

Take Two Coaches

George Fell looks at how different coaches, coach...

Over the next few articles I'd like to look at how different coaches coach. I'd like to start off with two (mostly) imaginary coaches. I say mostly, because they're both composites made

up of different coaches I've paddled with and different sessions I've seen over the years. They're both going to run really good introductory sessions, but coming at it from two quite different directions.

Because they're coaching in my imaginary world, we can pause their sessions and chat with them from time to time to find out why they're doing what they're doing. We'll also catch up with the learners at the end.

1. Amy

History

Amy first paddled in Scouts. She got into paddling when she joined her college kayak club. She stopped paddling in her twenties, but joined her local club a couple of years ago and now helps out with the coaching. She's also a Hockey coach which influences some of her ideas about coaching.

Venue

Amy is running a kayak session for beginners at her local pool. It's autumn and she thinks that the pool provides a great environment for an intro session, with clear warm water where people are less likely to be worried about falling in. Because it's such a controlled environment Amy feels she can get people more or less straight onto the water.

Hi everyone. I'm Amy. Are you all here for the beginners' session? Has everyone filled in the club medical form? If there's anything else you need to tell me that might affect your paddling then let me know. Have any of you paddled before, even if it was ages ago at primary school? [A few sheepish nods] Does anybody swim? [Everybody does]. Great. In that case is everyone OK to get in the pool and have a quick warm up swim? Come back to me when you're ready for more.

Right. Let's do another couple of widths only this time let's do front crawl. Cool. Now for a team game. Can you work together to push this (upright) boat from one side to the other?

Now same again with the boat full of water. Awesome. Same challenge only this time with a paddle in your hands. Try not to whack one another! [Vague hilarity ensues as people move themselves around using the paddles. Most people

seem to start to get a feel for feathering the blades]

Cool. Let's pop the paddles on the side and this time let's sit in the boats [cue 5 minutes of boat outfitting faff]. Now let's try to move them around on the water just using your hands. If you fall in, just push your boat to the side and I'll help you empty it.

[Again lots of entertainment as people start off spinning around in circles but generally start to some idea of alternating sides. A couple of the beginners look slightly perplexed.]

Well done everyone. Now let's put all that together and see if we can work out how to move the boats around using the paddles.

How did that go?

That went alright. I wanted to give them a nice safe environment where they can invent how to paddle. A load of them had paddled before, and even those who hadn't knew how to walk and how to swim. I think most people can work out how to make a boat move around on the water if you give them a bit of time. And most people seem to really enjoy working it out.

Of course, sometimes they don't and sometimes they invent crazy stuff. That's the skill of the coach. To set the right challenge in the right spot so they invent stuff that's going to work for them.

How to steer

Well done folks. Give me a wave if you can more or less make your boat go where you want? Cool. Let's split into small groups, with at least one of the wavers in each group. Can you share in your groups what you're doing with your paddle to stop your boat from spinning round in circles? [one group invents something that looks a bit like a sweep

at the front of the boat, the other invents something a bit like a reverse sweepy, ruddery thing]

Well done folks. So can you show the other team what you've come up with and get them to have a go. So you've now had a go at both of those things. Which one is going to work best if you want to keep your speed up? Which one is going to work best if you're trying to lose a bit of speed?

Cool. So let's have a little game. You're all going to be moving forwards all the time and the challenge is not to crash into each other. Sounds easy so far? The tricky bit is I want you to this [indicates] side of me, and I'm going to slowly shrink the area.

How did that go?

I think that went alright. I wasn't sure what they were going to come up with for steering. I don't particularly like that backwards, slowing down stroke they invented, I find that once somebody discovers that, it becomes their main way of steering and they keep losing all their momentum. But they had just invented it and it did work, so it wasn't wrong; I just tried to clarify what it's used for and then selected a game which would favour the forwards sweep.

Let's pause the sessions there and speak to some of the learners.. How did you enjoy that?

● "I really enjoyed that. It was fun. I got really involved with the games and challenges and at the end of the session I got loads better."

...but in contrast..

● "If she knows how to do it I wish she'd just told me. I turned up to the session to be taught how to paddle and instead we just played a load of games."

2. Andy

History

Andy first paddled at an outdoor centre as a kid. He joined his local club where he used to both paddle rivers and compete. He's picked up loads of paddling experience over the years. His coaching is based on both his experience of being coached and what seems to work when he runs sessions.

Venue

Andy is running an open canoe session for beginners at his local club which backs on to a very gently flowing bit of river. It's nice weather for autumn, the trees are just starting to turn and it's great to be outside. It's slightly chilly, but Andy plans to run a short active session and he reckons that if the paddlers can't deal with a bit of chilliness, they're probably never going to get into the sport.

Hi everyone. I'm Andy. Has anyone not filled in a participation form? Welcome to the River Erehwon. It's a great place to learn to paddle, in fact it's where I learnt to paddle 20 years ago. I'm as keen as you are to get out on the water, but before that there's some stuff you need to know.

Let's have a look at our canoes. So you can see they've all got 2 seats and you can see they've all got airbags. They just mean the boat has plenty of buoyancy even if you choose to turn it upside down!

Let's aim to sit in them like this. [Demonstrates kneeling with hips rotated towards paddle side] If your knees won't let you do that, then this will work too [demonstrates sitting on seat with knees against sides of canoe]. Great. Find a friend and I'd suggest that for now we'll have the lighter person in the front. Let's just have a quick sit in our boats here on the bank. [Wanders round giving feedback on seating position and posture].

Can you all grab a paddle? This bit is called the T-grip. If you kneel down and hold it upside down like this with the T-grip on the floor and your hand just here at the paddle end of the shaft, your hand

wants to be somewhere in front of your face. Swap paddles until we've got ones around about the right sort of size.

Cool, so start off by holding it like this [strikes a pose with paddle horizontal above head and elbows at right angles]. Grand. So that's a good distance apart to have your hands. Now find yourself a bit of space and copy me. [Mimes paddling]

See how the paddle is nice and vertical. Carry on paddling.

Great. Now watch how my body spins from side to side as I paddle. Winding up to reach out and unwinding to bring the paddle back. See if you can copy that.

So a couple of things before we get on the water. Let's quickly check our buoyancy aids with our partner. Let's make sure the straps are done up [demonstrates with another paddler] and you can check mine. Then let's work together to carry the boats to the water.

These are lovely stable boats, but if anybody does manage to fall in. Pop yourself out of your boat, check your buddy is OK and give me a wave. I'll let you know what to do next. Righty-ho. Once I'm out on the water, see if you can paddle over to me.

How did that go?

I was pretty happy with that. Most of the stuff I did there was pretty well tried and tested; I know it works with most people. I think that beginners don't really know what good paddling looks like or feels like, so they need some information and bit of a picture to get them up an running. That's the coach's first job; to get through all that stuff as fast as possible on dry land so they can get safely out onto the water and start paddling around. That's where the fun really begins.

How to steer

Nice one. Can you get yourself over to the pontoon facing upstream. [Drops in and helps nudge the last few boats into the pontoon] It looks as though you've all managed to get your canoes here, so it seems not only can you move forwards but you can steer a bit. Let me show you

a couple of ways to make that a bit more efficient and then we'll really be able to make the boats dance.

So if we want to turn towards the bow paddler's side, the bow paddler can reach out away from the boat, and pull the paddle in towards the boat before they do their normal paddle stroke. Stern paddler – you just keep on paddling. [Jumps in the front of a tandem to demonstrate] Have you seen enough to be able to have a go? Go for it! [Drops in useful bits of feedback as people are paddling round]

Now let's do the mirror image. If we want to turn towards the stern paddler's side, let's do a normal forwards stroke and then push the paddle away from the boat. Bow paddlers, what's your job? Just keep paddling forwards. Brilliant. So let's play a game. We're all going to start off from the pontoon paddling forwards; when I blow my whistle once that means turn left, when I blow my whistle twice that means turn right and three blast means come back to me.

How did that go?

They seem to be getting it. I'm never sure what's the best steering stroke combination to teach first in tandem. These two are a bit more complicated, but they keep the boat moving and they seemed like quite a capable group. Once they'd got the two directions sorted, I upped the ante by making them respond to my whistle blasts, so they just have to do it and can't plan it as well.

Let's pause the sessions there and speak to some of the learners.. How did you enjoy that?

● "That was great. I felt really safe and I knew exactly what I needed to do and what was expected of me. I got loads of useful teaching and got much better." ..but in contrast...

● "It was fine, but it felt a bit like being at school. I found I could turn the boat really quickly by jabbing the paddle in at the front, but he told me to go back to just paddling forwards."

Here's what I take from this

1. However you coach, you can't please all the people all of the time.
2. If you could choose when to coach like Amy and when to coach like Andy, then you could please more people more of the time.

3. What you believe about coaching, teaching and learning will affect how you coach.

We'll unpick this a bit more in the next Coaching Corner. In the meantime do you coach more like Amy or Andy? Which of them would you prefer to be coached by? Would that change if you were working on a different skill, in a different environment

or another boat? What are pros and cons of each of their approaches?

Comments are welcome on the coaching corner Facebook page at fb.me/coachingcornerscotland

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