

Whole Language Takes on Golf

by Kerry Hempenstall

Well, folks, here we are at the Whole Language School of Golf with our two founders — Smith and Goodman.

“Professor Smith, what can you tell us about your method of teaching beginning golfers?”

“Yes, well, our approach to teaching golf is more of a philosophy than a method. We consider that golf is an holistic experience which comprises more than the sum of its parts. Golf, to us, is an irreducible experience best learned by doing; so we enter all our novices in the Australian Open because that’s authentic golf. Our role is that of motivator/facilitator: we empower our students to grow in golf. We do not teach skills, of course. Even though some students request help with their swings, we explain that swinging is only a sub-skill of golf, and to emphasize it out of the context of authentic golf is time-wasting or even harmful. We do like to see our learners practise their invented swing during the Open itself, of course. The principles of the swing are eventually induced by the learner who is highly motivated during an Open but probably bored to tears and disheartened by artificially-timetabled swing practice.

Thus, we (along with another former champion, “Jocular” Johnny Rousseau) consider that the swing will evolve naturally, that feedback is pointless and may even damage the essential confidence that learners need if they are to take risks with their golf. Since learning to golf is as natural as learning to speak, we allow it to de-

velop, rather than forcing it — just as speech developed.

“Golf being such a natural pursuit, there is no need to demonstrate grip, stance or even which end of the club to hold. Gradually, through playing in authentic tournaments, the efforts of the novice will more and more closely approximate that of Greg Norman. If for any reason development is slow (probably caused by earlier misguided attempts at skill instruction), we provide entry into other golfing majors, such as Augusta or St. Andrews. More immersion in real golf is the answer. Golf improvement depends largely on the learner’s establishment of a self-regulating and self-improving system, not on anything an instructor provides.

“We also teach a revolutionary strategy in that we encourage our learners to disengage from the tyranny of the ball. The ball is only marginally relevant to the game and is often over-emphasized. It is, after all, only one cue to the deeper transacted meaning of the golfing experience. Students are sometimes bemused when we instruct them to pay as little attention as possible to the ball.

“We also ensure that our students don’t practise their chipping or bunker shots, as that involves fractionating the great game. Similarly, we consider driving ranges and putting greens to be merely mind-numbing traps used only by old-fashioned, ignorant instructors who fail to understand the implications of the new research literature on preferred golfing styles.

“How much success are we having with our up-to-date, golfer-centred philosophy? We have numerous anecdotes from dedicated teachers who find our approach so much more rewarding: they have no trouble engaging their students; they see the joy on the faces of the students; they are exhilarated to be part of this important redefinition of the essence of the game. Scores, you ask? Unfortunately that question is very revealing of your failure to keep up with modern research. You are still dominated by out-dated reductionist models of golf. One cannot validly and reliably keep scores without interfering in the golfing process; scores do not reflect all that is entailed by golf — they fail to capture more than the most miniscule element of the whole game. Scores are likely to be used to compare golfer to golfer — an unconscionable intrusion on the innate developmental trajectory of each individual seeker of golf prowess.

“We anticipate that our philosophy will sweep the golfing world. It is new, innovative, flexible — everyone is a winner. And we don’t stop there either. We already have plans to take on swimming coaching for beginners, used our proven immersion techniques. The sky’s the limit! Hey, Kenny G, have you thought about using our approach for beginning skydiver training?”

(Ms. Hempenstall is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia.)