

It's All About The Environment

George Fell says the key to a successful day's coaching is making sure you're in the right environment for your group...

There's times when coaching (and leading and paddling) is a joy. Everyone is buzzing as they get success trying things that are at just the right level for them. That only happens when we're in the right environment for the group we're coaching.

One of the key decisions we have as coaches is where to go. There's a big decision made before the session as to which loch, river or stretch of coastline to use, but there are also lots of mini-decisions throughout the day: should we push on around the headland or head back to the sheltered bay? Should we fire up the harder rapid, take the easier line, or walk round?

Exercise – pick a skill and draw a sketch map of the perfect place to coach it.

What happens when I'm in the wrong place?

When I find myself struggling as a coach it's sometimes because I'm in the wrong environment. Sometimes because I've been carried away with my own enthusiasm and taken a group to a place they're not yet ready for. On other times it's because the forecast wind and waves haven't materialised, or because the river has dropped off overnight.

If we're working with a group of people, they'll always be paddling at different levels, so a good venue needs to offer tasks at a range of different difficulties. Arguably sheltered water coaches have the hardest job. On a calm loch, the environment might only offer one level of challenge. The only thing the coach can vary is the task.

If I'm not in the right place, I usually find it easier to work with a team in an underwhelming environment. As long as we've got a working relationship and they've bought into my coaching, then it's always possible to add more difficulty by setting harder tasks or aiming for more precision.

If I'm working with a group of paddlers

for a few sessions, then sometimes the days spent in easier environments are those where we make the biggest gains, and set ourselves up for paddling better in harder places. If I haven't got the environment I'm looking for, then for me it works to be honest about that and to manage expectations at the earliest opportunity.

On the other hand, when I've taken a group to a place that's hard for some or all the team, I often find myself being more controlling. There's nothing wrong with that if it's what the folks I'm working with need and want. Some paddlers thrive in an environment that's right at the edge of their abilities, but others definitely don't. When this happens I'm no longer coaching, I'm simply trying to manage the safety or trying to pick up the pieces.

Having said that, I recall taking a group of paddlers down a slightly more than bank-full river, where I thought I'd given them a rubbish day out. I'd not done anything that helped them to paddle better because I'd spent all my effort trying to keep them out of the trees; at the end of the course, they said it had been the highlight of their week.

A coaching day doesn't have to make sense as a journey

Over the course of a coaching session, the coach's job is to offer the right environments in the right order. We can make those decisions ourselves, or like a waiter with a menu, we can offer a choice of environments and tasks.

Paddling the upper Moriston as a top to bottom is great with a group who are happy in that environment. With a weaker or unknown group I'll often start at the playhole at the bottom and we'll run laps, starting a little higher each time, gradually working our way up the river and finishing the day with a top to bottom lap. That makes no sense as a journey, but means we can gradually increase the difficulty and consequence (or not) as we choose.

Clearly on longer rivers or in gorges this ceases to be a practical option, but we still might choose to run laps of a particular rapid or on the Lyon or the Orchy we might choose to walk round sections that are noticeably harder than the rest of the river.

On the sea, life is more complicated as the conditions don't just change with place and weather, but also with tide. If we're in the perfect environment right now, odds on it's going to have changed in half an hour. However, the same idea applies; indeed without being constrained by river banks, it's often easier to journey to the spot that's going to work next: the sandbank that's going to start producing surf as the tide drops, or the eddyline that's going to appear and then intensify as the tidal flow builds.

If I set a task on a feature that is diminishing as the tide changes, I know that even if it's too hard at first, the paddlers will get success eventually (even if they're not actually getting better!).

Knowing a river or stretch of coastline to coach is definitely deeper knowledge than just knowing it to paddle.

Repeats or go with the flow?

Paddlers don't always succeed the first time they try something. If we're working with paddlers on a new skill or setting a task that they're going to find hard then it'd be nice to offer them multiple goes.

All white water coaches will have spots on their local river where there's a move with an eddy to take the paddlers back up to the top, so they can do repeats until they nail the move. On the sea this could be an easily repeatable rock hopping move or a surf break with a nice paddle out. On open water this could be to loop round some buoys or an out and back to a headland.

If we're stopping to coach in a particular spot, then we need to decide where to position ourselves; we need an area of sheltered water, where we can listen

to the paddlers, ask questions, set tasks and provide feedback. Do we need to be in the boat to cover safety, or can we rely on the paddler or the rest of the team to fix any problems? Where is the best position to be able to see or even video what's going on? Where is the best position for feedback?

Choosing the best location for feedback can make a really big difference to a coaching session. In general we're looking for a place where the paddler has time to process what they've done before they get to us, and somewhere that they have the option to come to us to chat or to ignore us and have another go.

Sometimes the environment might not offer us the option to do repeats. At that point we're looking for a move or a theme (e.g. posture, rotation, wind-up, edge, looking where you want the boat to go) that can be put into place as we journey from one place to the next. Or we might have a group of paddlers who've just learnt to do a new move, which we want them to consolidate by trying it in a range of different places. In that case we need to set up ways that paddlers can practice their new move whilst they paddle on, over the sea, across the loch or down the river.

If they're already at a place where they can tell themselves if they've done the move well, then perhaps all we need to do is to get them to find as many places as possible to practice the move as we travel from A to B. At that point they're not just practising the move, but also identifying the places where it's appropriate to use it (e.g. identifying the deep eddies where we can stern squeeze, the powerful eddylines to cartwheel, or the right waves to surf downwind).

If they can't identify the right places, then maybe that's the question to get them working on as they travel (e.g. What tells you when it's the right time to start accelerating to catch the wave? How do you know the eddyline is going to be a good one to start throwing ends?). If the paddlers don't yet have a way of knowing whether or not they're doing the move well, we need to provide that through a self check (e.g. check that your chest is facing away from the paddle at the start of the stroke), paired feedback (e.g. we're trying to minimise the number of backwards strokes we use, let your buddy know how many they did) or by setting a discovery task (does it work better to surf downwind with your skeg up or down?).

Of course all of that stuff is best set up as we leave the nice sheltered water at the start of our journey, rather than in the middle of the rapid or tidal race!

Exercise: Pick a move or theme that a paddler could practice on a journey. How would you brief it so that you don't need to be providing feedback?

We might choose to utilise those same ways of gaining feedback at a site specific spot; to take ourselves out of the feedback loop and free us up to observe and plan; making the paddler less reliant on us and setting them up to be able to practice on their own.

Question: Has that changed anything on your sketch map?

Thanks for reading. Wishing you all some sunny summer paddles.

