Introduction
Recreational scuba diving instructors and instructors of other highly adventurous sports such as mountaineering and skydiving often fail to understand the role they might play in a student's lifestyle development.

Although the “UDT” [Underwater Demolition Team] diving instructor image of the 1960's has been suppressed by the instructional certifying agencies, a few egocentric adventurers do still proudly wear the scuba instructor insignia. In combining the concepts of “adventurism” and “egotism” with an exciting sport such as scuba diving, the ingredients exist to produce a potentially undesirable instructor image.

Fundamental human needs to experience excitement, adventure, and even risk exist to varying degrees in all of our students. Unknowingly, an instructor may stimulate significant psychological “changes” in a student.

Most often such changes are “positive” in nature. A student may discover new avenues for social interaction, physical fitness, self-esteem, and the like. A confident, caring and skilled scuba instructor can contribute far more than just “blowing bubbles” to a student's life.

On the other hand, the egocentric adventurer can provoke the innermost human instinct of a student to such a degree that the student may act in an irrational manner. The instructor can be a very powerful “role model.”

A few students may be at an “emotional” point in their lives, such that attempted “imitation” (by a novice diver) of this role model (a highly skilled diver) can lead to “taking risks” that may have a potentially fatal outcome for the novice diver and his/her buddy.

wish to remind the reader that I am not a psychologist. My opinions are subjective, not objective. As a diving instructor, instructor training course director, traveling diver, Sea Grant Marine Advisory Services Specialist, and consultant in diving accident investigation, I have had the opportunity to interview divers, observe instructors, and review diving accidents for many years. I have continuously asked myself this question: “Why did this accident occur?”

The information and impressions presented in this article represent “hypothetical” situations. Any resemblance to an actual situation or individual instructor is strictly coincidental.

Diving Accidents: Why?
Why do divers have accidents? At one time or another, I feel that every instructor has asked himself/herself these questions. Why do divers die? Although the number of diving accidents, fatal or non-fatal, that occur each year is relatively small, the fact remains that accidents do occur.

A review of all diving accidents occurring in the State of Michigan since 1959 and data from the University of Rhode Island National Underwater Accident Data Center suggest that equipment and environment are not principle factors in diver mortality.

Subjectively, some authorities might say, “Divers are injured or die under adverse environmental conditions; therefore, the environment is the causation factor.” Or, “Divers die in caves; therefore caves kill divers!” Not true!

I suggest that “divers injure or kill themselves!” Many of the accidents which I have reviewed appear to be the result of an irresponsible or irrational act by the injured or deceased party.

In some cases such actions have also led to mishap for other divers. With regard to the environment, I must then ask, “Why would a diver enter into an environmental situation which is obviously beyond the scope of his/her training, experience, and equipment?”

Concept of Personal Limitation
Some diving instructors fail to impress upon diving students the concept of “personal limitation.” Too often a diver seeking the excitement and adventure of the underwater experience is under the impression that the C-card is a symbol of unlimited capability - the “Underwater Superperson Syndrome.” I do not feel that any instructor knowingly creates such a diver.

Furthermore, every national certifying agency must be praised for their efforts in promoting
continuing education. The environmental ratings, specialty diving courses, multiple open water training dives, logbook recording of experience and other such programs all serve to advance the diver in a logical progression of training and experience acquisition.

I suggest, however, that all instructors re-evaluate their training programs to assure that understanding of the concept of “personal limitation” is impressed on each student. Some students simply do not have and may never have the physical and emotional capacity to endure the rigors of cold, deep Great Lakes wreck diving.

They may prove to be excellent and safe divers at depths of 30 to 50 feet on a tropical reef. The diver must know, understand, and accept this “personal limitation.” And an instructor must not attempt to push the diver beyond this “personal limitation.”

Several years ago, the diving instruction community incorporated information on “diver stress” into training programs. Understanding the concept of “personal limitation” should be considered equally important.

The time and content restrictions imposed on some scuba diving courses limit the amount of time that can be devoted to any given topic. Nearly all diving students receive instruction on waves, currents, and marine life. However, the subject matter on “environmental analysis” and “personal limitations” within that environmental situation is minimal. A novice diver with a new plastic C-card simply may not have learned to look at a situation and say, “No!”

This brings us to our next question and the real theme of this article. Why do some divers act in such irresponsible and irrational ways that it may cost them their lives?

No doubt volumes of psychology literature have been written on this subject. There are many factors that can lead an individual to perform “irresponsible” and “irrational” acts. I have elected to address only one potential motivating factor - the role model.

Super Instructor: The Image

I am not identifying any specific individual or group of individuals. Nor am I being critical of any particular specialty diving activity. My instructor portrayal could be any instructor in the world. My choice of environment could be ocean current, surf beach, river, frozen lake, or sunken ship.

Each and every “honest” instructor reading this may identify with a personal experience. At one time or another, any instructor may have assumed the role of “Super Instructor.”

In reality, however, fatal diving accidents have occurred. The exact “cause” of most of these accidents may never be known. As instructors, we must teach “accident prevention.” I firmly believe that the “self-image” that we present during training can be significant in preventing diving accidents. Conversely, an instructor “image” could create the psychological climate for an accident.

For some instructors, teaching diving is an egocentric experience. All teachers enjoy the gratification of sharing knowledge and developing a student's ability to participate in an activity that they themselves have found to be so pleasurable and rewarding.

To varying degrees, we each experience our own renewed excitement as we share each new student's adventure. In any class, we have ten students with ten different reasons for being there, with ten different expectations, and with ten sets of problems. In other words, we have ten “individuals.” As instructors, we can graduate ten “individuals,” each with his/her own sense of expectation and limitation.

On the other hand, a powerful, egocentric instructor can develop ten “hero worshippers.” “Imitation” is one of the highest forms of praise that an instructor can receive. Many students imitate their instructors in equipment selection, diving technique, safety philosophy, and so on. This “imitation” can be good or bad.

The hypothetical “Super Instructor” that I shall create to illustrate my “negative-image” hypothesis is a northern state resident who teaches scuba diving at a local recreation center two or three evenings each week. His primary income is derived from an “assembly line” job in a major industry. Diving is the only real “adventure” in this person's life.

Five years ago, this instructor made his first cave dive in north central Florida. You're right! He was bitten by the caving diving “bug.” From that day forth, he would eat, breathe, and sleep cave diving. He found fulfillment, excitement, and adventure that he never before realized. He trained, purchased all the proper equipment, and acquired experience. He was a cave diver (probably, technically, a good cave diver).

As a scuba instructor, however, in a northern state, he was “losing control” of his enthusiasm. He taught his basic scuba classes with a new zeal. He included many examples and pictures of cave diving experiences. Each item of equipment was discussed as it might be selected for cave diving. The students learned about 55 watt/4-hour burn diving lights, safety line reels, and special BC's. They learned to
kick to avoid silting, finger walking, and blackout diving in the pool.

The day for open water training arrived. Our instructor appears at the local 30-foot-deep quarry wearing twin 100 cubic foot scuba with a dual manifold and two regulators (one with a 5-foot hose), three knives, a chest-mount cave diver's BC and three underwater lights (for exploring the inside of a sunken automobile.)

Some of the students express humor, while others are mesmerized. For a few, the total basic course experience had been captivating. Although they have never seen a real underwater cave, they, too, have been bitten by the “cave diving bug.” The quarry, the ocean, the reef, and all of the other facets of scuba diving were now secondary in their minds. In their “mind's eye,” their diving world was “the cave.”

It is now spring vacation time. Four of the divers from this class must fulfill their overwhelming desire to experience “the cave.” They arrive in north central Florida with standard scuba diving equipment, two conventional underwater lights (among the four of them), 100-ft. of plastic line on a $9.95 line retainer, a shiny C-card, and eight quarry dive experiences.

As they enter the crystal-clear water of Howard's Slough, in their minds they are not novice open water scuba divers. Rather, they picture themselves as they saw their instructor. Only two of these divers return to the surface alive!

Some readers may interpret the above story as a ridiculous fantasy. It is a “fictional” portrayal. Yet, for those of us who review accidents, it has a sobering aura of reality. Why did these divers die? What was their motivation to enter the cave? Could it have been imitation of their “hero,” their scuba instructor?

The same portrayal could be related to a deep wreck dive, a river dive, diving near dam floodgates, and other situations. Divers often fail to use common sense and good judgment.

It is often said that an instructor cannot teach common sense and good judgment. This may certainly be true. All instructors can, however, present themselves in a professional and realistic role.

Instructor Influence

During my years as a university diving instructor and Sea Grant Marine Advisory Services Specialist, I have been approached for consultation on matters involving diving instruction and instructors by various state government departments and officials, attorneys, parents, concerned diving students, private investigators, law enforcement officials, and other interested parties.

The “situations” described have ranged from “harmless misinterpretation” to “unbelievable horror stories.” The impression that instructors make on their students in class and during guided diving trips can encompass a wide range of results. The majority of participants have a safe, pleasant experience. Some students and parents simply “turn-off” to diving. This is a loss for our diving community.

On the other hand, some students “turn-on” to reckless, irresponsible diving. This is of even greater significance. The following represent a few selected situations where I feel “instructor image” could have led to the development of potentially unsafe divers.

Alcohol and Diving

Although a large majority of divers indulge in social drinking of alcohol, I feel that all instructors should discourage the consumption of alcohol in conjunction with diving and diving instruction. Alcohol is an adverse factor relative to nitrogen narcosis, decompression sickness and cold. Intoxication can lead to irrational and irresponsible actions.

One instructor supplied beer to be consumed during the first lecture and the last student to arrive at each lecture class period was asked to furnish the beer for the next class period. Certainly, the student did not have to drink; but most did.

Does this type of situation develop a proper attitude toward safe diving? Nearly every time I have been on a dive charter boat in the Caribbean or Bahamas, I have seen instructors/group leaders drinking beer between dives in some cases, considerable amounts.

I am certain that many readers will conclude that a beer between dives is acceptable. I am not in a position to debate this factor; however, the “image” is the harmful factor. Instructors must do everything possible to establish a “positive image.” Unfortunately, drinking does not stop at a beer between dives.

Review of a fatal diving accident revealed “all-night drinking, motel bathtub filled with beer, and partially consumed flask of liquor in a victim's dive bag.”

I am not suggesting that diving instructors “go on the wagon.” Proper and controlled social drinking at the end of the diving day is acceptable in our society. The prudent instructor, however, will set a “good example” and not mix alcohol or intoxication with diving.
Street Drugs and Diving

Consumption of “drugs” is a major social phenomenon. Unfortunately, divers do “smoke pot,” “snort cocaine,” and “pop pills.” A few diving instructors and group leaders have apparently been encouraging such activities. One organization sponsoring dive trips allegedly informed the participants that they had selected an island where “anything you wanted” was readily available and that guides would be glad to assist in purchases.

Allegations of “pot dives,” where the diver could experience a new dimension in narcosis, have come to my attention. Tales of a diving group called “the death seekers” have filtered through the diving community. Allegedly, the combination of depth and drugs provides a unique, if not “terminal” experience.

I do not wish to pass judgment on the social habits of any individual or group. I do suggest that encouragement of “drug” usage in conjunction with recreational or commercial diving is unacceptable. Diving instructors and group leaders must discourage illegal and detrimental drug consumption in conjunction with their functions. I am pleased to say that I have listened to the briefing by at least one charter boat operator who “really discourages” drug possession, as well as usage, on his boat.

Deep Diving

If a diving instructor can dive deep, why can't his/her students? They are approximately the same physiologically and they use the same equipment. Certainly, experience is a factor. But does “experience” justify air scuba diving in excess of all acceptable limits recognized by instructional agencies and physiological experts?

In this area, the examples are almost too numerous to even objectively select appropriate ones. For years, the “25-FATHOM” patch was highly prized by Canadian and Great Lakes area divers. Further south, there was apparently a “50 FATHOM CLUB.” Some depths reported in fatal cave diving accidents border on “unbelievable.” Divers bend and divers die on deep dives. Yet, some instructors and group leaders still encourage “unacceptably” deep dives. In some cases, the deep dive is used as a “reward dive” or “graduation dive” at the end of a dive trip. On the other hand, the instructors may make the deep dive as a “special instructor's dive.”

Following one such “instructor's dive,” some of the other divers on a trip decided to also make a deep dive on the last day of the trip. Apparently, the “instructors” had made their deep dive earlier in the trip and talked about it throughout the rest of the trip. The other members of the group had been “limited” to acceptable depths.

Unknown to the group leaders, at least two divers proceeded “over-the-wall” to about 270 feet, exhausted their air supply, and ascended rapidly. One “bent!” From a diver's point of view, the water was clear and warm, and the dive seemed easy. “The instructors did it. Why shouldn't we?”

The influence of an instructor and his assistants is illustrated by one experimental case. One instructor elected not to state a “depth limit” during the course. Rather, he used proper examples and objective lecture presentations. On the final examination he asked the question, “Based on what you have learned in this course, what do you feel is an acceptable depth limit for your future recreational scuba diving?”

With the exception of one student, the answers ranged from 60 to 100 feet. One student answered 160 feet. When asked how the student arrived at that figure, he replied, “After class one night, I overheard you and the assistants planning a wreck dive to 160 feet.”

In regard to deep diving, I do not wish to imply that my standards be imposed on any individual. I do suggest that the prudent instructor “limit” his/her diving activities to those consistent with acceptable diving practices as recommended by the certifying agencies when in the presence of students or guiding dive trips. It also might be prudent to “practice what you preach.”

Realistic or Unrealistic

Diving is fun! The vast majority of diving instructors, the certifying agencies, the equipment manufacturers and dive shop personnel all promote diving as a pleasurable experience. Unfortunately, a few individuals are so “pleasurable experience” oriented that they neglect to inform the student of the potential risk associated with the sport.

Students have a right to be fully aware of the potential “risk” as well as the “fun” associated with the diving experience. And the instructor is legally and morally obligated to inform the student of such risk. “Risk” can be presented in a positive manner which will inform, not “turn-off” students.

For example, present a lecture titled, “The Beauty of the Underwater World,” not “Hazardous Marine Life.” All of the potentially harmful creatures can be included in a more “positive” image, yet the student can understand “potential danger” and “prevention of injury.”
Every instructor must judge what are “realistic” or “unrealistic” student performance requirements. The certifying agencies recommend a “minimum” standard. How far beyond that standard is realistic?

Again, the examples are too numerous to allow for totally objective selection. I will select only a few examples that I find “interesting.” I must also state that two of these are “alleged” situations.

One student informed me that instructor required his students to “sprint” the length of a football field in full wet suits and with a scuba cylinder on their backs. Another instructor apparently requires that all students (including small women) climb out of the pool with 70 cu. ft. scuba cylinders on their backs, in deep water, and without using a ladder. I once observed a scuba instructor demonstrating and directing his students in a forward roll entry (with scuba) from a 20- to 30-foot high quarry cliff.

For some instructors, teaching diving is an egocentric experience. All teachers enjoy the gratification of sharing knowledge and developing a student's ability to participate in an activity that they themselves have found to be so pleasurable and rewarding.

Realistic or unrealistic? I must let each reader draw his/her own conclusion. Possibly there is a place in our present-day diving society for the “Civilian SEAL” along with the “survivalist” movement.

**Conclusion**

Time and space do not permit presentation of numerous other examples or allegations that have come to my attention over the years. Furthermore, I wish to state that relatively few instructors have been involved in the types of activities described above. Every year hundreds of instructors and group leaders conduct instructional and travel programs with the highest standards of safety and social behavior.

However, I encourage all diving instructors and group leaders to “evaluate” themselves and their programs, and ask themselves, “What kind of image do I portray?” “Example” is the most powerful teaching and leading technique that you can use. Your “image” is a primary determinant of the quality of diver you will produce.

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