

Ready, Steady Coach!

Matt Haydock looks at our options when it comes to session planning and delivery...

If you chat to any of my friends, they will tell you I am pretty abysmal at cooking. My range of creativity when it comes to making dinner is as narrow as it comes. I am a slave to convenience, creature of habit, and I lack the experience, commitment or confidence to try anything new or adventurous in the kitchen.

On the occasions I venture away from 'pierce film lid several times, and heat at 180°', I have to have a recipe book or food website in front of me. Throughout the preparation - the slicing, the dicing, the frying, the boiling - the step-by-step, formulaic approach relaxes me, makes me feel in control and gives me confidence to do something outside my comfort zone. I would be totally lost, probably reaching for the takeaway menu - or worse, a fire extinguisher - without it! The recipe tells me what to do, and when to do it, with clear timing intervals.

Compare my cooking exploits to the show 'Ready, Steady, Cook' which includes a segment involving guests coming on with a random bag of ingredients, and a skilled chef having to come up with ideas of what to cook in a very tight time frame. The skilled chef always pulls it off, and everyone raves about how tasty the meal

is. To achieve this, they are well-practised at what they do, can think quickly given some queues and triggers, and are able to pull something tasty together. They had no step-by-step approach, but went with their gut and taste-tested throughout the process. To develop their ability to do this, at some point in their cooking career they put down their recipe book - the one I am still tightly clinging to in my own kitchen!

Recipe Book to Paddlesport Coaching

Luckily for me in my line of work, I am a bit more confident and experienced with coaching paddlesports than I am in the kitchen. But rest assured, just like when anyone is developing a skill such as coaching, this wasn't always the case.

When we first start coaching, we often develop a list of recipes/plans/scripts and then get good at delivering them. We start by selecting a skill - we could call this the 'meal' - such as turning a sea kayak in the wind, step back turns on a SUP, S-turns on the river in an open canoe, or boofing a WW kayak off a drop.

We can then break down the technical and tactical components needed to perform that skill, i.e. the 'ingredients' that we need to make that 'meal': timing,

angle, speed, trim, edge, forwards paddling technique, body shape and frame, leg drive and power transfer, etc.

Next we concoct or replicate a step-by-step list of tasks (i.e. the 'recipe') that we can work through, often in order, with our learners. These ordered tasks would centre around these technical and tactical components -

for example: watching each other and grading each other's edge application and giving each other feedback, or a guided discovery task examining what point in a wave to complete the move. We might even have the tasks written down on the notepad, so our recipe is always to hand if we need it.

After a while delivering this type of session, i.e. 'cooking' with these ingredients, making this meal with this exact recipe - we gain confidence in it, because it often gets great results. After working through these tasks, the learners more often than not are able to achieve the move more efficiently, and with greater success. They feel like they've improved, see their performance get better, gain more confidence, and tell us what a great session it was. Happy days for everyone!

The Drawbacks

In the kitchen, things can sometimes go wrong, even with a trusty recipe. Your oven might decide not to work properly, one of your ingredients is way past its use by date, you might burn something, or your guests turn up and say they don't like one of your ingredients. The recipe now falls apart, and you're forced to think on your feet as to what to do next. Sometimes, you just press on with the recipe regardless because you're determined to make the meal (or you can't think of an alternative) - and it ends up tasting pretty dodgy!

This might end up happening in our coaching sessions too. Curve balls arise sometimes because different boats might produce different results, paddlers are challenged by their physiology to rotate and produce power, and sometimes the environment doesn't provide the right level of challenge for the task to work. The session would hit a roadblock for whatever reason, and we then need to think on our feet as to how to move past it and get back on track to the recipe. This could be by moving location or going back a stage with one of the learners, and this will sometimes work - but sometimes it won't.



Because we so rigidly stick to our recipe, the session may start to nosedive – we get frustrated with learners, sack it off entirely or just go for a paddle with them; or our learners' achievement, motivation and enjoyment drops. Worse still, we might even be so focussed on sticking to our session plan/recipe, we don't even notice the fact our learners aren't engaged with the tasks, or not spot the fact the conditions are no longer right for what we are doing. Not as good a day!

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So rather than risk ending up in these situations where the recipe doesn't work quite as well and we hit roadblocks; we might choose a different approach, much like the Ready, Steady, Cook kitchen from earlier. Rather than having a set list of ordered tasks to work through with our learners written on a notepad, we now start to develop plans and tasks as we go along. We then put a lot more focus into observing and actively listening to our learners as much as possible, as often as possible, because this is the information we need to shape our coaching.

Lots will change throughout a session – the environment, learner motivations, performance, energy levels etc. – and we are now focussed more on noticing when these changes are happening. We are focussed hard on identifying what is challenging our individual learners most, and what skill development would work best for them as individuals. Because of all of this, tasks are inevitably designed a bit more 'on the hoof' as we go along, often collaboratively, based on continued observation.

So, this time the environment and the learners are providing the ingredients - who they are, what they can/can't do, their goals/aims, their motivations, their equipment, their physiology - and together we then make a meal that is unique to them, rather than something we have planned. It might take longer to cook sometimes, but it will be something that they will find tasty in the end! The coaching we provide is now much more individualised, and the solutions the learners gain end up being far more adaptable, more robust, and unique to them.

This approach also has the advantage that we can tailor what we are doing to the conditions we get, the grade of water we are on – and if any of this changes, we are ready to adapt, rather than clinging to a plan that will no longer work. We can also focus more on finding good challenges for our learners that use the environment well – finding that great eddy move, that great rock hop and that



perfect surf wave. Sometimes tasks still don't work as well as we'd hoped and mistakes happen – but we don't let this phase us too much; we reflect and adapt as we go along.

We are now cooking with that random bag of ingredients, freestyling in the kitchen, taste testing as we go along, making things spicier/mellower as the meal develops, and experimenting throughout the session. Sometimes we might burn things, the meal might not turn out exactly as we wanted, but next time we will know what to change to make it restaurant quality!

Summary and Top Tips

It can be pretty daunting arriving without that recipe we used to cling to so closely. This will feel particularly difficult if your professional life relies on cast iron plans, or it just doesn't fit with your personality. But we must always remember that we paddle in dynamic and changeable environments, with changeable and different people – so our coaching needs to be adaptable to the situation, the environment and our learners, rather than exhaustively pre-planned.

So rather than practising recipe making, and developing more recipes/plans/scripts for our sessions, it is arguably better to practise task-setting as you go along, based on what you are observing and noticing, and based on what your learners are telling you. Just like any skill, developing our ability to do this as coaches won't happen overnight – it requires the ability to build confidence over time, and to gradually wean yourself off the crutch of a more concrete plan.

To build this confidence, first try moving away from your 'recipe book' sessions with learners you know well, or at venues you know well. Then work up to coaching a skill you feel very comfortable with,

but to a group of people you don't know, maybe at a venue you don't know. These types of experiences will help build this confidence to be more 'Ready, Steady, Coach!'.

You might make mistakes along the way, sessions might still nosedive, tasks you think of 'on the hoof' might not work as well as you'd hoped. But this is all part of it, part of learning and part of skill development - and with careful reflection, you'll be able to get better at adapting your coaching in the moment.

It's important to note, this approach heavily relies upon a good technical and tactical knowledge of the discipline and the craft (knowing what makes good paddlers, good!), and being confident in your beliefs. The good news is, this arguably comes from going boating lots, which is what we all love doing anyway; as well as getting a bit geeky sometimes about technique, plus sharing practice and ideas with other paddlers and coaches. So, build plenty of this into your coaching practice as well.

It's also worth stressing that recipes and scripts will still serve us well – we know they can get positive results sometimes. They will always be there when you need them, and they will always have their place within our coaching practice, because of the benefits they hold. However, to make our coaching more meaningful to the individual learners and adaptable to the environment and the conditions, try and build your confidence and ability to be more 'Ready, Steady, Coach!' in your approach, rather than 'Recipe Book'.

So my parting advice is to try and build this into your coaching practice, where and when you can. Who knows – maybe I'll try and take my own advice and try this with my cooking too. But remember if ever I invite you round for dinner, make sure you eat well beforehand.