

Practice Makes Perfect

We take a look at practising and what coaches can do to help a paddler get the most benefit from their practice time...

The job of a coach isn't just to teach a paddler new skills. It's also to help paddlers make the best use of skills they already have – responding to the environment, learning to do the just the right thing at the right time.

When the thing we're coaching clicks – when the paddler we're working with starts to succeed – it's always tempting to move on and start teaching a new thing. But if we don't revisit their new skill, providing opportunities for practice, we shouldn't be surprised when they can't do it next week. If we don't challenge their new skill, we shouldn't be surprised if it stops working under pressure.

What does the perfect practice task look like?

As always, the real answer to this question is 'it depends', but often a great task is close to, or even just beyond what the paddler can currently achieve. A SUP paddler who has only just started standing up might not get a load from repeatedly falling off attempting step back turns. A canoeist who already has a really good sculling draw might not get much out of repeatedly moving the boat sideways, but they might get loads out of using the sculling draw to spin the boat keeping the bow next to a buoy or to move sideways keeping the stern following the edge of a pontoon.

Both of those tasks have the paddler working individually, but another canoeist might get more out of practising as part of a group, either co-operatively, e.g. using sculling draw to do-si-do around another canoeist, or competitively e.g. a draw-of-war where you fight to shift a rafted canoe sideways whilst your opponent tries to scull their boat the other way.

Clearly some paddlers will respond better to tasks involving subtlety and precision, whilst others will prefer challenges involving power and thuggery. Often, we'll suggest the task that we think they'll prefer, but once in a while it'll be good to force the thug to be subtle and to make the technical wizard use some grunt!

In all of those tasks, it's vital that the paddler knows what outcome they're aiming for and can tell whether they're achieving it or not. At that point (as long as it's safe), we'll make ourselves unnecessary and the paddler can practise in their own time.

The desired aim will vary tremendously from paddler to paddler; for some it'll be a simple pass/fail outcome – "did I get the boat to touch the buoy?", whilst for others it might be much subtler – "did I position the boat right to use the tow-back from the hole?", whilst for another paddler it might be more about process than outcome – "did I really wind up my body

and get my top hand out over the water for the key stroke?"

One way to help us get the right paddler doing the right task would be to give the paddlers the control over the level of challenge. We could give them a menu of tasks to choose from; "We're going to cross over to the eddyline on the other side. We could do that by dropping through the hole, using the backwash from it or by doing an S-turn below it." Alternatively, we could give them a single task where the paddler can set the difficulty themselves "see how few strokes you can use/how quickly/how slowly/how smoothly you can get from this eddy to that one?" or "see how little air you can have in the paddle float and still roll the sea kayak?"

Of course when we start to add extra constraints to a challenge (e.g. "keep the front of the boat pointing at the target throughout", "do it again without using any strokes that slow the boat down", "do it again without letting your shoulders come behind your hips"), adding a challenge that comes from us rather than authentically coming from the environment, we have a great opportunity to shape a paddler's performance whilst they're practising the whole task. But we also risk them adapting what they do into something that won't actually work for them in the environment.

For example, when asked to keep the boat pointing at a target a tandem canoe



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solves the problem by having the stern paddler hold a rudder whilst the bow paddler puts in all the power – a really effective solution for the task, but not one that’s going to leave the two paddlers still speaking to each other after a few hours paddling.

Another coach has a solo canoeist crossing the flow paddling on one side only, to produce a beautiful shape which really uses the water to steer, but does that represent how we’d actually do that move. Maybe we then need to step away from one sided paddling and see how the one sided exercise has changed their ‘normal’ paddling.

Another way to get the right paddler doing the right thing would be to give them control of the entire task; “What would you make your boat do here?”, or “Can you two come up with a dance routine that involves moving your boats sideways?” This can sometimes feel a bit risky, or even a bit lazy, like we’re giving up all the coaching responsibility, but I’ve also had paddlers come up with some great moves, which they totally own, which would never have occurred to me.

However we do it, if we get the difficulty of the task just right, there’s a good chance it’ll grip the paddler and they’ll get drawn into practising.

What does the perfect practice environment look like?

If we add wind or flow into the mix then we’ve got another variable to deal with. Lots of a coach’s effort is often focussed on finding just the right place to practise the right thing, to produce just the right level of challenge.

If we find ourselves in an environment that’s way too hard then our paddler is going to be focused on staying upright and we’re likely to find ourselves playing the role of a leader, supporter (or perhaps even rescuer) rather than a coach. If, as is usually the case, the environment is close but not quite right, we can use our choice of task to fine tune the difficulty, setting easy tasks in hard places and hard tasks in easy places.

Running downwind and with the swell in a sea kayak, if the conditions are on the hard side for the paddler we might suggest they simply paddle the boat

with the skeg down and concentrate on getting used to the movement of the boat under them; if the conditions are more straightforward for the paddler, we might have them surfing downwind with the skeg up, working on when to steer with sweeps and when to rudder.

Having said all that, flat water on a calm day can be the hardest environment to coach in. In other environments we can change the difficulty simply by changing our location, but on an expanse of flat water on a calm day we need to create the perfect challenge. This is where you need a good toolkit of games and tasks (and if you don’t already have it, I can really recommend the book *Canoe and Kayak Games* by Dave Ruse and Loel Collins) and a bag of balls, rubber ducks, string and whatever other props work for you.

In riskier environments there can be real consequences to blowing a move. Before we attempt a move in such a serious environment, we need to find other lower consequence places where it’s safe to fail. However, we also need those places to preserve enough of the feel of the serious move that we get useful feedback. If the fruits of all our practising is something that still doesn’t work in the consequential place, we’ve wasted our time!

If we know that the river we’re on has a critical left handed boof on the hardest drop, it makes sense to find that move in mellow places before we get to the drop. If we anticipate a few miles with big swell from the stern quarter once we commit to paddling around the headland, it makes sense to find some more easily escapable places that offer us similar lumpy seas before we get to the headland. We can develop kick-flips off waves on the sea and boofs on wave trains on the river.

Unpredictable environments – a surging wave on a river or a rock hopping move in ever changing swell, or even in clapotis – provide another type of environment; one where a paddler will need to constantly adapt their paddling if they want to achieve a consistent outcome. Where successive attempts at the same task might necessarily look completely different. Arguably any place where we have wind or flow will be a bit like this; no gust of wind is exactly like the previous

one and even the smoothest, glassiest wave will surge slightly.

All things being equal we’ll often try to start practising a skill in a straightforward, predictable, repeatable, low consequence environment, and then gradually move to harder, more chaotic and perhaps higher consequence environments as the paddler needs more challenge.

Knowing why we’re practising

It’s not only the paddler who’ll benefit from knowing what they’re trying to achieve and being able to tell if they’re achieving it. As coaches we should think about why the paddler is practising:

- Is it to explore a new skill?

If so, we probably want a task with an obvious pass/fail outcome in a simple, repeatable environment where the paddler can reliably test what does and doesn’t work for them.

- Is it to embed an existing skill?

At first, the paddler might just need repetition, but as the move gets more grooved, perhaps we need to introduce more variation – can you do it fast and slow, left and right? What other ways can you do it? Or do we need to up the difficulty of the task and the environment? Are we better off changing from a predictable venue to a more chaotic one, or simply applying the skill on a journey where no two applications will be exactly the same?

Once a paddler has developed a feel for a skill, it’s even possible to practise without practising! Visualising a successful performance of a move might well help a paddler approach the real-life move in a positive frame of mind, whilst mentally rehearsing all the sequences of movements that go to make a skill might well improve the real-life performance.

Finally, by making time for practice in a coaching session, it stops me from teaching all the time. Generally, the biggest improvements happen when the paddlers are away doing – not when I’m talking at them!

In the next coaching corner we’ll take a look at how to help paddler’s rediscover the fun in their paddling (apologies to those who were expecting that article in this edition). See you on the water in 2022!