

It Starts With You

Kymerly Williams-Evans, MA, talks about the importance of bringing something in and sending something out.

Veteran fitness industry professional Kymerly Williams-Evans, MA, might be educating your next batch of instructors, so be nice when you see her at the IDEA World Fitness Convention®. Not only does she prepare students for a fitness career through the Fitness Instruction Minor at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB); she also runs the college's on-campus group fitness program. She never has time to get bored with her job, as she works with a new set of students each year.

Known for her sharp wit and intelligent industry insights, Williams-Evans has taught, trained or consulted for at least 4,100 fitness professionals on four continents in four languages over 21 years. She also served as editor, then technical editor, of *IDEA Fitness Edge*.

In the new generation of instructors coming up, do you see a particular attribute that you think is notable?

Instructors coming into the field today share many of the attributes of what I'll call "first-generation" instructors—those who started teaching in the 1980s or earlier. Both groups love what they do and want to impart their joy and energy. Both love people and want to bring a strong work ethic to their classes. The notable difference I see—and applaud—is that new instructors consider the financial aspects before committing. Twenty years ago we leapt in and asked about compensation later. We were grateful to accept money for something we asserted we would do anyway, "even if we weren't paid." Today's incoming professionals research the pay, benefits and required investments from the outset. They weigh the cost of education and amortize that over the number of classes they'd need to teach to get a good return on the investment.

Another interesting difference I've observed is that there are fewer prima donna/diva/ "it's all about me and my performance" instructors in the new generation. Fun as it was to teach in the 1980s, our field was fairly overridden with big egos. The current crop seems much too busy acquiring knowledge to indulge in major attitude.

What was the smartest thing you did to grow your career?

There are three smart things I did to expand and develop my career:

First, I attended every IDEA event I could to increase my knowledge base, develop my understanding of the profession on a bigger scale and stay ahead of the curve. In 23 years of teaching I have been to the IDEA World Fitness Convention 22 times, missing only the year my daughter was a baby. I even made it the year I was on crutches after knee surgery and the year I was pregnant (not the same year, fortunately). My bottom line belief is that if you want to expand in the field, you must commit to education and to the industry's professional association.

The second smartest thing I did was to travel abroad quite a bit in the first 10 years of my fitness career. I funded the first two trips myself by setting up teaching and presenting gigs as I went along. Traveling and teaching helped me get new ideas, see different perspectives, learn new cuing in many languages, make contacts, hone my nonverbal skills, polish all my teaching skills in a sink-or-swim environment and meet people with similar goals under widely varying circumstances. Travel also put me in touch with other U.S. presenters who became friends, mentors and networking contacts.

Last, I submitted ideas for articles and started writing for IDEA and other publications. I expected that writing fitness articles would help with name recognition, credibility and income. But the real payoff was the confidence I gained. Seeing my byline and bio in print shifted my self-perspective. I mentally moved from "part-time fitness instructor at my local

club" to "fitness professional in a worldwide movement."

What creative well do you tap when you need a new idea for a group fitness class? What inspires you?

Well, I'll share a secret about my creative brilliance. When I need a new idea for a class, I ask my staff what their ideas are. Before each new academic quarter, I ask them what class currently not on our schedule would make them happy to teach. Inevitably, a staff member will reply that she "has this approach she was thinking about" or he "just saw something at an educational event" that he would love to try. Then I brainstorm with the teacher and add my twist to make it viable.

I also ask the students at UCSB who are in training to become instructors. With the teachers-in-training, inspiration is even easier. Each student has to turn in a final project—a new class on paper, video or CD. At the end of the quarter I am sitting on a stack of great ideas from smart, active, young, eager "in-tune-with-the-trends" future leaders, who offer the perspectives of both a new teacher and a recent participant.

Also, the students in our program tend to be involved in other activities and sports. We use that carryover skill to create new classes. For instance, last year I had the ski team captain, a Folklorico dance team member and two triathletes in the training course. They were commenting on the injuries, victories and challenges of their activities, so the final project for each of these students was to set up a workout that would meet his or her activity's general fitness needs (not the sport-specific, technical stuff). We ended up with two new classes: "Terrain Training" and "Snow Stuff Conditioning."

Our enviable situation is that we restart the fitness program every quarter, so I am willing to try any class for 10 weeks. Because I allow "interpretation" latitude in certain classes, the teachers have room to experiment. Also, since I love words and wordplay I often come to

new class ideas backward. I name a class first and then figure out the content. For example, I had two new teachers who could teach hip-hop-type classes, which are very popular at UCSB. But their styles were vastly different. I went with the difference and called one class “Jammin’ With Janna” and the other “Bebop Hip-Hop.” We discussed ways to make the distinctions clear in class and voilà, two new classes were born.

What advice do you have for new instructors?

Make sure your first classes are with a supportive organization! Work for an involved director, a team of helpful teachers, a facility that offers education—anything supportive—to maintain a steep learning curve for the first year. Choose a place (or a few places) where someone with more skills and experience shows a

direct interest in your success and growth. Be wary of the temptation to choose the “easiest” place; instead, work to get onto a team where you will be pushed, helped, watched over and encouraged to grow.

What can group fitness instructors do on a daily basis to further the positive growth of the industry?

Do two things daily: Bring something in and send something out. “Bring something in” means doing something for yourself. Nurture yourself in some way every day you teach. Inject yourself with positive doses of anything related to fitness. Learn something new, pick a favorite piece of music to play in class, accept a compliment, be active in a way that is enjoyable, network with a fitness colleague or friend, note when a participant or a team member lights up at your entrance, eat nutritiously, ask for a raise, and look

to gain more from life.

“Send something out” means giving something beneficial to the world. Offer a compliment, help a colleague, notice a positive and specific detail about a participant, add to someone’s knowledge base, donate to a worthy cause, organize your activewear drawer, let someone know how fun activity is, share an interesting fitness fact in class, and look for ways you can offer more to others’ lives.

I think fitness professionals are better at the latter than the former. But just as the preflight direction tells us to “put on your own oxygen mask before helping others with theirs,” we can ensure the vibrancy, integrity and development of our industry by starting with ourselves.

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