

The Finishing Touch: Tracing the Anatomy of Expert Lesson Closures in Sport

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Introduction

In conceptualizing and discussing the instructional process, educationists generally conceive of a lesson as consisting of three main phases: the set induction (introduction), the body, and the closure (e.g., Rink, 2002; Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000). An understanding of effective teaching practices emerges, in part, through investigations of the instructional behaviors of successful teachers in each of these phases (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). However, though it is believed by some to be the most critical phase (Schempp, 2003), the closure remains largely unexplored as a lesson domain and understudied as a teaching function. Not only are studies of the lesson closure scarce in the related literature, but virtually nothing is known about what effective teachers say and do in closing a lesson.

Recent research from the expert teaching paradigm offers an initial glimpse into the nature and role of the lesson closure in the context of sport instruction (Baker, Schempp, Hardin, & Clark, 1998). Moreover, this research suggests a model for best practices related to closing a lesson, given the outstanding record of success required to earn the title "Expert Teacher" as it is defined in the literature base (Berliner, 1986). In their study, Baker et al. found that expert golf instructors routinely employed several closing behaviors when teaching, which included preceding the closure with a successful student performance, signaling the beginning of the closure, reviewing the key points covered in the lesson, and providing drills for student practice. The prevalence of these behaviors in the experts' lessons indicates their significance in the teaching-learning process and underscores the need to further investigate expert closures.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to trace the anatomy of expertly delivered lesson closures in sport. Specifically, the length, sequence, and content of expert teachers' lesson closures in tennis and golf was examined.



Methods

Participants

Twenty-one expert male tennis instructors from the Professional Tennis Registry (PTR) and 21 expert female golf teachers from the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) were selected as participants for the study. The instructors were selected for qualities identified by Berliner (1986; 1994) as characteristic of expert teachers, which were adapted to the context of this study and included (a) 10 or more years of teaching experience, (b) PTR or LPGA certification, (c) formal recognition for the quality of their instruction (e.g., National Teacher or Coach of the Year), and (d) peer and student recognition for outstanding teaching. The authors' IRB approved the study and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected as part of several other investigations of expert sport instruction by members of the University of Georgia Sport Instruction Research Laboratory. Each instructor was videotaped teaching a lesson (approximately 45 minutes in length). The tennis instructors were videotaped at PTR Headquarters in Hilton Head, SC and the golf instructors were videotaped at the University of Georgia Golf Course. As much as possible, the instructional format for each lesson was designed to reflect typical conditions (e.g., number of students, available equipment and space). The incentive for student participation was a free lesson (in tennis or golf). Student age and experience (playing tennis or golf) varied. A single VHS camcorder, placed at an optimal viewing angle, was used to videotape each lesson and the instructors wore cordless microphones.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in two steps:

Step One. Two investigators individually watched all 42 tapes to identify the beginning and end of each lesson closure and to search for salient characteristics in the anatomy of each closure. The routines and rituals associated with experts' lesson closures identified by Baker, et al. (1998) served as a useful guide in this first stage of the analysis. Closure length (how long it took for a teacher to close a lesson), sequence (the order in which teacher behaviors and closing activities transpired) and content (what the teacher said and did during the closure) were recorded for each lesson.

Step Two. The investigators met to share and discuss their notes. First the length of each closure was listed to identify the shortest and longest closures and subsequently record the range of closure lengths. Second, a typical closing sequence was identified by comparing the order in which events and actions were recorded in the investigators' notes for each closure. Finally, behavior trends were identified in each phase of the typical closing sequence to further distill the characteristic elements of an expert lesson closure in sport.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the credibility, dependability, reliability, and confirmability of the procedures employed by the investigators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase the level of trustworthiness in this study, two investigators trained in qualitative research methods analyzed the data. Denzin (1978) termed this analytical method "investigator triangulation" (p.297), which serves to reduce potential investigator bias and strengthen the credibility (i.e., validity) and dependability (i.e., reliability) of the analysis.

Findings

Closure lengths ranged from 30 seconds and 10 minutes, with no apparent common length. The typical sequence of an expert closure in tennis and golf was characterized by four phases, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Trends emerged in the types of behaviors the experts' used within each phase of the closure (see Table 1). To ensure their students ended the lesson on a positive note, the experts primarily maintained practice conditions and refrained from introducing new content in the final minutes leading up to the closure. Closing signals consisted mainly of verbal commands to indicate the transition from lesson body to lesson closure. Behavior trends found in the instructors' review phase of the closure included demonstrations, questions, and checks for understanding. These behaviors were used to review both the lesson content and the student's skill performances. Finally, the experts shared practice drills that were designed for either the respective sport setting (i.e., golf or tennis) or a setting external to the sport (e.g., hotel room, dormitory room, etc.). Table 2 presents examples of closing behaviors fitting each phase.

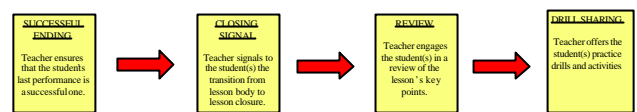


Figure 1. Typical Sequence of an Expert Lesson Closure.

Table 1

Behavior trends in Each Phase of a Typical Expert Lesson Closure

Successful Ending	Closing Signal	Review	Drill Sharing
Maintain practice conditions late in lesson	Verbal commands to indicate transition	Demonstrate	Offer drills designed for respective sport setting
Refrain from introducing new content late in lesson		Ask questions Check for understanding	Offer drills designed for alternative practice setting

Table 2

Examples of Expert Behaviors in Each Closure Phase

Successful Ending	Closing Signal	Review	Drill Sharing
A student hit a successful volley and the instructor yelled "Hero" directly before closure (Tennis)	"Come up here to the net. We're going to wrap up what we did today" (Tennis)	"Tell me what you learned today. What steps did you take to learn that?" (Golf)	An instructor suggested that the student practice making divots to increase the consistency of her swing patterns (Golf)
A student swung the golf club with the desired technique and the instructor exclaimed "Beautiful" directly before closure (Golf)	"Let's pull together for a quick summary" (Tennis)	An instructor asked his students questions in regard to key points made in the lesson, such as "What gives you power in the volley?" (Tennis)	An instructor suggested that his students perform leg squats to pick up tennis balls as a way to work on tennis-related fitness (Tennis)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study represents the first effort to examine the lesson closing practices of highly effective teachers. Patterns of behavior were found in the closures of 42 expert sport instructors, suggesting an initial model for engaging this important phase of the lesson. In terms of sequencing an effective closure, teachers in similar instructional contexts should initiate their closures directly following a successful student performance, then signal the transition from lesson body to lesson closure, review the key points covered in the lesson, and finally offer activities for student practice. Several of the teacher behaviors that the experts used in closing their lessons parallel those identified as effective in previous research on teaching (e.g., Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986), such as reviewing, checking for understanding, and asking questions. However, other of the experts' behaviors represent new additions to contemporary models of effective teaching. These included (a) maintaining practice conditions late in the lesson to promote successful student performance, (b) refraining from introducing new content late in the lesson, and (c) offering students practice drills that can be used in alternative practice settings. Since this is the first study of its kind, it is too early to determine if these newly identified behaviors are unique to instructional expertise or are also present in other forms of effective teaching. Either way, this study offers a practical guide for closing a lesson, based on the practices of teachers noted for their exceptional accomplishments in teaching and intended for those who wish to explore their potential as teachers.

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