

6 Learning Methodology

6.1 Introduction

The good coach is the person who can control and use time, water space and the coaching environment to the best advantage. The successful coach will have undertaken many tasks. He will be:

- an instructor
- a teacher
- a trainer
- a motivator
- a publicity agent
- a disciplinarian
- a manager
- an administrator
- a social worker
- a scientist

and a student of the sport.

A coach who is able to use these skills will have the ability to:

- assess a situation,
- plan alternative procedures,
- choose the best procedure for the situation,
- control the implementation, and
- assess and redesign, if necessary, the procedure.

The skillful coach is adaptable, resourceful, logical and confident. As a master of technical information, motivational devices and able to communicate easily, the coach should be very successful. But, success is dependent on an understanding of the variables which are interplaying between the coach, crew and environment and is also a demonstration of good planning and organisation by the coach.

6.2 Principles of planning and organisation

Planning requires a clear understanding of the objectives or aims of an athlete development programme and an organised procedure to achieve these objectives.

Objectives

The first step in the development of a plan is the formulation of its objectives or aims. It is essential for the coach to clarify, for himself and for the athletes, the ultimate or long-term objective of the programme and to develop short-term objectives for training that will result in the achievement of the ultimate goal.

It must be remembered that these objectives must be realistic. Goals which cannot be reached due to the age, ability or experience of the individual or group are not helpful and, in fact, may be detrimental.

It is also important that, once these goals have been formulated, the coach must commit them to paper. This written commitment should be examined often during the continual process of reviewing, assessing and planning.

Organisation

The organised coach will have a better opportunity to achieve the training objectives. This first requires an understanding of the factors affecting organisations:

- ability and relative experience of individuals
- range of ability
- size of group
- learning potential
- age
- ratio of athletes to coaches
- expertise of coaches
- length of session
- number of sessions
- time of year
- water conditions
- number and types of boats available
- facilities.

These factors can have a greater or lesser influence at any given moment and can alter the character of an individual or a series of training sessions. Therefore, the coach must learn to be adaptable and flexible.

This knowledge will allow the coach to design an effective organisation which will demonstrate:

- a** Good utilisation of time:
the coach should expect to spend more time at the sport than the athletes to ensure the best utilisation of their time.
- b** Proper selection of content:
each training session should have a list of essential elements in priority which may be altered according to changing conditions.
- c** Effective methods:
a method of instruction should be determined before the session; this may involve verbal and non-verbal techniques while remembering that in the acquisition of a motor skill the most effective technique is HAVING A GO.
- d** Good observations:
the coach must remember to listen to and observe the group.
- e** Feedback and guidance:
the observation made and comments received by the coach will allow the coach to provide effective feedback to the group on their efforts.

An effective organisation will also ensure the availability and suitability of the facilities, boats and equipment. This is important for the motivation of both the coach and athlete. With this organisation, the coach is prepared to present new information.

6.3 Presenting new information

This section will introduce a basic model for presenting new information to the athlete by considering the four major steps in coaching sport techniques, namely:

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Demonstration
- 3 Practice
- 4 Feedback

Introduction

It is important when introducing a new skill or even the sport itself to be enthusiastic in both words and actions. The coach should speak clearly and use language the group can readily understand. If introducing a new skill, such as feathering the blade, the coach should be brief in his comments and remember to:

- a Get the group's attention:
by being punctual, speaking directly and with eye contact.
- b Arrange the group so all can see and hear:
by avoiding background distraction, such as having the group looking into the sun, and using audio or visual aids when necessary.
- c Name the technique and, if appropriate, give a reason for learning it:
for example, "Today we are going to learn to feather the blade. It makes it easier to carry the blade off the water during the recovery and reduces wind resistance."

It is now necessary to demonstrate the skill.

Demonstration

The coach may demonstrate the skill being taught by the use of visual aids, by performing the skill himself or by having an experienced athlete do the performance. It is often useful when coaching a small group of beginners to have them watch each other attempt to perform the required skill. There are a few general principles which apply to this aspect of the presentation, namely:

- a Direct the attention of the group to the demonstration.
- b Tell the group what to look at.
- c If possible, show the skill from different perspectives.
- d Demonstrate the whole skill just as it would be performed.
- e Relate the new skill to previously learned skills.
- f Answer relevant questions about the skill.

Demonstration is most effective as a teaching method when it is followed by extensive practice.

Practice

It is important that the athletes practise the skill as soon as possible after the demonstration. Particularly with beginners, it is necessary to have the athletes initially try to make an approximation of the whole action of the skill being taught. This will provide a reference for further practice. There are several key issues that the coach should remember, namely:

- a Arrange the group and show them how to practise. It is important that this opportunity is well planned, particularly for beginners working on a busy stretch of water.
- b Motivate the athletes to practise.
- c Answer relevant questions. It is important for the athletes to understand what they are trying to achieve.

During the practice, the coach must be in a position to properly observe the athletes to provide them with feedback on their attempts.

Feedback

The practice must be accompanied by feedback from the coach for optimum learning of the skill and the sport. The feedback provides athletes with information about their performance that will aid in correcting performance errors.

There are three main principles for the coach to observe in providing feedback:

- a Observe and evaluate the performance of the athlete in relation to the objective of the session.
- b Provide feedback after the performance as soon and as frequently as possible.
- c Give effective feedback by keeping it simple and precise and, above all else, only ask the group to concentrate on one thing at a time.

A summary for a basic model of presenting new coaching information to novice or beginners is presented in Appendix A and a coaching checklist for presenting new information is provided in Appendix B.

To effectively present new information, it is also necessary for the coach to understand the stages in learning a skill. These will be examined in the next section.

6.4 Stages in learning

Researchers have demonstrated that there are three stages in learning. While these stages have been identified and characterised for convenience and analysis, it is always important to remember that learning is a continuous process. The three stages in learning are:

- 1 the early stage,
- 2 the grooving stage, and
- 3 the automatic stage.

The early stage

The movements at this stage are generally slow, inefficient and uncoordinated as the athlete, and in particular the beginner, is trying to convert the coach's directions into actual movement. The thinking processes are heavily involved as the athlete is trying to understand the purpose of certain motor acts, analyse the situation and devise techniques to reach the objective. The coaching principles associated with this stage are:

- a concentrate on basics,
- b limit the number of tasks,
- c short and frequent practice periods,
- d limit distractions, and
- e keep the task enjoyable.

The grooving stage

This stage occurs when the athlete understands the objective and is able to concentrate on practising techniques which will promote learning. The main coaching principles are:

- a quality movement:
the optimum movement pattern should be encouraged.
- b repetition:
frequent quality repetitions of the movement should be encouraged.
- c relaxation:
short concentrated bouts of practice followed by a contrasting activity to relax the system.
- d technique / time:
improving performance will permit a longer practice period and an increase in tasks.
- e pressure / speed:
improving performance will permit training at a higher load by an increase in pressure on the blade and speed of movement.

The automatic stage

This stage is considered the final stage in skill acquisition. The athlete is able to process information easily with minimal interference from other activities. Consistency in technique (good or bad) is a feature of this stage and the stroke can withstand an increase in training load. The main coaching principles of this stage are:

- a Time:
this stage probably take months but the reward is consistency in performance.
- b Differences:
this stage may be reached at different times for different parts of the stroke.
- c Regression:
regular observation, analysis and instruction are necessary to prevent regression.
- d Over-learning:
too much practice provides limited benefits.

The coach will be more effective during the training sessions with an improved ability to present new information and an understanding of the stages in learning a skill. This effectiveness may still depend on an ability to communicate.

6.5 Communication

This topic has been discussed in other sections of this booklet but further comments are warranted. Many of the greatest coaches in our sport seem to have the ability to build a close bond between themselves and the crew. This has been described as “magic”, “charisma”, etc. but further analysis often reveals that it is communication which is the cornerstone of their success.

Some traits inherent in these coaches are:

- a a high awareness level of their athletes and of themselves.
- b the gift of being trusted by the athletes.
- c the ability to listen to the athletes.

These traits are all developed and demonstrated by the coach over a period which enables an enhancement of the athletes’ performance by the establishment of this close bond.

While a complete discussion of communication is beyond the scope of this introductory booklet, Appendix C has been provided to assist in improving communication skills. The interested reader is encouraged to consult this information as well as take an opportunity to watch and learn from successful coaches.

6.6 Summary

Coaches provide an invaluable service to the development of the sport and its participants at all levels. The best method to improve your coaching skills is to coach and learn how theory actually works in practice.

This booklet has been written to provide information to assist in the evaluation of your coaching and, above all else, to encourage you to coach and develop the sport of rowing.

6.7 Appendices

Appendix A

Presenting new coaching information:

Introduction

- 1 Get the group's attention.
- 2 Arrange the group so all can see and hear.
- 3 Name the skill and, if appropriate, give a reason for learning it.

Demonstration

- 1 Prepare the group for the demonstration.
- 2 Demonstrate the whole skill.
- 3 Relate the new skill to previously learned skills.
- 4 Answer relevant questions.

Practice

- 1 Arrange the group and show them how to practise the skill.
- 2 Motivate the athletes to practise the skill.
- 3 Practise the skill.

Feedback

- 1 Observe and evaluate the performance.
- 2 Provide feedback after performance as soon and as frequently as possible.
- 3 Give effective feedback.

Appendix B

Coaching checklist for presenting information.

Activity selection

- 1 Was the activity challenging to the crew?
- 2 Was it possible for the crew to be successful?
- 3 Are the athletes making progress?

Instruction

- 1 Are the athletes aware of the objectives of the session?
- 2 Did you present a good model of the skill?
- 3 Did you provide effective feedback with verbal, visual and kinesthetic cues?
- 4 Did you provide the athletes with time to apply the skill in a typical situation?
- 5 Did you allow for individual differences?

Participation

- 1 Did you reduce talking time to a minimum?
- 2 Were your instructions clear?
- 3 Did you organise the group effectively?
- 4 Did the practice situations allow for maximum participation by the group?

Equal opportunity

- 1 Did you provide for less able rowers?
- 2 Did you provide for those who were experiencing difficulty in following your coaching methods?
- 3 Were the presentation techniques suitable for all participants?

Safety

- 1 Did you present the information in the context of safety?
- 2 Did you follow the correct procedures when working with equipment which can cause injury?
- 3 Was the equipment checked before the practice?

Motivation

- 1 Were the participants successful (i.e. did you present material in such a way as to allow them to achieve your objective)?
- 2 Did the group enjoy the session?

Appendix C

Communication

Communication is a vast topic and well beyond the scope of this material but there are several key features that should help you to improve your communication techniques: These are:

- 1 Reduce any “status awareness” between you and the group, that is, develop the appropriate level of language and other communication techniques in accordance with your situation. For coaches with perhaps limited experience this can be very difficult to achieve and some may like to hide behind status anyway!
- 2 Use as many channels of communication as possible. The hallmark of a good coach is presenting the same information by using different methods.
- 3 Try to eliminate any sources of interference, disruption or distraction.
- 4 In most situations, face to face communication is best because it allows for dialogue between the parties involved.
- 5 As the originator of the message, you, the coach, must accept the responsibility for the effectiveness of the communication.
- 6 Simple, uncomplicated language which avoids the use of jargon until it is fully understood is often the most effective.
- 7 Learn to listen to the responses of the receiver of your information since this will often enable you to adjust your technique for the introduction and development of the next piece of information.
- 8 Try to be aware of the subliminal of body language messages. You might be hindering the group; some coaches, for example, often look bored if they have presented the material on several occasions previously.

Remember, improving your communication skills will enhance the performance level of your athletes.