

Demonstrating Skills

George Fell looks at the role of demonstrations in coaching...

Take a moment to remember a demonstration of a skill which helped you improve your boating. Try to visualise the whole demo as vividly as you can. Here are a few questions;

- Who gave the demonstration – a friend, another course participant or the coach?
- Where were you observing it from – water level, from above, in front, alongside?
- Was the demonstration done perfectly, was it at a more attainable skill level or indeed was it an imitation of what you were doing?
- Did you get any information before the demonstration – what to pay attention to?
- Did the demonstration have an obvious start and finish?
- Was the demonstration done at normal speed, or slower/faster?
- Did the demonstrator exaggerate any element of the performance?
- Was the demonstration silent or did the demonstrator add information during the demo?
- How many times did you get to see the demonstration?
- Did you get to have a go between successive demonstrations?
- Did the demonstration change what you think or change what you feel - and if your answer is no to both, then what use was it?
- Who made all of those decisions - you or the coach?

If you have the time, I've put some of these questions up as a poll on the Coaching Corner facebook page at fb.me/coachingcornerscotland. It would be interesting to see if across paddling we have similar or different answers.

What are demonstrations good for?

They're great for giving a picture of what an unfamiliar skill looks like.

- Some coaches believe that's because it gives the learner's conscious brain a load of information to copy the coach's own recipe for the skill. These people might give the observer some key points, or ask the observer some questions, prior to the demonstration.



- Other coaches believe that if helps the learner's unconscious brain avoid a load of dead ends as it searches for its best movement pattern. These people might just demonstrate and then encourage the learners to give it a go.
- Most coaches will tend to use a correct speed, in the real environment demonstration of the whole skill at this point.

They're great to set a task or challenge – can you make your boat do this, can you put your boat here? With some groups I don't even need to ask them – they'll see me do something and just try it.

- Here I'm not necessarily looking for them to copy my technique, just to achieve the task. My job is to pick the right level of challenge – not so easy they can do it right away, but not so hard they get frustrated.

They're a great to show a solution when somebody is stuck.

- Now I might direct their attention to the element of the demo, (e.g. what my angle as I cross the eddyline). They're great to emphasise or examine an element of a familiar skill.

- Here the coach might choose to demonstrate either the whole skill, or just an element of the skill.

They're great to flag up an element of a paddler's performance. Essentially they're a very cheap video, where the coach can control the outcome, you can see the screen in bright sunshine and the batteries never run out!

- Here the coach might choose to copy the paddler's performance, so they can see what they're doing, and perhaps also demonstrate another way of performing the task.

- Some coaches might choose to exaggerate an element of the paddler's performance when copying them.

- Some coaches might choose to give a verbal cue e.g. "top arm!" during their demo.

Of course everything we do is a demonstration, not just the bits that we intend to be. For better or for worse, we all seem to be hard-wired to copy what goes on around us. Loads of us will have had a moment coaching a paddler when you ask yourself "why on earth are they doing that?" followed by the realisation

that they're copying one of our own bad habits.

When would I avoid using a demo?

- For some people, it's really important to question, understand and build their cognitive recipe for the skill before they see it.
- For others, they get their joy from trying to discover the move and work things out for themselves – the last thing they want is our answer.
- If I need them to feel something, they obviously can't get that from my demonstration.

Are those really rules, or just opinions?

All of that is just my opinion. Some is based on what has worked for me in the past; some is based on what other coaches have told me. I certainly don't stick to my own rules if I feel that the paddler in front of me would benefit from something different.

Here are some other people's ideas as to what makes a good demo which are taken from the academic research. As with any ideas (especially mine) you

need to try them out for yourself and see whether or not they work for you;

- If people are struggling to put together a sequence of movements, then adding a few words to your demonstration might help them. Indeed if they can do all the individual movements, but just can't put them together, talking it through might better than a demonstration. If you do give a demo with words it might take them a few goes (or a few demonstrations) to be able to put it all together. Demonstrating in slow motion might help here.
- If there's an issue with timing, giving a demonstration with a noise at the key moment, or singing or humming a song to accentuate a rhythmic movement might help.
- If you do choose to give extra information instead of a silent demo, make sure the extra information matches your demo, and that you don't give so much chat that you overwhelm the learner with too much information. The better they are at the skill, the more information they're likely to be able to deal with.
- If the extra information you give them

describes stuff they already do (or think they're doing) it probably won't help.

- It might not make a huge difference if you give verbal information before, during or after a demonstration.

Another way to help us to provide the right demonstration for the right learner might be to ask ourselves two questions;

1. What information do they need out this demonstration?
2. How much information can they handle right now?

If I give my learner what I think they need in a way that they can digest, I'll probably not go too far wrong.

If you've got any of your own top tips for demonstrations please share them at facebook.com/coachingcornerscotland You can check out any previous coaching corner articles there, and also at canoescotland.org/resources

In the next edition we're going to take a look at the role of confidence in our paddling and in our coaching. Happy paddling and happy coaching

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● HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS

Glenmore Lodge
01479 861256
enquiries@glenmorelodge.org.uk
www.glenmorelodge.org.uk

Loch Morlich Watersports Centre

01479 861221
office@lochmorlich.com
www.lochmorlich.com

Active Outdoor Pursuits

01540 673319
info@activeoutdoorpursuits.com
www.activeoutdoorpursuits.com

Abernethy Trust - Ardgour

01967 411222
ardgour@abernethy.org.uk
www.abernethy.org.uk

● LOTHIANS

Port Edgar Watersports
0131 319 1820
bookings@portedarwatersports.com
www.portedarwatersports.com

● WEST AND SOUTH WEST

Blairvadach OEC
01436 820491
CMcKerral@blairvadach.org.uk
www.blairvadach.org.uk

James Hamilton Heritage Park

01355 276605
Garry.Rodmell@southlanarkshireleisure.co.uk
www.slleisure.co.uk

National Watersports Centre Cumbrae

01475 530 757
cumbraecentre@sportscotland.org.uk
www.nationalcentrecumbrae.org.uk

● TAYSIDE

Beyond Adventure

01887 829202
email@beyondadventure.co.uk
www.beyondadventure.co.uk