

Feedback Matters

This edition of coaching corner is all about feedback. Loads of the decisions that we make as coaches relate to feedback; how much, when, what sort? Whether or not we're currently able to get out on the water to coach, it's worth spending a bit of time looking at those choices.

What is feedback?

Feedback is information that a paddler receives as a result of whatever they're doing. Examples might be 'running the Moriston upside down really hurts', 'the run where I did a spin on gate 4 was faster than the previous run', 'my coach just told me to stop leaning back', 'I feel wobbly when I twist round to get the stern rudder in the water' and 'as I slide my paddle further forwards, the canoe starts to sail across the wind'.

As paddlers we receive feedback all the time, through what we feel, what we see and what we hear. As coaches we can choose to help the paddler sort, prioritise and make sense of their own feedback, we can add to it with some feedback of our own, or we can stay quiet and leave them to it.

Decisions, decisions

Question one; the big one. What feedback will help the paddler in front of us? I'm

sure we'll all have had situations both coaching and being coached, where the feedback hasn't helped. We'd hope that a good coach's feedback is going to be technically correct, but it also needs to be the right stuff, delivered in the right way, at a time when the paddler is in the right headspace to deal with it.

Here are a few examples; do any of them chime with your experiences as a coach or as a paddler?

- We're working on a move in the middle of a long rapid. The paddler makes a complete mess of the move, puts the boat onto their shoulder and stomps back up to the top, passing right in front of the coach without making eye contact. The coach is tempted to start a conversation with the paddler, but realises that they don't want to talk right now. The paddler does a second run; it's not perfect, but it's much better. This time the paddler pauses their walk and puts their boat down next to the coach. This time they're ready to talk about it.

"Tell me about it?"

"Well... I made a complete mess of the first run"

"That's OK. It was your first go after all. What about the second time?"

"Better, but I still had to fight to get into the eddy."

"Cool. Take a look at the video – where do you lose your angle?"

The coach starts off with a very open question, nudges the paddler on from beating themselves up about the first run and then listens to what the paddler has to say about their second run. Rather than give their own feedback, the coach focuses the paddler's concentration onto their angle and sets them up to analyse their own run. Clearly for this approach to work, the paddler needs to have some idea of what they're trying to achieve and how they're going to achieve it.

If the coach had succumbed to the temptation to give feedback right after the first run, and decided to open with their own observations, the conversation may have gone more like this...

"You probably want to start pushing across the flow a bit earlier."

"Yeah. I know. I blew it."

"So when are you going to turn to face the eddy? I'd certainly be moving before I got level with the tree."

"Yeah, but I need to punch the top wave first."

The information that the coach gives here is spot on, but the paddler isn't in the right place to take it on board. Their short initial reply suggests they're still



processing their first run. The coach never gives the paddler the opportunity to share their own thoughts and in the paddler's second reply the 'but' suggests they're wanting to pivot away from the coach's suggestion.

- Another coaching session, this time on a loch in touring kayaks. The paddler is working on their stern rudder. In the coach's mind that's a stroke which keeps the kayak running in a straight line without losing much speed, but the paddler keeps trailing their paddle a bit further out from the boat than the coach would expect, slowing the boat down and turning it towards the paddle side.

"What do you expect the boat to do when you do that stroke?"

"To turn towards the paddle side."

"Can you use that stroke to make the boat carry on in a straight line?"

"I'll give it a go."

The paddler tries, but is still spinning the boat towards the paddle side.

"Would you like a thing to tweak or a bit more practice time?"

"Some help would be good."

"Great. Watch me do it, and see whether my front hand is over my boat or out over the water."

The coach does a quick demo...

"It's out over the water."

"Great. So check to see if you can do that."

This time the coach has started off by clarifying what we're trying to achieve and gently nudging the paddler to try something different. The coach gives the paddler choice as to whether or not they want feedback, and then delivers the information they need with a question and a demo. It's much harder to reject a technical point when you've just seen it work!

Finally the coach checks that the paddler has understood, and sets the paddler up to be able to check themselves. The paddler can then go off and connect the input (front hand out over the water) and see if that provides the desired output (boat goes in a straight line). The coach has removed the need from them to keep providing feedback.

- Another coaching session and we're back on the loch, but this time in canoes, with a paddler who has just started paddling solo. The paddler has quite an effective power stroke, but keeps killing

all the speed with her correction stroke. As a result the boat is only creeping forwards and occasionally stalls completely.

"That's not working very well. I keep stopping. Tell me what I need to change."

"OK. Your forwards stroke looks good, but you're killing all the speed when you push the paddle away from the canoe to steer."

"So what do I need to change?"

"Try making the push away shorter and more aggressive. Can I suggest a way to do that?"

"Of course you can. Learning how to do it right is what I'm here for."

"You could try using the paddle on the edge of the boat. Imagine you're trying to snap it. I'll jump into a canoe and show you."

So here the paddler is really clear about what she wants. She knows what the problem is and she wants answers. In this case a load of questioning, discussion, or a long convoluted episode of discovery learning would at least demotivate, if not actively annoy her. The type of direct, coach-given feedback that didn't work in the first example is exactly what is required here.

The coach's job is to identify the right feedback that will help the paddler, and to deliver it in a way that works for them.

More choices

If we know the paddler we're coaching well, it becomes much easier to guess when they're in the right place to receive feedback, how much they'll want, and how they'd like to receive it. If we're coaching somebody for the first time, we can either try to read their face and body language as we coach them, or simply ask them what they want. Questions like 'how can I help?', 'would you like a tip?', 'would you like a challenge or a suggestion?', 'what would success look like?' could all help the coach fine tune their session to work better for the paddler.

Student gained or coach given?

As coaches we want to give. It can sometimes feel like the more information we throw at the paddler, the better we're doing our job. However, the coach saying something, isn't the same as the paddler understanding it, being able to do it, or feeling it. When we look at paddlers, we might pick up on several different factors that we think could be improved. We need to prioritise and select a small number of points (often just one) that we think will produce the most improvement. If all we ever do is tell the paddler

how we think it should be done, we run a number of risks. Firstly there's no guarantee that the way we think it should be done is the way that will work best for the paddler. Although we all have the same physics (e.g. a forward stroke close in to your boat will have less of a turning effect than one that's done further out), we all have different biomechanics (e.g. strength, balance, flexibility).

Secondly, even if the coach is giving the paddler perfectly accurate information, there are times when we need the paddler to be able to solve their own problems. The coach won't be there when the paddler goes off line halfway down the rapid, out back, beyond the breakers when the paddler is trying to decide whether or not to land on the beach, or even out on the loch when the wind picks up.

You definitely see paddlers where as soon as they've done a move, the first thing they do is look up to their coaches to see if they've done it 'right'. It might be that the first few times the paddler tries something new, where they don't know what something should feel like or look like, that we do need to provide this feedback; but our job as a coach is to get the paddler through this stage, to a place where they can judge for themselves whether they've done a good one or not! Providing self-checks, agreeing ways to measure success, setting challenges or discovery tasks or even holding a video camera or stopwatch are all ways the coach might help the paddler become their own judge.

Inputs or Outputs?

There are few things more irritating than being told what you already know. Imagine a rolling session where all the coach ever did was say 'well done... you came up there', or 'bad luck... you just swam out of your boat'. The paddler often knows the output - the result of what they just did - but not always. A racing paddler might well want to know their time, a beginner might have been too preoccupied with not falling in to notice that they just carved their boat around in a lovely smooth arc.

For a paddler to improve, they usually need to make a connection between an input (knowledge of performance) - what we did or what we changed - and an output (knowledge of results) - what that makes the boat do.

As coaches we can help learners decide which inputs to focus their attention on (e.g. 'try it again and tell me how much pressure you feel on your thigh braces as you do the stroke').

We can set up other ways for them to receive feedback (e.g. 'work in pairs and tell your partner where their chest and tummy are facing as they start the stroke'). We can set up rating scales (e.g. 'on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 is flat and 5 is where you're about to fall in, how does your edge change through the move?') We can point a video camera at them, or we can simply just tell them what we saw! It often makes sense to set these things up before the paddler attempts the move rather than asking them to recall what happened afterwards.

We can also help them to make the connections between inputs and outputs (e.g. 'what happens to the tightness of the turn when you go from a number 2 edge to a number 4 edge?')

As an aside, I reckon that a load of connections that we all use to make the quick, reactive movements that control our boats in dynamic environments happen at a subconscious level. If we focus on these aspects and get the cognitive mind involved, the paddler might well get worse before they get better!

Positive, Negative or Neutral?

Most people are at least partly motivated by praise, but too much could be perceived as insincere. Clearly the balance will vary from paddler to paddler. Neutral feedback is simply stating what you saw without judgement (e.g. 'the bow of the SUP came out of the water as you slithered your foot back and started the turn'). Of course what the coach perceived as neutral may well be perceived as positive or negative by the paddler (e.g. 'great, the bow came up like it's supposed to' versus 'the coach said I slithered my foot back, that sounds like I must have done it wrong').

One way to structure neutral feedback is observation – effect – change (e.g. 'you're hitting the side of your boat when you do your draw stroke, I think that's giving you a moment where you're a bit off balance, maybe try slicing the blade back out before it reaches the boat').

Common pitfalls

- Giving feedback on what we've seen, before we've listened to what the paddler thinks.

- Not listening to what the paddler has to say, because our brain is full of what we want to say.

- Giving feedback when the paddler doesn't want or need it.
- Giving feedback on something that was a one off.
- Giving feedback before the paddler has had a chance to make sense of what they've done.
- Giving feedback when the paddler is still doing the move and hasn't got enough spare brain to process it.

If we're lucky enough to be out on the water, perhaps we can think about feedback in our next coaching session. We could start noticing if different paddlers and different groups want their feedback differently. If you're currently off the water, can you look back on a coaching session you've run and think about how you managed the feedback? Where did it come from? Was it the right stuff at the right time?

Thanks for reading, I hope 2021 proves to be a less memorable year than 2020 and look forward to us all getting out and about on the water a whole lot more in the new year.

Paddle Scotland Guidebook



The Andy Jackson Fund for Access is proud to be taking pre-orders for Paddle Scotland, our latest guidebook. It is a rewrite and update of Scottish Canoe Touring and covers river trips on canals, lochs, gentle coast and grade 1-2 (with the odd portageable grade 3) rivers.

It's designed to work for canadian canoeists, kayaks and the increasingly popular paddleboarders. The trips have been made easier to digest giving many single-day or half-day options. To help you find your way there the guide has maps showing you the way and location coordinates ready to type into your phone. And it all comes in full colour with photos contributed by the wonderful Scottish paddling community.

I asked the lead author and editor Eddie Palmer what had been the reason for the rewrite and what new trips had he found in doing it: "The new edition was prompted mainly when copies of the



old Touring book had nearly sold out. Did we need to review the content, and coverage? Yes, because although rivers and lochs stay where they are, humans always interfere, building new things like weirs and roads and taking away parking etc.

If anything (unfortunately) access gets worse, so, for example, an open section of river bank, maybe not very large, is included in a new housing estate. Sometimes, a new road bridge over a river leaves a nice section of old road doing nothing so it might be used for parking.

New routes were suggested by paddlers going exploring. A good example being Jonathan Kitching's new Cross-Scotland route - a rather horrific road portage (solution: do it early on a summer morning!), but there is also lots of easy loch and river paddling. Franco had also surmised, quite accurately, the need for the SETs - Short Easy Trips, so we both went to look at current entries, to work out basically half-day trips, no obstacles such as weir portages, and so no worries.

Paddling has changed, maybe partly due to Covid restrictions, with lots of people asking 'how can I get out and do a short trip with no worries?'

Any profits from the book go to the Andy Jackson Fund for Access, and if you buy direct rather than from a book shop that gives even more money to charity. We are Scotland's charity for funding access projects to get more paddlers on the water. In recent years we have helped fund a safety sign on the River Muick above the beater's bridge. We granted Pinkston £1000 to help keep them afloat (pun intended) during the 2020 March lockdown. In 2019 we funded removing a tree that had fallen across the River Avon in Lanarkshire, a joint venture with the local council. And in 2018 we helped pay for some steps on the River Blackwater in Perthshire.

We are always on the lookout for new projects to help fund, if you have a popular paddling spot which could do with some new infrastructure such as information signs or steps or a boat park or buying a compost toilet, please do apply to the fund. andyjacksonfund.org.uk

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