

# What Makes Good Technique?

George Fell discusses the issue of good paddling technique and whether it matters, or not, when coaching...

After a couple of quite abstract coaching articles, I'm keen to grapple with something a bit more concrete: Technique. You could be a coach with the most fantastic delivery, picking up on every subtle nuance of your paddlers' needs, but if you're pointing them at solutions that are technically inadequate then you're probably not helping them to get better. You might even be putting up barriers that impede their future development.

However, we all know that if you took ten paddlers and got to them describe how best to do a skill, you'd get ten different answers. Some answers would be similar, just with differences in emphasis, whilst others would completely contradict one another.

We've all got our different opinions about what good paddling technique looks like, but when you ask people why they hold those opinions, you tend to hear the same sorts of answer (see fig. a).

Why do you hold your beliefs? All those different reasons have pros and cons. (see fig. b).

I think to develop our technical beliefs we need a combination of all of these things. As an example, I'd like to look at forwards paddling in kayak (sorry single-bladers!)

Take a look at an excerpt from the 1960 BCU book Canoe Handling and Management (fig. c).

Fig. a

It's what I was taught. It's what so-and-so does and they're really good. It's what the BCU handbook says. It's what I saw on YouTube.	<b>External Authority</b> I've posted links to a few resources I've found useful at <a href="http://www.fb.me/coachingcornerscotland">www.fb.me/coachingcornerscotland</a>
This way feels nicer. It's what I've always done.	<b>Personal Experience</b>
I've tested it and this way works best. I did this in competition and I placed higher.	<b>Measurement</b>

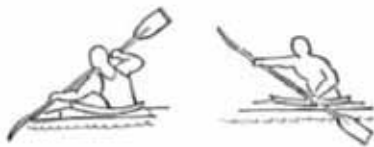
Fig. b

<b>External Authority</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● It's what I was taught.</li> <li>● It's what so-and-so does and they're really good.</li> <li>● It's what the BCU handbook says.</li> <li>● It's what I saw on YouTube.</li> </ul>	Represents somebody else's opinion at one moment in time. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>👍 Gets you to try new things you might not have thought of</li> <li>👎 Might not work for your body and your boat in your environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Experience</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● This way feels nicer.</li> <li>● It's what I've always done</li> </ul>	If we boat for fun, and it feels nice, surely it's got to be good? In dynamic environments, the stuff that feels nice and flowing is often the most efficient. The way we paddle right now is likely to feel more natural to us than a new thing.
<b>Measurement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I've tested it and this way works best.</li> </ul>	This way, you can really prove if something works or not. Even if you've measured it, is what you've measured relevant in the context you use the skill (e.g. the technique that gives me the best time over 10 Km, isn't necessarily the best for paddling out through surf)?


Fig.c


**THE STROKE**

1. Let the blade reach forward as far as possible with one hand, leaving your trunk forward and dip the paddle blade in the water with the blade turned slightly outwards.



2. Pull back with the forward hand and push the other hand forward at eye level straight from the shoulder to the full extent of the arms.






To full extent of arms

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

- 1) Hold the paddle with a wide grip, NOT a narrow one.
- 2) Make your stroke as long as possible.
- 3) Lean forwards from the hips.
- 4) NOT backwards onto the backrest.



Hold paddle with wide grip

Lean forward from hips

Make stroke as long as possible

With the benefit of 60 years of development, you probably don't paddle like this, but there are people out there who do and they still make their boats go forward. If we were paddling with 1960's gear – thick wooden paddle shafts and wide, tracking boats – we might find that our paddling started to adapt to look more like that.

Here's what I believed a few years ago;

**BODY**



**BOAT**

- driven powerfully forwards
- minimal spinning
- minimal bouncing

**BLADE**

- moves backwards/outwards from boat
- powered up from the start of stroke
- remains submerged throughout the powerful bit of the stroke
- short stroke – feet to knees

That all gradually evolved based on a mixture of what people had said to me, what I'd read and what I'd experienced out on the water in lots of different craft, and lots of different environments.

It seems to work for me in most boats. Certainly when I gradually moved towards something looking like that, I got faster and more importantly (to me as a recreational paddler) I could go for longer.

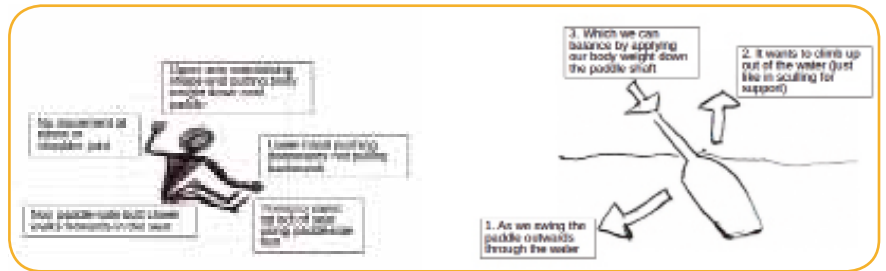
Then I had the pleasure of a day of coaching from a marathon paddler. Their ideas coupled with going out and trying to apply them in context has helped me add to my beliefs; using a heart rate monitor and GPS has given me some data to compare with what I feel.

Now this only represents my current opinion and the mental pictures that work for me. It's different to what I believed a few years ago and I hope it'll continue to change. There are loads of much better paddlers out there who know stuff I'm not currently aware of and can feel things that I don't yet notice. I'm really happy if you disagree (indeed I hope you do – at that point we can learn from one another), but if you do disagree please think why?

We all have an emotional response to things that challenge our beliefs; it's much easier to reject something we don't like rather than go out there and actually try it or think about it (if you disagree with that statement I'd suggest looking at any heated discussion on social media!)

Thinking about it, it's great when there's a disagreement about technique, as long as we use that tension to motivate ourselves to get out there and try to find what actually does work best. If you think something is right or wrong, get out there and prove it! Without that paddlesport never moves forwards.

Often this involves finding an appropriate way to measure what works best when it's being used in context. Sometimes what we find on the



lochs, rivers and the sea is not that one technique always beats another, but that the choice of adaptation depends on the shape of person, the design of boat, the conditions and place they're at in their paddling life.

As a (mostly) recreational paddler, I'm blown away when I get to observe the technical prowess of competitive slalomists and racers. There are loads of reasons why they get really, really good, but surely having an absolute measure of success in terms of a timing or a ranking has to be part of it.

**If we believe that good technique is vital, but also hard to pin down, then what does that mean to us as coaches?**

I think that to coach effectively we have to have some fairly detailed technical beliefs. Sometimes we do need to nail our colours to the mast and be honest about what we stand for, but we also need to be aware of the limits of any technique and understand that what works for us might not be what works for our students.

**Do all paddlers need to have the best possible technique?** If somebody is happy doing what they're doing then can their technique really be a problem? I'd argue that it only becomes an issue if they want to go faster, longer, into more challenging environments or if what they're currently doing risks causing injury.

**Do we try to guide our paddlers straight to what we believe works best or do people need to go on a journey?** Are there some techniques that a paddler isn't ready for, either physically or in their skill level and ability to feel what's going on in the boat?

In summary all coaches need technical knowledge, but we also need to beware of being too dogmatic. I like the metaphor of a tree, where my closest held beliefs are in the trunk that only flexes in the wildest storm, many of my technical thoughts are in the branches which bend depending on which way the wind is blowing and others are like leaves which are here one season and gone the next.

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