

Time Off The Water

George Fell discusses using this enforced lockdown period to develop our coaching skills...

I'm putting this edition's Coaching Corner together in the middle of May, two months into the COVID-19 lockdown. Right now some folks are working flat out, while others are wondering how to fill their time. Some folks are really missing their paddling and their coaching; for others it's irrelevant as they deal with much bigger more urgent challenges.

If you do have the time and the motivation, here are a few thoughts as to how we could use our 'off the water' time to develop our coaching. As usual this article is much more about asking questions than supplying answers.

Do some focused navel-gazing

As coaches we spend all our time trying to help other paddlers. Can you free up an hour to think about how to help yourself? Look back on some of your coaching experiences; use those experiences to check and challenge your beliefs about your coaching; then come up with a plan to help you develop as both a paddler and a coach.

Some folks love doing that kind of thing, others hate it. Trying to be completely candid about our strengths and weaknesses can be tough. We won't always want to do it, but we can all benefit from it.

When coaching (and life!) are going well is often when I'm in the best place to be honest with myself; but paradoxically it's when things are going poorly that I benefit the most from some sincere reflection. Taking a bit of time out to think about what we do and how we do it, rather than frantically planning our next session, is time well spent. As with most skills, the more we do it, the more it becomes second nature.

What's the best environment?

For me I'm useless if I try to sit down and reflect. I need some low level activity or I head off on tangents (or get bored and start eating cheese sandwiches!) Conversely whatever I'm doing needs to be fairly straightforward or I don't have any spare brain. Early morning walks

work for me; what's the best environment for you?

What's the best way to record your thoughts?

If I head out for a stroll it's great when I come up with a new idea, but that's useless if I've forgotten it by the time I get home. Notepad, phone, friend with a good memory – what will help you keep hold of your thoughts?

Big picture or little picture?

Do you work best starting from your feelings about your strengths and weaknesses as a coach, and drilling down into detail from there? Are you better starting off with a particular event; checking to see if it fits into a pattern and then working up to a theme?

Little picture experiences

If I just start thinking about events, sometimes I'll get useful stuff, sometimes I'll get nothing and other times I'll just go round circles thinking about my most recent coaching experiences.

Here are a couple of structures that might help us extract useful learning from our experiences;



Or more succinctly;



Big picture profiling

If we're starting off by taking a bird's eye view of our coaching abilities there's a range of different approaches we can use. At one extreme we all have our own thoughts about what makes a good coach. We can try to rate ourselves against these ideals.

At the other end of the spectrum you could rate yourself against somebody else's ideas - britishcanoeingawarding.org.uk/coach-self-analysis/ is one place to start. It's written for people working towards the coach award so please

bear that in mind if you're coming at coaching from another direction. As with anything automatic, it's only as good as the information that you put into it.

If you only ever rate yourself against your own ideas then you're bound to miss opportunities to develop. Conversely, if you spend your life trying to conform to somebody else's template of good coaching, you'll lose out on the chance to develop your own individual style. For all of us there's probably a happy blend somewhere in the middle.

Either way, we don't know what we don't know. Do you have a friend with whom you could chat about your coaching? They might uncover things that you didn't expect. Do you have someone you've coached who you can talk to? It's great to have people we can trust to point out both our strengths and our weaknesses.

It's also important to have a good idea of where that person is coming from; someone with similar opinions to your own can really help to explore fine detail; somebody with very different opinions can help to challenge and change your views.

Remember that coaching is much more than knowing the big words. How good is your own paddling right now? Would your technical and tactical understanding be improved by spending a bit more time out on the water working on your own paddling? What about your confidence in your paddling and your coaching? Honest reflection is always useful, but beating yourself up about stuff that hasn't worked isn't.

Symptoms or causes?

If we're coaching and we notice a paddler keeping their body rigidly facing the front of the boat and paddling using just their arms, then we've spotted something that's probably limiting them. Before we can decide what (if anything) to do about it, we need to find out why: Lack of flexibility? Feeling unstable? Posture? Injury? Outfitting? Lack of technical knowledge? It's just the same when we turn our gaze to our own coaching. We can spot the symptoms, but what we really need to do is identify the causes.

“We are limited right now. Lots of changes can't happen until we're all back on the water, paddling and coaching. What are the areas that you can start working straight away?”

I'm at a gentle beach break with a middle aged sea kayaker, trying to help them with their surfing. It's not going well; they don't look happy and they're paddling really timidly. Do I need to spend more time trying building more trust between us? Am I being too flippant or too serious? Are the conditions wrong? Did I misunderstand them when I thought they were keen to get into the surf? Am I choosing the wrong task? Am I taking or giving too much control? Do I need to come up with more tasks and progressions? Is it my own personal performance that's the limiting factor? Is it just late in the day, they're tired? If so do I need to think about how I sequence the day?

Or is it me who's flagging at the end of the day; should I be working on my own endurance? Are they scared and I haven't changed what we're doing to take that into account? Or is it some other

factor that I've not picked up on? If I've identified a cause, was it a one-off that only occurred in that unique combination of paddler, task and environment, or can I think of similar occasions? Is there a theme? Is this illuminating a whole area of my coaching that I could work on?

Plan

Once I've identified some things to work on, what am I actually going to do to improve them? If I've got some ideas, would it be worth talking them through with a friend? Are there other ways that would give me more improvement for less effort? We are limited right now. Lots of changes can't happen until we're all back on the water, paddling and coaching. What are the areas that you can start working straight away?

Does it sound like an easy change to make or is it going to take ages? What resources do I need? Do I need to find some sacrificial students to try out some

new ideas on!? How much time and effort will it require? How long will it take? With something as subjective as coaching, how will I know if I've got better? If the plan doesn't seem to be helping, how long am I going to stick with it before I try something different?

Whatever you do remember that the year isn't over yet. Whatever the future holds there are bound to be some opportunities for learning. Hopefully we'll get back onto the water fired up and even better prepared to help people with their paddling.

Thanks to Matt, Laura and Jenny for help with this article. In the next coaching corner I'd like to ask some questions about what socially-distant coaching might look like. There will doubtless be a load of challenges and frustrations, but it might also force us to be clever with our coaching and ultimately make us do a better job.

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The following centres and providers are members of the British Canoeing Quality Mark scheme (previously known as Approved Paddlesport Provider scheme); having been inspected and met the minimum requirements to deliver Paddlesport activities. The inspection includes a sampling of coaching activity, staff qualifications, equipment, policies and procedures. The SCA make recommendations only to Quality Mark providers.



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