



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, March 2025

"Putting the child at the center of their learning."

What Can We Learn about Great Teaching from Great Coaches?

Krista and I (Dana) have discussed the connection between teaching and coaching sports many times, including in our book ***Constructivist Teaching by Heart***. A recent article in ***The Athletic*** by Rustin Dodd (January 21, 2025) caught our attention for several reasons. This article was about Kansas City Chiefs head coach Andy Reid. We are in Kansas City and devoted members of "Chiefs Kingdom". However, this article also talks about Madeline Hunter, whom we had the privilege to meet and engage with several years ago. Madeline Hunter was a professor and researcher at UCLA during her long and storied career. The article shared how Andy Reid was a follower of Dr. Hunter's teaching philosophy. Now we were captivated.

In the 1990s, Krista and I attended many of Dr. Hunter's professional development sessions where she would talk about her key principles of teaching. (At the time, these principles were adopted across the nation's school systems and teaching colleges.) By the end of the conference day, many conference attendees sat with her in the hotel lobby, following her every word. We were there, too. Madeline Hunter was witty and charming, loved children and teaching, and we couldn't get enough.

At some of these informal sessions, Madeline would talk about sharing ideas with her friend at UCLA, "Johnny". "Johnny?", we would ask each other. "Who is she talking about?" It turns out Madeline's friend was none other than legendary UCLA Coach John Wooden, still considered one of the most successful college basketball coaches of all time. Madeline Hunter and John Wooden loved to talk about education. According to *The Athletic* article, Andy Reid believes "Coaches should be teachers first." And according to Hunter, "Even champions have coaches." So, this idea about the connection between teaching and coaching did not originate with us, and we think it is worth exploring in more depth.

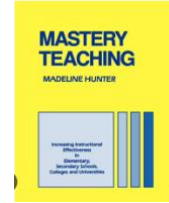


The Athletic article reminded us of some of Dr. Hunter's key principles:

- Motivation can be taught.
- Raising the level of concern is paramount.
- A teacher's "feeling tone" can foster a productive learning environment.
- Hold students accountable.
- Dignify incorrect answers.
- There is power in modeling.
- Don't judge.

Andy Reid, who asks his assistant coaches to read Madeline Hunter's 1994 book, *Mastery Teaching*, also took this final principle of Dr. Hunter's to heart: "Don't Judge."

So much so that he wrote this and other Hunter tips onto index cards and handed them to players and assistant coaches. Donovan McNabb, quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, received some of those index cards that Andy called "nuggets". When McNabb was drafted out of Syracuse in the 1990s, he faced prejudice against black quarterbacks in the NFL. Some questioned whether a black player could provide the leadership needed to run the offense. Reid told him, "I'm going to build this offense around you and your ability."



Regarding the nugget saying "Don't judge", McNabb said, "I always took it as, don't judge someone because of their skin color. Don't judge someone because of what other people may say about you. Don't judge because someone may be different than you." It is a worthy reminder applied to sports **and** education. For example, don't judge kids because of where they come from, who their siblings are, or where they live. Don't judge kids by how they speak, how their parents speak, or whether they speak English. Don't judge children by the clothes they wear, the style of their hair or how many tattoos their parents have. Don't make assumptions about students based on their test scores, how well they read (or if they read) or whatever diagnosis they have been given. Andy Reid said that we don't know everything about a person, and judging keeps us from recognizing a person's gifts and potential.

Five years after the Eagles drafted Donovan McNabb they were in the Super Bowl, and he was selected to the Pro Bowl six times under Andy Reid.

After leaving Philadelphia and coming to the Kansas City Chiefs, Andy may have encountered his most challenging "student"; Travis Kelce. Yes, our Travis (Taylor's boyfriend) was a handful when he first arrived in KC. He was stubborn, difficult, and ready to break the rules as he had done before when he was kicked out of the University of Cincinnati. But Andy stuck to his 'Don't Judge' rule, and Kelce became one of the best tight ends in football.



Travis Kelce says that Andy Reid changed his life. Andy has rules and high expectations for his players. He wants things done right. He is careful about practice and how each player should participate. Andy's interest in education and Dr. Madeline Hunter's work has helped him become one of the NFL's most respected and successful coaches.

By embracing Madeline Hunter's teaching philosophy and using our own index card that says, DON'T JUDGE, we can truly embody that with our students.

Dr. Madeline Hunter had another interesting connection between coaching and teaching with her **attribution theory**. Attribution theory explores how we interpret our successes and failures which influences our motivation and learning behaviors. She encouraged educators to ask their students after any success, such as a high score on a test, an interesting project, or a significant improvement in participation in class, this question: *To what do you attribute your success? Or restated, how did*



you improve? Coaches can ask a team member the same question after a winning game – *How did you win that game?*

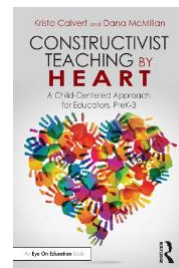
Let's explore the sports question first. We ask a team member, "How did you win the game?" The player might answer, "We love playing at home." Or another might say, "We have the best shooter in the league." In those answers, the players attribute their success to things outside their control. If you say things like, "we like to play at home", "the schedule favored us", or "the weather was good", you attribute your success to luck. Players have no control over luck.

Dr. Hunter said the only thing luck is useful for is finding an ideal parking spot. Answers such as, "We have the best quarterback," attribute success to talent. Dr. Hunter told us, "Talent runs out." The answers that make a difference and help students see that success is in their control attribute success to effort. You control your effort. You can count on effort. Efforts last in both sports and school. Students do well on tests because they studied. They created a great project because they worked hard, and they improved their performance because they practiced. Any other attribution tells students or players that success is out of their control.

On the field or in the classroom, these principles from Dr. Madeline Hunter have stood the test of time because they work for teachers and coaches alike. Not just to assign drills or skills, but to take our work to the next level so that our players/students will thrive under our direction and fulfill their own potential. ***How are you coaching your class to the championship?***

Citation: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6075302/2025/01/21/andy-reid-leadership-style-chiefs-eagles-notecard/>

We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, What Can We Learn about Great Teaching from Great Coaches? [here](#).



Reflection Questions for What Can You Learn about Great Teaching from Great Coaches?

- ★ Have you found a strong guiding principle you learned from playing sports that you have applied to your classroom?
- ★ How do you think about the “Don’t Judge” principle as it applies to schools?
- ★ What nugget would you write on an index card to give to a student, a student teacher, or a first-year teacher?
- ★ To what do you attribute your success as a teacher?



Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: We have a lot of games suggested in our curriculum. I often leave them out of my instruction. Are games beneficial for learning?

A: Games are an engaging method for practicing important learning concepts. This is why games are incorporated into many curricular materials. Games can be a very useful tool for learning- with a few considerations.

Pre-operational children (younger than about 7 or 8) play games for the joy of the game and have very little concern about who is winning. I love to play games with this age group, but I put less focus on who is the winner. For example, concentration works perfectly for this age group.

Let's say you are teaching children to listen to the sounds they hear in a word. Use two colors of index cards or card stock, put pictures on one set of cards and letters on the other. Lay out the two colors into multiple rows face down. Taking turns, each child turns over one card of each color. For example, they turn over a picture of a bear and a second card with the letter t. Since there is no /t/ sound in bear, they did not make a match. They put the cards back to where they were originally. (Putting the cards back in the same place is key because other players will learn to make note of where a card is located.) Let's say another player turns over a b card and then remembers where the picture of the bear card is located.



Young children have amazing visual memory and are very good at this. If they make a match, they collect the pair of cards. This age of student doesn't seem to need to have a winner. They are practicing a skill in a fun setting and often ask to play repeatedly.

Games help young children learn fair play, such as turn-taking. Once they have been taught a game, you can then place the game in a learning center for more play on their own.

Concrete Operational children (about age 7 to 8 to about 11 or 12) are much more interested in the rules of games and finding a winner. But games work equally well for this age group, too. You can try setting a goal for winning the game, and all who reach the goal win. Keep those games in the curriculum, and you will see children having fun while improving their skills.

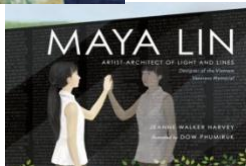
Teaching with High-quality Children's Books



We have put together a multi-genre text set for **Women's History Month**. Use this combination of recently published **biography, narrative nonfiction, poetry, autobiography, and historical fiction**



books to explore some important historical and current day figures in women's history. Students can relate the women in the texts to women in their own lives whom they admire.



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)

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