

Voice projection and protection

'I lose my voice regularly.'
'My voice is always tired at the end of the day.'
'I'm waiting to have nodules removed – I wish I'd known this before!'

These actual comments indicate vocal abuse and damage – so who is causing these problems? Unfortunately the answer is you! Many swimming teachers and coaches are creating long-term problems for themselves by forcing their voices on a daily basis without realising the consequences.

Every craftsman will take care of the tools that earn him a living, so why do teachers ignore the mechanism that allows them to work?

The Institute of Swimming Teachers and Coaches (ISTC) noticed this problem back in 1998 and approached a leading voice practitioner to provide some basic voice protection training at their annual conference. The success of this initial session led to a nationwide tour of training workshops which are still ongoing.

So why is the voice so prone to damage?

Well, it is one of the most sensitive organs in the body being susceptible to hot, cold, dry atmospheres and dehydration. In fact, a swimming pool is probably the worst environment imaginable for the voice.

When a teacher strains the vocal cords to be heard in a noisy pool day after day, throughout the term, the results can be dramatic. Over a period of time you may lose a section of your normal pitch range (often the top notes); find you have



In demand: Priscilla Morris is an expert in voice training

a permanently gravelly tone; lose your voice for short periods of time on a regular basis; lose individual note bands permanently or, in extreme cases of abuse, cause growths on the vocal cords which require surgical removal.

But this is not inevitable. It is possible to learn fairly simple techniques in one three-hour practical workshop which can, with practice, protect your voice during your teaching sessions. Breathing and posture can provide support for the voice which, together with a vocal warm-up, ensures that you are doing all you can to keep yourself working.

You also need to consider vocal range, emphasis, articulation, expression, gesture and other areas which help your message to get across. With a series of exercises to practise, it is possible to change the nature and power of your voice so that you feel more comfortable and confident on poolside.

Are there courses that teachers can attend?

Yes, around 40 courses so far have taken place throughout England and several areas have requested a follow-up session where teachers and

coaches can re-inforce their knowledge and add new techniques to develop their skills further. Feedback has been very positive with comments such as 'This has really made me think about how I use my voice', 'Highly informative and good fun too!' and 'Every teacher should know this'. Sessions are very practical with everyone encouraged to have a go but without anyone being made to feel uncomfortable at any time. This is a big departure from the normal training programme of ASA members but it provides vital information to back up your technical skills so that you can pass on those skills without causing permanent damage to yourself.

So what is a session like?

A workshop begins with an exchange of information about vocal problems in the group and advice on how to help improve them. Then the learning begins with basic information on how the voice works and how breathing can support it. Exercises are taught so that the skills can be developed after the course and fun, practical examples are used to re-inforce the learning. We then move to a vocal warm-up, exercises for clear speech and variety in

delivery. Everyone receives material to work at later with particular reference to trouble-shooting and the 'do's and don'ts' of using the voice. The workshop aims to make sure you can protect your voice so that it will continue to enable you to teach poolside for extended periods without damage.

And who runs them?

Voice tutor Priscilla Morris, who has over 30 years experience in voice training, runs them. Her background is theatre and she has taught thousands of youngsters and adults how to use their voices for the stage and business.

What's the best way to book?

The course is based on techniques developed by The Voice Care Network, an organization of which Priscilla is a member and which specifically researches into the teacher's voice. Centres generally book a workshop on a Sunday (although other days of the week may be possible) with one three-hour session for a maximum of 20 participants. A second workshop may be fitted into the same day if numbers warrant this and travel home for Priscilla is still possible.

And how do we get in touch?

Priscilla is very much in demand as an international examiner and adjudicator so early application is advised if you are thinking of including this in your training courses for 2005.

Remember that the ASA issues a half-day credit for attendance at this course and it could make a big difference to your working practices.

Priscilla is happy to talk to any region which is considering having a workshop and will try to give individual advice to any ASA member with voice problems.

Priscilla can be contacted on 01455 230317 or email: info@loudandclearuk.com.