

British Canoeing Awarding Body - Coaching Podcast

Emma Love and Lucy Downer

Ducks, a Throwline and a Rock!

Emma Love 00:04:55

I'm thrilled to have Lucy Downer join me today. Lucy is the head Canoe Coach at Falcon Boat Club in Oxford here in the UK and is a Sheltered Water Performance Coach in the discipline of Canoeing. Lucy and my paths have crossed over a number of times in the past year and she's always a joy to chat to about all things coaching. Huge welcome Lucy to the Paddle UK Coaching Podcast.

Lucy Downer 00:05:23

Hi Emma. It's great to be here.

Emma Love 00:05:24

Before we do start chatting, it'd be great, Lucy, if you could give us a short introduction about you.

Lucy Downer 00:05:31

Sure. So, I've been paddling for about 13 years now. My craft of choice as you said is canoe, although I have done some paddling in other disciplines as well. I coach mainly canoeing based in Oxford on the Thames and the Cherwell which is a mostly sheltered water environment other than in the winter when it can get flowing a bit faster. We've got about 105 paddlers currently in the canoe section there which keeps us busy. That's all levels, from beginner to advance. As a team of 16 coaches which I lead and as well as coaching at Falcon, we do lead trips further afield. There's quite a lot of interest in open water and white water as well. When I'm not coaching, I work as a musician. I play the clarinet and a few other woodwind instruments and do some teaching which works quite well I find alongside paddling. There's quite a lot of interesting crossovers between the two and that I've particularly enjoyed exploring in the last year or two.

Emma Love 00:06:33

Wow, sounds like a really busy life you lead. Amazing. Today we're going to be chatting about something that really interests me and I'm very new to it, so I'm here to really learn from you today, Lucy. It's about Representative Learning Design in the context of canoeist's technical and tactical skill development. But before we begin to explore this, Lucy, would you or could you define for us what Representative Learning Design is?

Lucy Downer 00:07:06

Sure. It's something I've done a lot of thinking about over the last year or two and I think it's something that's really useful when navigating the transition between two different environments. So, it's used quite widely in sports as a training strategy where the training session and the real-life situation are not always exactly the same. It's a kind of tasks which are designed to help people to learn the skills that they need to successfully interact with that real world environment which is not necessarily just the isolated skill itself but a reaction to information from the environment, putting that skill into context and learning to adapt it where needed.

It's something that I think comes up a lot in various different sports and has a few different considerations, things like where the information is coming from? Whether we can recreate that in a training session in the same way or a similar way to how it will be in real life? Giving people the decision- making opportunities that they'll need to learn in order to act effectively in that environment as well as practice at dealing with the emotional or the pressure considerations as well. So, it's all about helping people to navigate that transition between two different environments and to effectively transfer their skills.

Emma Love 00:08:33

Wow, my brain is already firing off in all directions thinking about it in a coaching context - really exciting. What sparked your interest in, and should we call it RLD? Just to help us because as you can already tell I'm falling over the words already.

Emma Love 00:08:55

What sparked your interest in RLD?

Lucy Downer 00:08:59

So, my initial interest came when I was on the Performance Coach Pathway when I was just taking a closer look at coaching strategies in general and it's something I realised I had been unconsciously doing without really knowing what it was. But then my interest really deepened and I explored it a lot more deeply while I've just recently been studying for an MA in Woodwind teaching that I've just finished. And particularly looking at strategies in that I could transfer between my two worlds of canoeing and clarinet teaching.

What might be the same? What could be transferred? And so, it's something I've been really looking at in a musical context - whether it's something that could be helpful in training students to prepare for performance where again those two environments are very different.

It's very different to perform a clarinet piece in a small room in a school to a teacher as it is to go out onto a concert hall stage and perform live to 200 people or to a recording or anything like that. There are many challenges that come up in performance that are quite different to practice.

And so, I've been looking at that particularly with my master's that was the subject of my dissertation - looking at some ways that we could develop activities in one-to-one clarinet lessons that would then prepare students to be better equipped to deal with the challenges that come from a performance environment.

Probably don't want to get too technical with clarinet things. It's a bit geeky for this context but things like if the performance environment is a particularly hot or things like if the performance environment is a particularly hot or cold environment that can have a huge difference on the way that a clarinetist responds and that can be quite disconcerting for a student. And so it's just looking at some things in lessons that can help to teach that adaptability, that resilience that they'll need to be able to perform effectively when these things come up for real.

Emma Love 00:11:02

I think that that's really interesting and you know I'm not anyway involved with music world. So, when I was looking at some of the tasks that you had put together and sent over to me to get a sense of what you do with your students, it was really

interesting to kind of start to get a sense of, you know, how a venue can have lots of background noise and bright lights and people looking in through the window and audience coughing and I had never thought about so many of those impacts while this student or this musician is trying to perform their piece. And again, I could see how this was starting to draw across into the context of a paddler in an environment. But before we look at that, I'd be really fascinated to hear an example of a task you would set for one of your students as a way to try and prepare for what potentially could come at them when performing?

Lucy Downer 00:12:05

Sure, it's lots of the things you just mentioned, there are many things that could be distracting. There are quite a lot of things within that that are also physically uncomfortable. So the classic example as a woodwind player is if you've had a long walk from say the dressing room to the performance room. You might very well get there out of breath and then with less breath than you would like already to have to then start to perform your piece that's going to be quite physically demanding.

I once did an audition where the warm-up room was in the basement and the audition itself was on the second floor and there was no lift, which doesn't sound like much, but when your job is based on having super breath control, that three flights of stairs really make a difference. And so a task I might set my students can you go and run up and down the stairs three times and then play your piece and then adapt to the fact that you are more breathless than normal?

Can you find new places to take extra breaths? Or can you just, I suppose, keep going despite the fact that you feel really uncomfortable, but not let that stop you?

Emma Love 00:13:15

Gosh, it sounds yeah, I'm really feeling for your musicians listening to that.

Lucy Downer

I should say this is entirely with their permission. We talked about it in advance. I don't just get them to do these things without them being up for it.

Emma Love

I have previously you know come across examples of RLD being used in the context and I guess I've read about them in the context of land-based team sport practice scenarios.

So, it's quite common, isn't it, to see examples of coaches working with footballers or baseball context in that trying to prepare them for what could potentially happen in the game. And it's really interesting to hear how it can help musicians prepare for public performance and the many factors that they may encounter possibly that could be challenging and potentially quite a negative impact. From what you've said, I am now starting to be able to visualise rather than the team-based sport how RLD would be useful in preparing paddlers for say, I suppose my most immediate thought is high level performance in a competitive environment. So, slalom would be a great example, wouldn't it? But I know you use RLD to support canoeists in a sheltered water environment, and this is the bit I find really intriguing. So, tell me, why do this? What are the benefits?

Lucy Downer 00:14:57

So, this really comes down seen the paddlers that I work with at Falcon and their own goals and aspirations. We've got at least half of the paddlers who already have their canoe awards and are paddling at a slightly more advanced level and keen to take their paddling further. For lots of them that means moving into more challenging environments and there's a lot of interest in white water paddling but we are based in Oxford on the flat Thames which doesn't have a lot of rapids and we're quite a long way away from any real moving water. And so I'd done a lot of thinking about how to support those paddlers and help them continue in their developments even while we're sort of limited by the environment that we're in 90% of the time.

And so, I think RLD is really useful for being able to come up with some activities that will help them develop the skills they will need when they then move into the white water environment. And so, lots of the skills that we're looking at as well as things like the actual strokes they might need to do things like get into eddies, cross flow, avoid rocks; we can look at those on flat water, but then we can also use some representative activities that will help them to learn the reactions as well to develop

the decision- making and sort of know when to use it. So, we're really thinking training the tactics as well as the technical

Emma Love 00:16:37

That's really interesting and a couple of weeks ago you and I were joined by some of the club canoeists because I had a lovely invite from you to come over to Falcon and had the opportunity to observe you use Representative Learning Design and this was interesting because it was there to support their skill development in terms of that there was quite a lot of technical, wasn't there? But there was a lot of tactical as well, we were observing. And, I wanted to say thank you again for the invite, it was a really fascinating afternoon. Plus, I had the opportunity to use my incredible acting skills and embrace my natural talent for being a physical rock on the water. So, great fun!

Lucy Downer 00:17:29

You did that very well.

Emma Love 00:17:30

Thank you.

Emma Love 00:17:34

So, we've had those examples of, how you've done it within the musical environment, and I can see now why you would want to explore within the sheltered water environment in terms of prepping for getting into a more demanding environment.

Can you talk us through some of the tasks you set them that afternoon? Because I think this would give our listeners a really great example of RLD in action in that sheltered water environment.

Lucy Downer 00:18:07

Sure. Perhaps a bit of background. This was a group of paddlers who'd recently had their first moving water experience just on a Grade 1 section of the Wye. On that trip I had observed that as they were moving into eddies, they had sort of the basic idea, but they weren't being very effective. And the reason for that was they

were often using strokes to steer at the back of the boat rather than the front which meant they were actually spinning on the eddy line before they were actually in the eddy and then having to work quite hard to get in. And so, I wanted to run a session for them that would help them to grow their confidence in using the sort of front of the boat strokes: the cross-deck bow rudders, bow draws, and the things that would help them to just catch those eddies a little bit more effectively.

Hopefully that would then help them next time to have less hard work to do and also then pave the way to go onto some faster water where their current strategy, they were getting away with it on the Grade 1 Wye, but if we went up to something more challenging that then I could tell would not be working for them.

Emma Love 00:19:20

For sure, for sure

Lucy Downer 00:19:21

So, there were kind of two questions in my mind. One was, do they know how to use those strokes? Do they know them? Are they competent performing them? And then secondly, do they understand where to use them? Why they might be useful? And sort of connect them with the task that is set. So, I think my initial activity on that day was a really simple game with some ducks. I love rubber ducks - I use them in coaching all the time. And I just gave them two minutes as a warm-up to go and turn around as many ducks as they could, only using strokes at the front of the boat. That was all the information I gave them. I just wanted to see what they would do? What strokes they would come up with? Whether they would manage it? Just to see, do they have that technical skill, or would they need to start with a bit of a brush up on physically what to do with the paddle? The result of that was they could basically all use those strokes absolutely fine. They might need a bit of refining, but the basics were there.

So, my conclusion was that it's not that they couldn't do it, it's just that they weren't in the context of those eddies on the Wye.

So, the next task got a little bit more representative of that eddy situation. So, we set up an eddy with a clear approach and that's where you came in as the rock. You were that fixed point to turn around. We were having a bit of a runup aiming for you

and then aiming to turn just below the rock, so this put it a bit more in context for the paddlers. And then as they did circuits of that, gave me a chance to ask questions and give feedback to each individual and just getting that stroke, that approach, and that whole combination of factors a little bit more effective.

So, they're thinking partly about how their bow rudder is working, but also about the tactics, the timing, how they're approaching, where they're aiming, how fast they're aiming, how they're using their edge, how they're using their trim, until we sort of getting more effective and they were feeling a bit more confident and assertive with it. So that was then Stage Two.

We then added an extra level of an eddy line by putting out a throw line across the water. Still with you as a very helpful rock at the top of the eddy, but there was now a line to cross. And with this one, I gave them the task of they were only allowed to plant their bow rudder on the opposite side of the line from their approach.

The aim of this was to get their timing a little bit more effective, as in, they'd be in the eddy before they're turning. We're trying to prevent them from turning before they get there and give them a bit of a feel of how far they have to get their boat in before they start the turning stroke. And I think this was surprisingly effective; all of the members of the group, I think, seemed to get this immediately as soon as they had that really clear line that they had to cross. They were doing that absolutely brilliantly and again we could then adapt that activity. We could make it a bit harder. We could add a bit more coaching to get, you know more effective edging or looking where they're going.

Experimenting a bit with not paddling at all but just seeing how much the edge would turn them. Sort of similar tasks to those we'd actually use on moving water. But obviously with a flat-water environment which I think really kind of opened some eyes and I think really helped them to understand actually just how far into the eddy they need to feel before the turning is going to be effective and where that's going to work.

Emma Love 00:23:03

It did strike me as a really effective task. And what I really liked about it was that it gave you space as the coach to really sit back and watch each individual learner. It

also gave each individual learner time to go off and explore. And I had a real sense that they really enjoyed that freedom to go and experiment, have a few goes, come back and talk to you when they wanted to. You could intercept at points when you felt potentially a little bit of a nudge. But I think what I came about away from that afternoon was just the relaxed environment it created. Is that something that you set up? Are you very keen on that? Did I see what you see?

Lucy Downer 00:19:21

I think so. Yes. And I think in some ways that can be a benefit of doing these things in a sheltered water environment. I think in some ways it can be a challenge as well when it comes to the transfer later. But I think when I've done these sorts of activities with paddlers before, I think they have really appreciated the opportunity to practice these skills in a very, very safe environment. So, obviously, if you're on moving water and you mess it up, there might be consequences. And as a beginner on grade one, as the coach know that those consequences aren't going to be particularly disastrous. But often they can feel a lot more pressure because they don't know that it's okay to be going down something backwards. Whereas on flat water if they mess up the eddy turn all they've done is look a bit stupid or feel a bit silly. There's nothing that's actually there as a consequence of that. So, they just feel safe to keep trying and keep experimenting with things and trying out stuff without that fear. I think it's great to be able to have that repetition. So, to be able to do it again and again that's something that has come up as feedback for me from my paddlers is they've really appreciated the fact that we don't just do it once and move on, but we've got the chance to do it as many times as they want to before they get fed up with it. And then we can change it, we can make it harder, we can add extra challenges, and various things. I think it can be a bit of a drawback in some ways because when you're on moving water, you might then have that pressure or that sort of emotional edge of, I'm not quite sure what's going to happen. Which we don't have when we do it on flat water. So that would be a thing probably for me to think about how we can make that representative as well. Perhaps by adding some more stronger challenges I suppose.

Emma Love 00:26:12

Yeah. And the other thing that struck me was that what I loved was how experimental your coaching session was. So, I can remember when I arrived and you were saying to me, "this might work. I've not done it before. This particular I'm a little bit kind of like not sure. We're gonna start off with this. What do you think? And we just had this general chat and it's a way I do love to coach is having that unsurety, not having a very top-down coach led approach. And it was really fascinating to watch just how experimental you were happy to be. It made it very interesting as an observer and I was wondering is this a very important element for you in terms of your coaching style?

Lucy Downer 00:27:05

I think it probably is. I think I'm very lucky at Falcon in that a lot of the paddlers I work with are just so up for doing as much coaching as they can get their hands on and they're happy to be guinea pigs for my experiments. Which is great. I do like to have more activities planned than I will have time for. Because I really want the activities to be things that the paddlers will really kind of get behind and be getting something out of. And sometimes you might run an activity that on paper or in my head should be the perfect fit for teaching this skill. But actually, it falls a bit flat or it doesn't quite work because the river is a bit wider than I'd anticipated and it hasn't quite given them the constraints I wanted it to in which case I want to have a whole extra sort of resource of activities that I could then move on to or change it with. Often that can then end up being a bit experimental because while we're doing an activity there might be an idea that think that occurs to me that makes me think this could be made better if we just tweak it in this way. So might throw in an extra thing. That particular one on that day, I'd done the sort of artificial eddy challenge many times, but it was the first time I'd tried it with a throw line. And wasn't sure if it would work, whether the throw line would stay in place as people paddled over it and so again, as I said, it was a bit of an experiment. But I could see in my head it working quite well if it did stay in place and was delighted that it did. And so that's definitely now on my regular list of activities for coaching.

Emma Love 00:28:53

Is there anything in particular that tells you when a task is working?

Lucy Downer 00:29:03

I think probably two things. From an objective point of view, if the paddlers are achieving what we're setting out to achieve. In that example, they were approaching the eddy, they were turning brilliantly around the rock and they were a lot more assertive and in control. So that seemed like a success.

They were also having a great time which is really important. They were really smiling and having a good time with the challenges. and I think that's the time just flew by which is always a good sign, isn't it? I think if it's falling a bit flat, it'll be people looking a bit bored or finding it too difficult or it's just not quite seeming like a fun session.

Emma Love 00:29:48

They definitely came off the water really upbeat, didn't they, and buzzing and talking very excitingly about the next time they'll be getting on the water, which was fantastic

In terms of feedback from your canoeists, obviously there's the verbal feedback. what do you observe that makes you think, yeah, yeah, this is really really starting to hit the mark? with the activity itself.

Lucy Downer 00:31:11

With the activity itself, I think it's watching the way that they are then handling their boats. that can tell me whether they're sort of I suppose doing it better as a simple marker. But also looking at the confidence which is I think a big thing particularly if we're looking at paddlers who are perhaps learning these skills for the first time or the ones we were working with that day who have had one experience and found it quite difficult to then be sort of I suppose repeating some of those similar activities but with a lot more confidence, a lot more knowledge that they've got control of their boats and they know what they're doing.

I suppose the real feedback will come the next time they're on moving water and we see, do they get those eddies a little bit more assertively next time? But I hope that the confidence that they feel they verbally report, but you can also see in the way that they're paddling means that they have developed that skill and that tactical awareness in some way.

Emma Love 00:32:38

Yeah, I think that's interesting, isn't it? Because, you know, my experience of paddling on white water, that nice clear, the marker of the throw line in the sheltered water context and now you're in something that's visually much more tricky to understand. And now you're looking for this in it's almost like an invisible line to an extent, isn't it? And it can go really ske-whiff!

You spoke earlier and this is something that comes through in the tasks that you set your students in terms of musical performances, how to impact their psychological or psychology of being in that environment. And of course, once we move into graded water, we start to come into contact, don't we, with other aspects, other things that can affect our performance. So, the sound, the movement of the water, the adrenaline that suddenly goes through our body, and this all really does have an impact. And I was just wondering how helpful have you found RLD in this respect when you're in that sheltered water environment? And I think you spoke about this slightly earlier in that potentially this is something you're going to start to bring into your design or is this something you've been exploring already?

Lucy Downer 00:33:56

I think a lot of the sort of dealing with pressure elements could be applied to canoe coaching in a similar way to what I've done with the musician coaching in that we could add an extra element of difficulty to that same task by throwing in distractions that need to be ignored or simply just making the task harder.

I think with moving water, a pressure that I often hear about from beginners to that environment is you can make the eddy fine when it's empty, but what about if there are already two other boats in it and then you're a bit more limited in where you go and there are extra obstacles to navigate around. And so that's something that we could easily recreate as a next level. We've got our eddy that we've created, we could easily just add more boats in it, make it smaller. More rules as to where you have to cross the eddy line and be really precise about it. Just to, I think, help again with the physical technical skill, but also the mental awareness that it's not going to be the same every time. I think it's really important with these activities that we're also coaching the adaptability of the paddlers. I do often get asked about where should I be putting my paddle, kind of angle or whereabouts on the boat and I love to

tell my paddlers it really depends on so many factors. It's not always going to be the same.

And I really hope that the activities that we set does go some way to teaching them that so that when they try it with extra factors that we probably haven't even thought of, they would then have the skills to adapt them without necessarily having to have experienced everything in advance. I suppose that's quite important both in musical contexts and in canoeing contexts.

Emma Love 00:35:53

For sure, for sure. I think that's been really fascinating. Lucy and I suppose finally, we touch your own personal development as a coach, what have been the advantages of you exploring Representative Learning Design? And what's next?

Lucy Downer 00:36:12

I think it's been a really interesting journey for me. Partly giving me the challenge of coaching paddlers who are a bit more advanced, and the Thames for half of our paddlers at least, isn't really that challenging anymore. But paddlers are still keen to keep developing, to keep learning their skills and preparing for bigger and better things. And so the more I can develop my skills in this sort of coaching, I think the more helpful I can be to them, and then we can keep working on skill development even though the environment doesn't immediately demand it, so that's a brilliant thing as a coach in the club. I think it keeps it really interesting as well. We're not just teaching sort of the strokes and the environment that's here, but we're looking much wider and much bigger. And hopefully that just helps all of us to get those skills at a level we can have more adventures really.

Emma Love 00:37:22

Very cool. Are there any books you could recommend coaches who are intrigued by this and would like to read some more about Representative Learning Design. Is there anything that you would recommend as a starting point?

Lucy Downer 00:37:37

Sure. Rob Gray has written a lot on it and particularly has a good chapter in his book, 'The Advanced Ecological Approach to Skill Development and Maintenance'

has a fantastic chapter on Representative Learning Design in that with some pointers as to what needs to be present for it to be truly representative. And that might be an entire environment, or it might just be an element of a skill. It doesn't need to be the whole thing. And that's been really helpful to me, and I've been particularly exploring recently.

Emma Love 00:38:14

Brilliant. Thank you. Thank you, Lucy. I think it's been a really fascinating insight into RLD as I say, both in the musical and the paddling disciplines. I'm going to be coaching this weekend at a #ShePaddles event here in Leicestershire. And you know what? I'm going to go and have a little go.

Lucy Downer 00:38:35

Amazing.

Emma Love 00:38:36

See what happens. I'll let you know.

Lucy Downer 00:38:40

Please do. That would be great.

Emma Love 00:38:42

Thank you again. It's been an absolute joy to chat to you today and look forward to seeing you on the water very soon.

Lucy Downer 00:38:49

Thanks very much for having me.

END.