

Eight Tips for a Great Health Lesson

By Melissa Jensen

One of the goals of a physical education and health education teacher is to help students acquire the knowledge necessary for lifetime health. However, there is rarely enough time for teachers to cover all the required content. Often, health is only an “add-on” class to the traditional physical education lesson and consists of only a few random lessons dedicated to this important area. Consequently, students may not necessarily gain the knowledge they need to achieve lifelong health. Whether one is a new teacher or a seasoned professional, learning (or being reminded of) a few tips and tricks to teaching core health concepts quickly can be beneficial. The ideas presented here are not new, but sometimes seeing them together can help ignite an idea that will transform a lesson.



1. Student-Learning Targets

Alice: *Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?*

The Cheshire Cat: *That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.*

Alice: *I don't much care where.*

The Cheshire Cat: *Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.*

(Carroll, 1865)

Students need direction; they need goals to know where they are going (Seidel, Rimmel, & Prenzel, 2005). While it is common to post learning objectives on the board, the information given needs to be more than a schedule of what is happening in class on a given day. Students want to know what they will be learning, not just what teachers are teaching. To be successful and take ownership of their learning, students should know the expectations.

Learning targets need to be written in “student” language they can understand. If the learning target is in content jargon, only a few students may understand what is being required (Moss & Brookhart, 2012). Learning targets should be measurable so students know if they have reached the target. If a student learning target states, “Students will know the health-related fitness components,” how will students gauge if they have met the requirement? Will they need to recite the fitness components, recognize them from a list, and define them? How many fitness components do the students need to know?

Make sure students have a way to assess their learning. Here is an example of a better learning target: “I will develop an activity that correctly uses three of the five health-related fitness components.” This target uses language students can understand, and it gives them a measurement to assess their learning. Share the learning target with students at the beginning of and throughout the class. It helps students connect the lesson activity to what they need to know and be able to do.

2. Applicable Content

Lesson content should be applicable to students. Teachers all have a topic that interests them most and that they love to teach. Unfortunately, the topic may not be something students care about or may not be relatable to them. Examine the community and school to learn what it is students most need to know/do to improve their health. It may be smoking or drug use, violence or bullying. Once it has been determined what students need, make sure the approach of the topic is applicable.

A good example might be to talk about reasons not to use e-cigarettes. Students may be uninterested when the negative effects are only visible in the years to come. What will happen to students 30 years in the future may have little impact on their choices today, and just knowing the content of e-cigarettes may not affect their decision to smoke. Instead, have students calculate how much it will cost them to smoke 10 mL/week for an entire year. Students may be more likely to care about the amount of money they are spending, which can help influence them to make the healthy choice of not smoking.

3. Student-Centered Teaching

Instead of the teacher standing in front of a class and dispensing knowledge and information, have students research the topic; see what they can discover. If necessary, the teacher can help guide them in the right direction. There is a difference in student participation when *they* are driving the lesson. Help students learn how to use technology in an educational setting to find answers to questions. Push students to take an active role in their education. Students may provide input not only on the topics to cover in class, but also on how they want to learn them. Do not be afraid to give up some control.

4. Student Engagement

If students are not interested in the presented topic, they are less likely to assimilate the concept. Get students involved! The lesson should grab the students’ attention and hold it for the entire class period. Be creative, try new things, get students moving, and think outside the box. Be careful to not just do fun and exciting activities. Directly connect the activities to the student learning targets. This profession has the chance to affect change that can last a lifetime. Make this class the one students remember.

5. Use Several Activities

It has been suggested that 10- to 15-minute increments of learning are better for information assimilation (McKeachie, 2002). Breaking up the class period into several different sections or activities creates natural brain breaks, which increases the likelihood for content retention. A bonus of having several activities during a class is that a greater number of students are likely to remain on task.

6. Skills-Based Content

Educators want students to know what they should do. The goal is to get students healthy for their entire lives. This requires the ability to execute health-enhancing skills effectively. The National Health Education Standards (Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards, 2007) describe skills students should acquire to have a health-enhancing lifestyle. Students need to know more than just how underage drinking is a health risk behavior; they need to develop refusal skills they can use to say “no” to alcohol use. Students should be given ample time to practice skills so that they feel comfortable using them in everyday life. Learning to perform health-enhancing skills should be the focus.

7. Assessments

We need to view assessments as driving instruction, not just data for teacher evaluation, administrations or accreditation. How will teachers know if students have learned the material, if more time is needed on a concept, or even if there is a need to

reteach the concept? If the goal is to produce students who can make health-enhancing choices throughout their lives, teachers must make sure it happens. Assessments can be as simple as asking questions and observations. Using the learning targets as assessments at the end of class is a great way to tie the lesson all together.

8. Role Modeling

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Don’t say things. What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary” (Tilton & Rusk, 1991). Although not related to a specific lesson, educators of physical activity and health should be aware of the nonverbal messages they are sending their students (Baghurst, 2015). It is important for teachers to model the behaviors they are teaching so that students can easily recognize the skills and content they are learning from their teachers.

Conclusion

Educators strive to transform students into healthy and physically literate individuals, and it is important to use the little time available as efficiently as possible. These eight tips, while not groundbreaking, can contribute to the organization of a lesson and allow for the greatest opportunity for student success.

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