

Coaching The Coach

George Fell discusses the benefits of coaches applying the coaching ideas and concepts to themselves as well as the student...

In the last article we looked at the concepts of identity and confidence, and applied them to the paddlers that we're coaching. In this article we're going to take a look at attribution, return to identity, and apply those ideas to ourselves – the coaches.

It's easier to apply our coaching ideas to other people! Putting the outside world to rights is always fun. It's harder but arguably also more useful to apply them to ourselves.

Attribution: If it went well, why?

Previously we looked at how we can see our failures as an opportunity for learning, or dwell on them as a reflection of our lack of ability. Failing to make a move might be a huge setback for one paddler whilst it inspires another to try harder or practice differently.

At least as a paddler it's hard for me to ignore the outcome – as I'm bobbing around in the eddy, out of my boat, it's hard to deny that I've just had a swim. However, I might attribute different causes to it:

- "I knew I shouldn't have followed Sarah's line."
- "I didn't drive the boat hard enough towards the right – I'm rubbish at that."
- "I didn't drive the boat hard enough towards the right – I need to work on that."
- "This is a really slow boat – if I get a newer model I'll be able to do the move."
- "I shouldn't have run the rapid – I wasn't feeling up to it today," or maybe even...
- "Waaaaagh – I hate kayaking – it sucks!"

You can see that some of those statements lead to people getting better and being happier in their paddling; others don't!

I think reflecting on a coaching session is much harder because the outcome is often much less clear cut. "Some bits worked and some bits didn't. The paddlers got a bit better and seemed to be fairly engaged for most but not all of the session", would be a fair summary of most coaching sessions I run. Different coaches could run identical sessions; for one it would be a triumph and for another a disaster.

Here are three coaches looking back on exactly the same session:



Alan: "The paddlers looked tired and just weren't firing on all cylinders tonight. They really dropped off in the second half of the session. When I set the

final task crossing the flow they just didn't have any gas left in the tank to accelerate up the eddy and hold angle. That was what caused the swim at the end. Next week they need to turn up well rested and ready to perform."



Brenda: "They weren't performing at their usual level. It felt like quite a slow start. Maybe if I'd turned the first

drill into more of a game they'd have got more involved and we'd have been able to keep up a higher pace for the rest of the session. The swim at the end was a shame – maybe if I'd set an easier task or built up to it more slowly it'd have gone better. Still swims happen and they seemed to bounce back from it fine. Every time I set a task it's a gamble – you win some, you lose some!"



Charlie: "Well that wasn't one of my better days. I just didn't inspire them today. If Brenda had been running that session I bet they'd

have had a load more fun. I wonder if they'll all come back for next week's session."

Alan attributes the outcome of the session entirely to the paddlers. This allows him to bolster his identity and maintain his confidence in himself as a coach but decreases his opportunities for learning. It would be interesting to know if Alan would have attributed the outcomes differently if it had been a more successful session.

Brenda attributes the outcome of the session to both herself and the paddlers. She sees that she could have done things differently and that this may have resulted in a more successful coaching session, but also acknowledges that you can't replay reality, so she'll never know. She manages to learn from the session without it damaging either her confidence or her identity as a coach.

Charlie attributes the outcome of the session entirely to his actions. He compares himself unfavourably with Brenda and decreases his confidence in himself as a coach without actually coming to any useful conclusions that would help him improve. It would be interesting to know if Charlie would have taken credit for his good decisions if the session had gone really well, or just found other aspects to beat himself up about. I think in different situations we'll behave like each of the three coaches, but perhaps we'd be both better and happier if we could be more like Brenda for more of the time. Becoming aware of which of the coaches we're currently behaving most like sounds like a great start.

Identity: Are you a paddler who coaches or a coach who paddles?

Do you see other coaches through the lens of their ability in a boat, or how effectively they help others to improve? Or both? Do you believe you can coach a skill well without being able to do it well yourself? None of those questions have definitive right or wrong answers, but different coaches will give very different answers.

Let's meet the two coaches who sit at different ends of the continuum.

Moira is an excellent paddler. She started off in competition, but she now mostly paddles recreationally and coaches within her club. Some paddlers in the club are really motivated to be coached by her because of her background and how powerfully and accurately she paddles. Others are intimidated by her direct approach to coaching which mirrors how she was taught. From her perspective the

people who avoid her coaching sessions just aren't cut out to be performers. Moira trains a couple of times a week. The club asked if she wanted to go on a coaching course – she could think of few worse ways to spend a weekend than having a load of that left-field, arty-farty coaching nonsense inflicted on her by some self-appointed gurus, who don't even boat very well. However, she does keep on top of developments in technique, both by talking to paddlers she respects and by watching video of the best paddlers.

On the other hand... Mike is a great coach. He has spent a great deal of time and effort reflecting on his coaching experience and learning to adapt what he does to help the paddlers he has in front of him. He's great at choosing just the right venue to challenge paddlers a bit, but not too much. Paddlers almost always have a good time when they get coached by Mike, but the techniques he's teaching are those of 20 years ago when he was learning to paddle.

Mike is aware he's never been an amazing paddler, but he knows he can paddle well enough to manage the safety of his group, and to him that's as good as he needs to be. As the paddlers

“It's easier to apply our coaching ideas to other people! Putting the outside world to rights is always fun. It's harder but arguably also more useful to apply them to ourselves.”

Mike works with improve, they begin to outperform him. As they paddle with other people and watch the world's best boaters online, they sometimes notice the differences between what they've been taught and what the others are doing.

Mike has signed up for the next coaching course, but he has no plans to get out on the water and work on his own paddling.

For both coaches here, their priorities are influenced by their identity. For Moira – the paddler who coaches – it's about the performance. For Mike – the coach who paddles – it's about the learning. As with all of us, Moira and Mike will be both be great coaches for some situations and terrible coaches in other situations. Both of them aspire to be closer to their ideal of a perfect coach, but those two ideals look very different.

From my perspective, Moira would benefit most from developing her coaching skills whilst Mike would get the

most improvement from working on his paddling; but neither is likely to, because they're not the areas that are important to them.

Are you more like Mike or Moira?

The reality is that most of us will sit somewhere on a spectrum between these two caricatures. We all have a finite amount of time and effort that we can put into developing ourselves and we'll all invest that differently based on what we value and how we see our identity.

Perhaps the better we can pin down who we're trying to be as coaches, the more we can consciously decide whether to develop our weaknesses or play to our strengths.

In the next issue we'll delve deeper into that question "who are we trying to be?". For now I'm wishing you all many happy days on the water in 2020, where we can be helpful to our learners and kind to ourselves.

