

Interview with Dr Sara Ashworth

*After high school and undergraduate studies, Sara earned her MA from the University of Mississippi and an EdD from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. From 1987-2008, Dr. Sara Ashworth taught the **Spectrum of Teaching Styles** in the Department of Elementary Education at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). In the first four years, she received every teaching award given at FAU, including the University Distinguished Teacher of the Year Award. In 1996 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the Faculty of Sport and Health Science from the University of Jyvaskyla in Finland.*

Andy: Good Afternoon Dr Ashworth. It's a pleasure as a PE professional to meet an expert in the most widely used framework to teach PE worldwide. Also, on behalf of the Singapore Physical Education Association, we warmly welcome you to our Island and thank you for granting us an interview on such short notice.

To start off on a light note, I am going to ask you a question which you are likely to have received many times. As an educator, which style of teaching do you lean towards? (Could I be bold enough to ask why?)

Sara: To be frank, the idea of 'which style is my favourite' actually goes against the very basic principle of the spectrum of teaching styles. Each and every one of the teaching styles are equal in their importance.

The correct question rephrased would be, "Which teaching style must a beginning teacher show competence in?" Teachers may not be able to immediately show competence in every one of the teaching styles, but they need to be fully aware of and be able to design lessons that include students regardless of the teaching style used; therefore, the Inclusion Style of teaching is critical. My opinion is that every teacher should know every style from A to H. But Style E, the Inclusion Style should certainly be in the early training phase and the key style that teachers should practise and practise until they get it.

Let's use a classic rope test as an example. We ask a class of students to jump over a rope, setting it low to promote success first. As students start gaining confidence, we raise the height of the rope gradually. We then start seeing students of varying abilities and some students start to experience failure.

How then does the Inclusion Style come in? We slant the rope. We have now created an opportunity so that the task is manipulated according to height. All learners, independent of their level of competence in their ability to do the task, can now be included and engaged in developing the task. The learners are continuously challenged via this classical design. We need to use a language to encourage learners to attempt the task at their level of performance, thus explaining that there are now 'less difficult' and 'more difficult' tasks so all can be included. The factor that makes it more difficult or less difficult is the same, height. Therefore, we have created a situation whereby students regardless of their level of emotions or skill, can continue to develop because they are included in the task.

If future teachers cannot analyse tasks to identify the factors that make tasks more difficult or less difficult, we will continue teaching content from a single standard approach which will result in "exclusion" because all students cannot perform every task on the same level. Each and every one of the

styles promotes a different thinking process. The Inclusion Style manipulates the degree of difficulty so learners can be included. Once we master the structure of the styles, we can take the philosophy of one style and integrate it into other styles. The Inclusion Style is applicable in so many situations and therefore it can help so many different learners.

Andy: Having said that, the rage is all about student-centric learning today and styles like the guided discovery, convergent discovery, learner initiated and self-teaching styles are very much the focal point of how teachers craft their lesson. What are your thoughts about this?

Sara: That is a conversation in pedagogy in current times. Get away from the command style and move towards all the discovery styles. If we have students only learning in the discovery styles, we are going to have kids with a lot of imbalance. It is not possible to live only in the discovery style on a daily basis. Life is also about routines and predictable expectations. If there is only one message that I can convey, it would be: No one style is better than the other. Value depends on our desired learning intent. If you are teaching motor skills, you can do discovery all you want but there will still be significant gaps in performance and development. Motor skills requires repeated memory practice after discovering the mechanics of a move. We have to have cooperation and compatibility between both sides of the spectrum. We have to know when to use discovery and when to use memory. It is about being able to shift from one style to another based upon the needs of the learner, the needs of the content and even the needs of the logistics. The notion that there are teacher-centric and learner-centric styles is a total misnomer from the spectrum's point of view. A professional teacher always demonstrates a learning-centric approach to teaching—independent of the teaching style in focus.

The learning community has always deemed teacher-centric as bad due to the lower cognitive operations and lack of critical thinking. But this is not true. Memory is critical and it serves as a platform for discovery thinking. Do you know what Alzheimer's Disease is? Next time you think creativity and discovery are where we want to lead our learners all the time, ask an Alzheimer's patient which cognitive operation they value more: Memory or Discovery? I'll take memory any time.

The Spectrum aims to develop and expand the capacity of the learner to learn in different ways. To do that, we have to teach in different ways. The names of each style represent what they develop. The command style is not: "I command you to do this, so you do it now or you are in trouble". The command style develops precision performance and the learners' cognitive capacity to command their memory and movement so that they can recall information with automaticity. Each style develops a significantly different set of learning objectives. For example, we want learners to have automaticity when they drive, we don't want them to check the rear mirror only when they are told to do so. Look at aesthetics like theatre, dance, singing and even the military band, they all require a precision performance. And that is the command style at work. The command style is as gentle and nurturing and encouraging as the teacher who is teaching it. The styles are neutral in terms of temperament. The teacher brings the temperament into the behaviour, into the teaching experiences.

In Singapore, you are aware of the importance of teaching values. Every teaching styles promotes its own set of values. Each style develops values on each and every one of the domains of development:

social, physical, cognitive and affective. We are developing the human being just as we are developing content. They are not two separate things. And this is one of the greatest misnomer about pedagogy. Every teaching style intrinsically teaches both. When we teach using the command style, we are teaching conformity, respect for the group, precision and accuracy of content. I really hope teachers can hear this, "Every teaching style has a set of objectives in subject matter and in behaviour."

Andy: This year marks the Spectrum theory's 50th Anniversary celebration. I hope you had a good time at the AIESEP 2016 International Conference. I'm quite sure this was well discussed during the conference: 50 years later, how will the Spectrum keep itself relevant in today's context? Will it evolve, will it remain status quo, or will it make way for a redefined set of framework that govern our teaching styles?

Sara: The Spectrum and I are the same. We hope we are still around and we haven't a clue what's going to happen. What I do know is that the Spectrum deals with a universal structure that is not based on idiosyncrasies but a unifying theory. Most of the other ideals are part of the whole, Mosston identified the skeletal system, the fundamental structure that includes decision making, creativity, memory learning, discovery learning etc. that fit into the structure of teaching. And because of its universal structure, it has the potential to linger. Kind of like gravity. The Spectrum is fundamental to human beings. It was discovered, not created by Mosston.

As long as people make decisions, as long as computers do not take that ability from us, there might be room for the Spectrum to survive the technology world. But when technology takes that ability from us, schools will become irrelevant, Spectrum will be irrelevant because we would all be controlled by somebody... or something else.

Because the Spectrum deals with humanity, I have the feeling that it is going to expand tremendously. The landmark styles are highlights, milestones and examples. It is now up to the teacher to take that decision structure and design other episodes that would meet the needs of the students and the content.

Andy: To what extent do you think the Singaporean Education System has adopted the Spectrum of teaching styles and how do you think we could do better?

Sara: I have been very honoured to witness your Singaporean Physical Education Teachers carrying out lessons in both Primary and Secondary Schools. The heartbeat of any theory is the fidelity of implementation. I am so honoured to know that not only is the Spectrum so respected, but also being implemented here. After about 50 years of working with the Spectrum, it's great to receive such lovely feedback from you all. I know that the policy makers are more aware of the Spectrum and the implications of it. And I understand their intent is to see how it can be used with a greater degree of fidelity.

In terms of the teachers' knowledge and awareness of it, I feel there is a gap between those who know and those who do not know how to use it yet. You have a superb understanding of content sequencing and consistency amongst the teachers in the content of the subject. But what hasn't been stressed is how the content is delivered. Teachers need to understand HOW they want learners to be engaged in

the subject matter. Our teaching styles affect the students' engagement level. Teachers need to realize that there are different teaching behaviours. And these different approaches will offer the learners different developmental experiences.

A typical lesson involves giving learners a task and getting them to practice. When you say, "Class, we are going to work in groups". That is still not a different teaching style, because we have not told them HOW they are going to work in groups. Teachers need to be specific in giving students their behaviour expectations—HOW are they to interact in the content and with other students? The more we learn about the landmark styles, the more we can create a variety of alternative learning experiences for learners.

Andy: If you were to give the Singaporean PE educator advice on crafting his/her lesson by injecting effective ideas from your travels, what would be the top 3 tips you would give us?

Sara: My advice would be that the decision makers need to slow down on imposing multiple projects that teachers need to do. Teachers need to be given the latitude to develop their strength in teaching. There have been so many programs coming along in the pipeline and teachers haven't the time to learn so many new ideas. The money that comes and goes in education is enormous. Unfortunately, the result is not as good as the money that comes and goes. Instead of having a 'versus' approach to teaching, why not readjust our thinking so that we have a unified understanding of teaching. We could include all diverse concepts instead of dividing and separating all the ideas. The Spectrum has evolved from a 'non-versus' approach to teaching rather than a 'versus', competitive approach.

This allows us to take the goodness of the variety of teaching and put them into a unifying system whereby teachers and students can reap the benefits and so teachers don't have to discard everything they have learned just because a new idea has come along. In music you have notes, and those notes are consistent. Musicians do not have to learn new notes and patterns for every composition they play, so why do teachers have to throw away their understanding of teaching with every new program that comes along? We need to have some kind of understanding about the *structure of teaching* so we can have a system that includes new ideas and allows them to cumulatively advance our educational system.

Andy: In the next 50 years, what challenges do you foresee the PE educator facing in using the Spectrum of Teaching Styles and what advice would you give to the aspiring PE educator?

Sara: The role of the teacher is to develop people. This focus is needed right now more than ever. Thus the teaching styles are needed more than ever, because the Styles talk about developing people. People learn to make decisions. People learn to build social relationships. We need to give young people, experiences in humanity.

Frankly, for the physical education community, if there is anything that I can impress upon them, it would be this. If our profession is going to survive in schools, we must do more than teach basketball. We must teach learners what our field is about and what it is that only our field can do in schools. We need to create a "movement identity". We need to help students learn about movement, learn the beauty of the body as a moving object, and how that movement leads them through a wonderful life, if

they are lucky enough to have movement. Let them experience a day of no movement and then create an environment where we can teach them about movement. They are probably not going to do basketball when they become adults, but we do need to teach them to have a reverence and appreciation of the movement that their body can do so they can lead a longer and healthier life.

Physical Education is the only subject in school that teaches such a wide developmental approach. Every activity that we do includes physical, social, cognitive and affective development. So much so we should be the stars in schools!



Dr Sara Ashworth with Mr Andy Chua on her left and Ms Helen Low on her right.

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