

Taking Flight!

Matt Haydock looks at the stages of the coaching process, and the journey we go on with our learners...

Coaching is all about going on a journey with a learner to a destination, and in this month's Coaching Corner, with the usual help of analogies to digest theory, we are going to imagine that journey is a flight on a plane.

First off, this flight could be short haul or long haul. For some coaches, the bulk of your paddlesport coaching is taking people for shorter sessions of a day or less. Others may be engaged in longer term coaching, working with learners on a weekly basis for six months or longer. Of course some of you may do a bit of both! We can certainly apply everything below to both types of learning experience.

Why are we on the plane?

From the start, gaining an understanding of the motivations of our learners is really important. Taking time to find out what paddling means to them can really help shape our coaching. As a coach, I often ask the question "there must be a reason you get up on Sunday morning, in the dark, in January when it's freezing, to go paddling on your day off. What is it?". For some it will be motivation for performance results and competition, others it may be the social connection with others, the feeling of achievement and skill mastery, connection to wild places – the list goes on.

It could be an intrinsic motivation (they just want to be the best paddler that they can be, and improve their own performance, rather than comparing it to anything else). Or it could be an extrinsic motivation (to be able to keep up with their friends, or achieve an award). Why someone has engaged with coaching and learning will be inherently linked to their paddling motivations. Indeed, many people may not actually be able to put their finger on what their motivations actually are, or might not be honest about them – but asking the question and starting the conversation can be really useful.



Likewise, what are our motivations as a coach? Why are we on the plane? Why have we decided to give up our time to support the development of others – what do we get from it? It could be financial gain of course, but equally, there must be a reason we also got up on the same cold, dark January morning to run the session. Again, it's useful to consider what your motivations are as a coach as well, as this will also influence and shape the coaching process.

Where are we flying to?

Establishing a destination for this learning journey is important – what are the learner's goals, aims and aspirations. Often we might get some answers that, although genuine, can be a bit woolly. A common example is: "I'd like to be and feel more confident". As a coach, trying to get the learner to add some specificity to this is useful. For example, this could be describing a move, position or conditions/grade where they don't feel confident. You can also ask what situations (social, environmental etc.) breed a lack of, or a gain in, confidence. A good starter question can be "Where is your paddling now and where would you like it to be?" to tap into potential goals and aspirations. The best answer I ever

got to this was: "Well, we are in Nairn, and I would like to be in Marbella!" - not what I meant!

Goals, aims and aspirations can of course have short, medium and long term aspects to them. They could be qualification-based (beneficial because you have a framework, though can sometimes add pressure), based around a particular trip or river, or just simply aiming to look good for Instagram. With our destination set for our flight (our goals and aims decided), as we fly there, we should still use our flight deck instruments to measure our progress. Checking in throughout the coaching process to measure our goals is useful, and make sure they are still realistic and achievable. We may need to divert to another airport (set a revised goal) if required.

Flying the plane together. Who is flying it when?

Once we are up in the air and the coaching is off and running, we often have choices as to who is steering the session. Picture a pilot (coach) and co-pilot (learner) at the controls of the plane. There might be times when it's appropriate for the coach to be steering – they are setting the tasks and

the parameters, making the decisions about where and how to structure the practice, and the learner is working with a technical and tactical model that the coach has designed. This may be appropriate to manage safety, because the learner needs support and a model to work with, or because the learner isn't in a headspace to solve problems – they just need answers. The coach is very much flying the plane.

This is contrasted with the learner flying the plane. In this instance, the learner will be adopting a problem-solving approach with an element of creativity, embracing trial and error to find their own solutions in the environment, rather than following a prescriptive coach-defined method. They will be developing their ability to perceive the environment for themselves more through feel, and also the ability to produce their own right action at the right time, in the right place. The coach may define a few things if needed and be on hand for support; they might tell a learner where to look, but not what to see.

Whilst there's discussion around which is the best approach for skill acquisition, both are valuable. The skill of coaching is adopting the right approach, at the right time, in the right place, with the right learner, and the right method of feedback. Sometimes we may relinquish control to the co-pilot so they can get a better feel for flying the aircraft; at other times the pilot may need to take control back again. Plenty of 'steering wheel swapping' usually results in a safe and productive flight.

Ascending or Descending?

As well as steering the plane in a particular direction, we may also need to control its speed or elevation. We will often need to make decisions around when learners expand their comfort zones and stretch or challenge their paddling. There are times we may need to take some risks and push the throttle or ascend, and there are times we may need to reign things back, descend or slow things down. This might be a collaborative decision between coach and learner, but sometimes we will need to make it for them as coaches.

We sometimes spend time coaching for more advanced environments. For example, practising skills on grade 3 water in preparation for 4 and above, or practising skills in force 3 winds in preparation for force 5. This often allows us to break down skills without too much of a psychological barrier.

However, at some point, we will need to expand comfort zones and do some coaching in these more advanced environments - face these psychological challenges, and begin to develop the confidence and fast decision-making skills required to perform and be more comfortable here. Taking that leap to expand comfort zones will be needed at some point, and likewise, we may need to retreat back again if it all gets too much. The timing of when we go from 'coaching for' to 'coaching in' harder places is often pivotal to the success of a learning experience on the water.

As a coach, we need to push the throttle or ascend at just the right time when the learner has the energy and psychological robustness to be stretched, rather than panic.

Always expect turbulence!

Never forget that 'learning is uncomfortable'. Sometimes a flight can be smooth and relaxing, but often there'll be times when it is not that pleasurable of an experience. You might be delayed and stressed because you are going to miss your connection, the drinks trolley may knock your elbow, someone may be snoring next to you or the in-flight meal is horrible. Likewise, when we are developing our paddling and learning new skills, that experience isn't always comfortable. We might get frustrated because we can't make the move we are striving



to do, we might feel out of control, we might get scared, we might mess up in front of our friends, we might take a swim, or coach and learner might get frustrated with each other. All of these things are part of any learning experience, and approaching the experience with the mindset that this is unavoidable, and embracing that fact, is key. This way coach and learner can focus more on enjoying the learning journey together.

Unwind in the Pilot's Lounge afterwards

Reflecting and reviewing from a learning experience and a coaching session is incredibly valuable. Chatting things through - maybe writing stuff down if that works for you - and forming plans for the future is always a useful process. There are ways we can do this better both as coaches and learners, and that will be the topic of the next Coaching Corner article. In the meantime sit back, relax and enjoy your flight - and your coaching!

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