

# 32 DEGREES

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## Ride Here

### *Ride Now*

Building a Buzz  
That Lasts

PG. 42



PGS. 20-46

### You Don't Say!

How to Work Magic  
Without Words

PG. 56

### Teaching Tip

Take a 'Can-do' Approach  
in Adaptive Lessons

PG. 66

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# Shut Up and Teach!

## When Silence Really IS Golden

BY PETER HOPPOCK

**T**he writer Joan Didion once remarked: “I write to find out what I am thinking.” Isn’t this true for most of us? We have the urge to connect, to enlighten, to understand.

What are *you* thinking when you’re in front of a class? Are you choosing words that help or hinder learning? Do your words enliven the atmosphere or put a damper on it? Does what you say engage and provide clarity, or get in the way?

In ski and snowboard lessons, we speak to explain something (a concept or movement), to show we care (vocal enthusiasm, soothing words after a fall), and to move things along (after all, time is an issue). It all matters. How can we *not* talk?

Frankly, I’m asking you to do just that – be silent for an entire lesson (almost) – and discover just how much you can communicate without opening your mouth. Granted, you might want to reserve this approach for an early season training opportunity with colleagues or regular clients who are up for a bit of experimentation, and you’ll likely need to get permission from your ski school director or supervisor. But, trust me, conducting a clinic or lesson largely without words will do wonders for your focus, give greater weight to your demonstrations, and permit a heck of a lot of practice time and guided discovery.

### Just To Be Clear

Even though no words will be coming from your lips, a word-war will be raging inside your brain while your body does the communicating. This isn’t going to be easy! Also, you may think of something absolutely brilliant to convey while pantomiming a movement sequence. Resist. The power

of this approach includes surprise associations that come up – not unlike the way the sense of small often triggers memories.

You’re going to go places (psychologically) you’ve never gone before. Drop your ego off at the ski rack; you won’t need it. You’re going to struggle, that’s a given... but your students will be eager to help you! You’ll establish a partnership with everyone almost instantly.

I give one or two of these lessons a year, usually at the beginning of a season. I also run a wordless clinic for the instructors at my ski school, and in both cases there is always a lot of laughter and learning.

So get ready to *shut up and teach*. Here’s how.

### Set the Scene

First off, begin the lesson normally. Introduce yourself. Learn names. Agree on goals. Give your class the set-up, explaining that once you are all on the hill and have started the lesson in earnest, *you* will not be speaking, but *they* certainly can, and should – by asking questions of you, chatting with one another, etc. You will be using hand gestures, facial expressions, and body movements to convey both what you *see* in their performances and what you *want* to see next time.

In some instances touch will replace vocal instructions, so be sure to ask your students’ permission to use physical contact to help them focus on what is working as well as what is not working and could be adjusted. At this point, someone may feel like asking you a question. If you can answer it with a gesture or facial expression (for example, by nodding yes or no, pointing, smiling, or adopting other charades-like clues), by all means give it a shot!



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What can you convey when you don’t speak?  
Plenty!

You’ll get some of the anxiety out of your system – and your classmates will enjoy it.

Use this time to get buy-in and deliver directions. For example, tell your students (or clinic group) that you’ll be doing demos at the start of every phase and pointing to various parts of your body depending on where you want them to focus.

### Be Aware of Space... and Faces

Be sure to effectively manage physical space on the hill. Positioning your class, i.e., your students’ location on the hill or whether they’re in a line or semi-circle, may take slightly longer than usual. That’s okay. You’re going to feel like a Border collie herding sheep at first.

You may also find yourself focusing on your students' movements while they're skiing to, or walking to, your chosen spot. Why? Because you're not thinking about what you are going to say next! And what else really matters besides *movement*? (Of course, you may be thinking about what you're going to *gesture* next, especially if you're trying to anticipate questions and how to answer them.)

Don't be surprised if you start paying more attention to your students' facial expressions. You'll want to know what they're thinking of this little experiment – but you can't ask them. You start thinking, *I bet they want to get moving. They're certainly not waiting for me to say anything!* And you'll be right.

### Giddyup!

Okay, so get moving! Whatever your lesson plan is, get at it. For example, if you're

reviewing a wedge turn, do a demo. Then do another one. On the third one, use hand gestures to get students to focus on the part of your body you really want them to notice. In this case, if you were doing a right turn you might point to your right leg and show how moving the knee in the direction of the turn releases the edge and begins the turn.

If you want to focus on the ankle – say, by having students lift the arch of the foot – you can cup your hand and point to your arch to mimic that movement, indicating the exact part of the body you want them to move. Exploring movement further, you could illustrate functional tension by representing the ankle and arch as clenched fists while pointing to the rest of your body and letting your arms fall limp at your sides. Ankle and arch = fists; rest of body = limp arms at your side.

Get the idea? In this lesson, *there is no tell, there is only show*. You move, then they move. It's that simple.

On the next run you might want to show students how little it takes to release the edge and allow steering to become effective. You could point to your boot, and – using your right hand as a “stand in” – lift

your thumb a little and lower your pinky the same amount. Now point to the tip of your inside (right) ski and show them how it moves. Then do another right turn demo. Then a left. Watch their reactions.

Time to get moving again. Begin the process of “demo, watch, learn, adjust, repeat.”

### Rapt Attention

As you proceed, your class will be riveted to your movements. You may be dying to add phrases like “watch how my right knee moves” or “lift the big toe.” Again, resist! The point here is that what feels right for you to say may not be what's needed. Be patient. In their performance, your students will be telling you what each of them needs.

Here's where you get to spend a lot of time doing what you really get paid for: to watch and learn. Learn where your students' heads are, each one's body awareness, physical limitations, etc. How did each student interpret your visual cues? Your movement analyses will become sharper during the course of this type of lesson. Why? Because you're totally immersed in your students physical world. All that matters is movement.



As you proceed, your class will be riveted to your movements.



When you don't use words, you're less likely to interject negative spin.

### Amazing Insight #1

Because you're not using words, there's no possibility of any negative spin on anything you do. You can be as enthusiastic about a poor performance as a great one. High fives, fist bumps, and big smiles will be interspersed with your physical mimicking of what you saw that needed adjustment (i.e., stance issues, cuff pressure, over-steering) and a quick demo of your correction. I keep things playful, even when offering suggestions for modification.

### Amazing Insight #2

About half-way through you'll realize that even though you encouraged your students to speak, some most likely won't (except among themselves a little). That's because the transfer effect is powerful. Taking their cues from you, your students are focused on the movements necessary to succeed.

If someone does ask you a question, it might come in the form of a statement, like: "I can't seem to steer my inside ski" (which you most likely noticed already).

THINKSTOCK

The real question here is, "Why can't I steer my inside ski?" Your response will be the same: To physically demonstrate what you saw that skier do (point to that student and do the incorrect movement) and what you are looking for that will be more functional (point to yourself and show the correction). It's swift, to the point (pun intended), and involves no judgments.

### Amazing Insight #3

As you're going through the cycle of demo, watch, learn, adjust, and repeat with each run, with lots of individual non-verbal feedback, you will realize at some point that you forgot about your lesson plan. Don't get nervous. Don't go back to the plan. Let the performances of your students guide you to what should come next.

If they are linking turns, effectively using turn shape, and controlling speed, what's next? What feels right? A steeper slope? Narrowing the wedge or eliminating it? Mime the choices. Do I have to tell you how? I bet you've figured that out already.

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## Help Fright Take a Hike

Okay, say as your next step you do choose; your class has shown you they want a steeper slope. Can you anticipate the new challenge and mime the movement focus? As the slope drops away from the student, his or her balance will be challenged, a loss of cuff pressure may ensue, and/or the urge to “get the turn over with” will result in loss of turn shape. The fear factor may creep in.

Me? I have lot of fun mimicking fright in front of my students. I demo a sitting-back, fearful turn a few ways

(over-turning and under-turning) and shake my head no. Then I mime “courage” by puffing my chest out and taking the proverbial three deep breaths, focusing my students’ attention on my movements forward in my boot cuffs (tib/fib), my center of mass (butt up and over boots), and my hands (reaching out).

## Actions Speak Louder Than Words

What will *you* do? That’s your choice, but there’s one thing of which I’m sure. If you resist the urge to speak, you’ll be focused and sharp in your demos. You will watch your students (or guinea-pig colleagues) with a more discerning eye than ever before. You will learn about each person – and yourself.

Plus, your adjustments to their performances will feel more like tightening a lug nut and less like replacing a defective part.

Your students will be actively integrating skiing into their lives and not just reacting to a teacher’s directions.

Demo. Watch. Learn. Adjust. Repeat. Thoroughly engaged, your students will get in lots of practice time, and your body language will speak more than words ever could. Imagine that; the silent treatment might just make you a better instructor. ☺

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## WHOSE JOURNEY IS IT?

The first time I tried this I learned that I spoke to “self-soothe.” I wanted to feel as comforted by my words as my students did. I used – and still use – speaking as a tool for the kind of “self-discovery” that Joan Didion spoke of. I discovered how I felt about my students’ performances *while* I was telling them how it went and what to do next. I learned, however, that the less I spoke, the more the lesson became about *my students’ journey*, and less about my comfort. And, when I *did* talk my words connected better with the visual cues I was delivering.

So, sometime this winter try giving a lesson without speaking. Again, if you’re uncomfortable trying it out on the public or a return client, work it into a clinic or simply ask some fellow instructors to let you try it out on them. You’ll be a better instructor for it. – *Peter Hoppock*

## THE LESSONS YOU’LL LEARN *When You ‘Shut Up’*

- You *can communicate your feelings* without speaking.
- You *can describe movements* without using words.
- You *can guide behaviors* with simple hand gestures.
- You *can give feedback* in a similar way, and by touching (this requires getting approval in the set-up speech before the lesson begins.)
- You *can excite* your students by exuding confidence and energy.
- You *can calm* your students by exhibiting quiet determination.
- You *can get a lot more done, in less time.*
- You *can get students to laugh more easily* (perhaps because, at times, you may appear desperate and foolish – they will appreciate your effort!)
- You *will be exhausted* at the end.
- *Your students won’t be able to take their eyes off you.*
- You *will learn that your students’ words* come at you like golden nuggets, and *your words* – the ones you are thinking of saying but don’t – will seem worn and lame by comparison.
- You *will have a great time*, and so will your class.

– *Peter Hoppock*