

Book Review

You Haven't Taught Until They Have Learned:
John Wooden's Teaching Principles and Practices
by Swen Nater & Ronald Gillimore
Introduction by Bill Walton
Fitness Information Technology, 2006

Reviewed by Steve Turley
California State University, Long Beach

In *You Haven't Taught Until They Have Learned: John Wooden's Teaching Principles and Practices*, authors Swen Nater and Ronald Gallimore have written a short, easily read, deceptively simple book that draws essential lessons on pedagogy from arguably the greatest college basketball coach of all time for application in the general education classroom.

From 1970 to 1973, Swen Nater was a bench player on two NCAA champion basketball teams at University of California, Los Angeles at a time when UCLA was in the midst of an unprecedented run of 10 national championships in 12 years. In addition to what he was learning in the classroom at Westwood, Nater was learning basketball lessons daily as the backup center and practice fodder for Bill Walton, the team's three-time college player of the year and a future National Basketball Association star. (Nater went on to a lengthy and successful professional career himself.) Nater later came to realize he had learned as much from coach John Wooden about the practice of teaching as he had about the playing of basketball.

About that same time, Ronald Gallimore and Roland Tharp were young university psychologists who thought there might be lessons for all educators from the success Wooden was having as a coach. Tharp and Gallimore formally studied Wooden's coaching and teaching during the

Steve Turley is a professor in the College of Education at California State University, Long Beach, Long Beach, California.

1974-75 season, arriving empirically at many of the same conclusions that Nater was drawing from his firsthand experience (Tharp & Gallimore, 1976; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004). Are there lessons to be learned from Nater and Gallimore's collaboration for today's classroom teacher?

The "lessons" of John Wooden are covered in eight succinct chapters. Chapter One starts where all good teaching begins—with students (players for Coach Wooden). For Wooden, it was important to come to know each player's unique strengths and areas of weakness. In his words, "They are all different . . . There is no formula . . . You can't work with them exactly the same way. You've got to study and analyze each individual and find out what makes them tick" (p. 1). Sound familiar? One of the interesting new pieces of information for me in this book was that Wooden began as a high school English teacher after graduating from Purdue University in 1932, and that much of his coaching practice was based on what he had learned as a classroom teacher. The quotation on treating students as individuals ends: "The same thing was true in my English classes. So you have to know the individuals you are working with" (p. 2). One of the testimonies to Wooden's focus on individuals is the reverence his former players hold for him. Nater and Gallimore include a number of anecdotes involving former players, many of them bench players who did not become famous UCLA standouts, but who have maintained lifelong relationships with their former coach. Only a teacher who cared greatly for his students could inspire this kind of loyalty.

Chapter Two discusses motivation that comes from the student focusing on reaching his or her potential. Wooden attributes to his father his belief that one should strive not to become better than someone else, but to become the best that one can be at whatever the task is. Thus, for Wooden, motivation is internally directed: "Success is the peace of mind which is a direct result of the self-satisfaction in knowing that you have made the effort to become the best of which you are capable" (p. 25). Conveying this to players was important in Wooden's system, since he only played seven or eight of the 12 players on the roster. The athletes who knew they would not see much playing time had to be motivated toward self-improvement each day for practice to be meaningful and, equally important to Wooden, for them to make their contribution to the success of the team.

Chapter Three, "It's What You Learn After You Know It All That Counts Most," discusses Wooden's approach to research. We do not usually think of basketball coaches as researchers, or even having much of a body of research upon which to draw, but Wooden valued improving his knowledge of the game, of his players, and of his coaching methods. As he says, "If I'm through learning, I am through" (p. 41). But for Wooden,

his own learning was not primarily for himself. Rather, “The purpose of self-improvement is, of course, to help students improve. [The coach] must continually be exploring for ways to improve himself in order that he may improve others . . .” (p. 43). Early in his career (1948), Wooden began an off-season regimen of selecting a topic to research, for example, rebounding or free throw shooting. As Nater and Gallimore write, “The goal was to uncover all he could learn about a specific subject, draw conclusions, and apply it to his teaching” (p. 43).

Chapter Four, “You Can’t Teach What You Don’t Possess,” underscores the value of knowing and delivering the content of the curriculum. Nater and Gallimore discuss Wooden’s deep knowledge of basketball and his ability to teach fundamentals as well as nuances of the game. In this chapter they also go into some detail describing Wooden’s practices, i.e., his classroom teaching. Drawing on Tharp and Gallimore’s (1976) empirical study of UCLA’s practices during the 1974-75 season, they describe how Wooden used current learning theory in his teaching, e.g., positive reinforcement and modeling. However, contrary to what they expected to see based on their background as psychologists, Wooden also ran very tightly timed practice sessions that followed a detailed plan from which he rarely deviated, and during which the intensity level was kept high. Nor did they expect to see the quantity of didactic teaching that occurred: “He packed into every practice and every sentence an enormous amount of information. Wooden was teaching a rich basketball curriculum and delivered information at precisely the moments it would help his students learn the most” (p. 58). He also demonstrated a strong belief in immediate error correction, whether it was while the whole team was together or during his one-to-one work with individual players.

Readiness is the theme of Chapter 5, “Failure to Prepare is Preparing to Fail.” In this chapter the authors describe Wooden’s dedication to planning and begin to explore more deeply his pedagogy. He would spend as many as two hours each morning creating, revising, and finalizing the plan for an afternoon practice that would last about the same length of time. In the off-season he would design plans for the entire upcoming season, sketching yearly, weekly, and daily plans that would be revised as implementation drew closer. Nater and Gallimore discuss eight principles Wooden followed to organize instruction: practice fundamentals before creativity, use variety within regularity, teach new material in the first half of the session, use quick transitions, start simple and increase the complexity, “condition” learners to the classroom, curriculum and pedagogy, end on a positive note, and avoid altering a plan during a lesson.

Although each of the eight principles earns several paragraphs of explanation by Nater and Gallimore, two deserve to be looked at here:

fundamentals before creativity and avoid altering a lesson plan. Wooden firmly believed the fundamentals need to be mastered, practiced, and reviewed constantly. End of the season practices, when his teams were preparing for an NCAA tournament opponent, featured drills on fundamental skills similar to those practiced at the beginning of the season. For Wooden, drilling was important if the fundamentals were to become automatic. The authors write that “coaches and classroom teachers . . . sometimes associate (drill) with mindless, boring repetition in which there is no opportunity for students to learn concepts or exercise initiative or imagination” (p. 76). For Wooden, “Drilling created a foundation on which individual initiative and imagination can flourish” (p. 76). In other words, without grounding in the fundamentals of the discipline, higher order work cannot be done with much initiative, imagination, or individuality. Following Wooden, the often heard phrase “drill and kill” might more aptly be “drill and skill,” with skill being the attribute that enables the student to transcend the routine and reach realms of acting or learning not otherwise possible.

Wooden also held to the principle of not altering his practice plan during implementation. Although he made notes during practice of what worked or did not, and what might be modified or discarded, the time for revision was after practice. Change was discussed with the assistant coaches at the next day’s planning session. Rather, Wooden felt that problems that arose during a particular drill or activity in practice would only be exacerbated by an ad hoc change that would interrupt the careful planning and sequencing of the lesson, and risk leading to more problems than were originally raised.

Chapter 6, “The Laws of Teaching and Learning,” centers on Wooden’s pedagogy. At the heart of Wooden’s educational practice was his goal for all his players to be “creative, confident problem-solvers” (p. 89). Wooden wanted his players to be so well prepared and automatic in their fundamentals that they could successfully adjust to any situation they faced during a game. As Wooden says, he “wanted to be as surprised as our opponent at what my team came up with when confronted with an unexpected challenge” (p. 90). Do not all teachers wish their students to leave the classroom well grounded in the curriculum and ready to use it in unforeseen ways for undetermined personal reasons? Wooden’s basic teaching theory was whole-part-whole: introduce the big concept, break it down into its constituent parts, then re-construct the whole with a new awareness of its meaning and use. Within the whole-part-whole framework, Nater and Gallimore write that Wooden’s method included three pedagogical “laws”: explanation/demonstration, imitation/correction, and repetition.

When introducing a new play, for example, Wooden would first provide the purpose and movement of the entire play through explanation and demonstration. Then players would participate in activities that isolated each part of the play. At the appropriate moment, players would come back together and work on the whole play again, now with the benefit of having practiced various parts of it. During practice on the individual parts of the play, Wooden (or an assistant coach) would imitate the desired movement and immediately correct an error while players practiced the action. That is, Wooden “would not wait to correct an error because he believed the context of the correction would be lost unless done immediately” (p. 92). Drawing on Tharp and Gallimore’s (1976) study, the authors note that 75% of the information Wooden gave at practice was coded as “information about the positive way to do something in a particular context” (p. 93). Tharp and Gallimore were surprised that Wooden did not praise or scold players much. When asked about this, Wooden replied, “I believe that giving lots of information is the positive approach. I believe in the positive approach” (p. 93). Wooden’s last “law,” repetition, was necessary to develop the automaticity he felt was important for a player to move beyond fundamental soundness to creative and imaginative play. The goal was to perform “an operation with absolutely no conscious thought of bodily movements” so that physical movements would be second nature and concentration freed “to make multiple, instantaneous decisions” (p. 96).

In chapter 7, “You Haven’t Taught Until They Have Learned,” Nater and Gallimore return to the student as the center of learning, and to assessment of student work as the measure of learning and, therefore, as the measure of a teacher’s success. This chapter is not a discussion of standardized testing and whether or not student performance on tests is indicative of a teacher’s ability to teach or of a student’s learning. The message is much broader, and deeper, even as it is simpler. That is, Wooden never thought it was enough to simply present the “content” of his coaching, but felt his players had to demonstrate their learning through performance before he was satisfied that what he “taught” was learned. Without a tangible sign of learning, Wooden felt he had not yet effectively taught his content. As he says, “Fundamentals and conditioning are important . . . but, since I’m preparing them to play, I must have them play, compete, and test the things being presented. In other words, I must put them in competition to see if I’ve taught them” (p. 109).

There is content and there is pedagogy, but above all there is the person of the teacher. The final chapter discusses Wooden’s foundational belief that “It’s what the teachers are themselves” (p. 119) that is the most critical attribute of a teacher. For Wooden, teaching is essentially

a moral and ethical enterprise embodied in the values, beliefs and actions of the teacher—and he “always tried to teach by example” (p. 119). The effect of this example is evident in the quotations from several of Wooden’s former players and colleagues attesting to the enormous impact, intended and unintended, he made on their lives with which the book concludes.

In this review I have sought to give a flavor of Wooden’s teaching principles and practices as Nater and Gallimore have portrayed them in an attempt to entice readers into the pleasures of this book. What I have not done is draw the lessons for teachers inherent in Wooden’s coaching. Nater and Gallimore do this to a certain extent throughout the book; Nater, in particular, drawing on Wooden’s principles and practices in his work as an algebra teacher and coach. But these lessons are not difficult to ascertain for experienced classroom teachers. Teachers will find many similarities between Wooden’s ways of teaching and what they learned in their preservice programs and in their subsequent classroom practice. There will be familiar points of reference as well as points leading to new teaching experiences. Readers will draw their lessons from Nater and Gallimore’s description of Wooden’s coaching practice long before the authors make those connections explicit. One worthwhile lesson—which will be new for some, re-learned for others—is that great teachers follow fundamental beliefs and principles that are applicable across time, generations, and content. This is a book that can be read profitably by teachers in training, teachers in their induction years, and veteran teachers. The lessons are venerable, and always reward review.

References

- Gallimore, R., & Tharp, R. G. (2004). What a coach can teach a teacher, 1975-2004: Reflections and reanalysis of John Wooden’s teaching practices. *The Sports Psychologist, 18*(2), 119-137.
- Tharp, R. G. & Gallimore, R. (1976). Basketball’s John Wooden: What a coach can teach a teacher. *Psychology Today, 9*(8), 74-78.