specific correction to everyone as your attention is diluted across the group.
- **Abilities, progressions and regressions** – having a range of training options for all the ability levels you might have in a group is a challenge. You want everyone to have a good session but need to try and cater to everyone if possible.
- **Supervision** – simply being able to see everyone exercising can be difficult at times, and you need to consider the best vantage point to observe the session from.
- **Personalisation** – it can be difficult to offer specific recommendations to each client, and it is easy to become distracted with one person if they are more demanding of your time and attention etc.

With these things in mind training a small group can offer a competitive yet inclusive environment, and create a ‘team-like’ feel to the group. It is an excellent option as an instructor as it showcases your skills to the entire gym.

Closing Sessions

Finally in this section we will look at closing sessions...

Evaluating the client...

At the end of a session, you should offer some feedback to the client on their performance, what they did really well and what you will focus on with them next time, as well as what they should do between now and their next programme review. Feedback on the session will help them along their training journey. You can also gain valuable feedback from the client on how they felt the session went, and any areas they didn't enjoy, didn't feel were beneficial, or would like to do more / less of in future. They may be unsure as to how a specific exercise relates to their goals, or for example, why you have chosen to do intervals instead of an aerobic curve.

This practice is invaluable as it sets the basis of your relationship and shows the client that their input and ownership of the sessions, the process and the results is important.

Evaluating yourself...

Following the close of the session with the client and after having given feedback to them, it is important that you take a little time to run an informal session-evaluation on yourself.

This doesn't have to take long, and doesn't need to take place after every session, but if there are any parts of the session you feel didn't go as well as you would have liked you can think about how to change this in future. Maybe you didn't explain something well enough or offer correction to a specific exercise. Conversely, if there was something that worked really well, you might want to use it with other clients. A few moments reflecting on your performance, identifying areas you are happy with and those that could be improved are valuable for your long-term progression.

Keeping the gym tidy is everyone's responsibility. It may not always be possible during the session but as a rule we should clean as we go through the session. This is the best way to ensure a safe working space for everyone. Not only does this ensure a safe training environment, but it also sets a good example for other users. Following the session completion there may be a few bits that you have moved. It is important to ensure the gym is set back up the way it should be after you have finished.

