Professor as Student: A Gym Perspective

By Billie Hara

Earlier this summer, I joined a nationally-known health club. Working out daily and having numerous personal trainers show me the finer art of weight lifting has taught me much about the art and skill of my profession as an educator. I did my research on this gym. I knew what I wanted to achieve, I understood the long-term nature of my goals, and I understood the limitations of my situation (that I wouldn't suddenly transform into a super-model). I knew that I wasn't in shape enough to be a gym standout, but I was determined to work the hard and achieve the goals I'd outlined for myself.

Yet the style of teaching I received at this gym wasn't what I needed. I wanted to be challenged, pushed. I wanted my body to be sore at the end of each workout. I wanted to know that I was working as hard as I could. I wanted to know that the trainers (trainers I paid to see) believed in my abilities as much as I did. I do want to be fair, though: maybe this style of teaching works on other types of individuals. (**Self-Disclosure**: I'm middle aged, I'm overweight, and I'm female. I may not be the typical health club customer.) While there is nothing wrong with being a member of any of the overweight, middle-aged female club, people make assumptions about me based on these markers, assumptions that—in this case—were grossly incorrect.

While experienced in what they do and knowledgeable about how being strong and fit has worked for them, most of the trainers I worked with were not good teachers. I needed them to share their knowledge with me about lifting weights, about the balance of working out different parts of the body. I needed encouragement when I felt unsure of my abilities. Yet they made comments that could be offensive or at least insensitive. Among them:

- **Trainer #1** (after asking why I was at the gym but not waiting for my answer): "So, little lady, you want to fit into a special occasion dress in a few weeks, right?"

- **Trainer #2** (after working with me for a few weeks and after I asked for more strenuous exercises than the ones he gave to *all* elderly gym visitors): "Oh, you don't want to do anything other than what I'm teaching you. You aren't good enough to advance like that."

- **Trainer #3** (after I'd asked her <u>the location</u> of a particular weight machine): "You need to make sure you use this machine carefully, as you could get hurt. Make sure you don't add weight before you are ready, and start with 5lbs at a time. If a man is around, ask him to spot you. Make sure your form is proper, and here's the way to do that: just watch me." She never once made eye contact with me.

- **Trainer #4** (after I'd I mentioned to her I liked the muscle definition in her arms): "Take a look at this photo," she said. She showed me a photograph of a heavyset woman and a baby. "This was me 10 months ago. Don't you want this?" She stands up and moves her hand like Vanna White, showing me her backside. "Don't you want to be like me?"

- **Trainer #5** (while I was holding a barbell weighing 75 lbs. above my chest): "I have to take this phone call [on his Bluetooth device], just hold that position. I'll be back in a minute."

- **Trainer #6** (after I was late for a training appointment): "I don't have time for you now; you are late. I'm a busy man." I still had 15 minutes left in the 30-minute training session I'd already paid for.

- **Trainer #7** (after rushing through my training session because she took a lot of time showing me photographs of herself): "Go over and work the flydeck and adjust the machine to your maximum resistance. Make sure you feel the burn in your pecs and tell me later what secondary muscle group it worked." (I didn't know which machine was the "flydeck" machine and I was just marginally aware of my "pec.")

The comments these trainers made weren't awful comments by themselves (OK, maybe some of them were), but as standalone comments—without other contextual information—they don't mean much and combined with the positive feedback I received from others, coupled with my own determination, I could ignore most of these unfortunate turns of phrase. Additionally, some of the comments were truly intended to be helpful. The trainers probably didn't mean to be patronizing . . . even after I told them that their comments did not support the goals I had for myself.

What does all of this have to do with you, oh higher education professionals?

I wonder how many of us teach the way these trainers did, unintentionally offensive? Rude? Insensitive? Patronizing? Have you ever:

Made incorrect and negative assumptions about why a student was in your class and that student's ability to perform the work, assumptions based on gender, race, class, age, or physical ability?

- Told a student that she wasn't prepared to do more even if she had the motivation and skills to do so?

- Simplified instructions to a procedure (theory or concept) to such a degree that a five-year old would understand it (and your student was an adult)?

- Assumed that students want to be like you (because, you know, you are so *amazingly awesome*)?

- Told a student that other calls (other students, other work) were more important than working with him right at that moment?

- Cut a short appointment even shorter because a student was late and you were insulted?

- Used terms and concepts that were above a student's level of understanding, without asking the student if she understood?

What many of these statements have in common, and what they have to do with my gym experience, is the faultiness of making quick assumptions, of not *asking* a student what she needs and if we are helping her achieve her goals. If a student has a professor who exhibits some of these behaviors, we chalk it up to a bad semester for the professor or a situation that's unfortunate for a student. We justify this because part of a university/college education for students is learning how to navigate less-than-perfect scenarios, right? However, what happens when, for example, all of a student's professors exhibit these kinds of behavior? We lose the student. They drop the course; they drop out of the semester; they change schools.

The Collective Experience: It's not our responsibility to troll our colleagues' classes looking for the incorrect assumptions they make about students, as we're doing good to monitor our own behavior in classes. However, it might behoove us all to recognize that students usually have more than one professor a semester and that their *collective experience* in school will encourage them to stay enrolled at the university or college or it could encourage them to leave. (As an aside, I changed health clubs after my collective experience at this gym.)

So how about you? How do you avoid making assumptions about students in your classes? If you have made incorrect assumptions about students and their abilities, how have you redeemed yourself? As the semester begins, how might you bring this idea of "collective experience" to your colleagues and departments? Is it our responsibility– as individual professors– to think about a student's *collective experience*? Please leave comments and suggestions below.

SELECTED COMMENTS

One final point: anyone who has endured military boot camp knows that it is certainly possible to learn in an environment that is anything but ego-friendly. I certainly wouldn't advocate screaming at college students while using expletives and questioning their parentage and I.Q. level as a new teaching technique, but the fact that it works, in an arena where learning your job has potential life and death consequences, is a pretty strong indicator that young people will not universally crumble at the slightest offense.

---

sugar_lumps: Your point about boot camp is a good one. And while mental toughness will help a student or military recruit overcome obstacles, what matters most is simply desire. Do they want it bad enough? Desire is what gets us where we want to be. The author's real strength was her desire – and why she saw past at least 7 different trainers. How to put that kind of desire into students is the more fundamental question we have to answer. Student responsibility must take over at some point.