

# RESPONDING TO 'HOW' OUR LEARNERS' LEARN

Wouldn't the world be a boring place if we were all the same, luckily for us the world is not like that – it is in fact quite the opposite. This is obvious for all to see, because in everything we do we are all very different. To all of us who coach this is also very obvious, our learners in front of us will all be learning in slightly different ways to different things. I would suggest that for a coach to be able to 'notice' how our learners are learning and then be able to 'respond' in what they do to support this is a critical, yet very challenging skill. So 'how' do our learners learn, 'how' should we respond as coaches and 'why' are they all so different!

## HOW LEARNERS LEARN...

The subject area of how learners learn is one that has been grappled with for many years. It has gone through stages where we looked to 'label' people with a 'learning style or preference'; with the idea we then coached to that style. Research would suggest that the act of 'labeling' learners or coaching specifically to how they 'want' to learn is not that helpful to the learner and actually something best to avoid. This is due to the fact that as learners we continually change and develop in how we learn, perhaps due to what we are learning, the environment in which we are learning or just as our learning develops. It is also apparent that certain skills benefit best from being learnt in a certain way (e.g. rolling requires a learner to 'feel' what is happening, tidal planning requires a learner to 'think' what they are doing), therefore to meet our learners learning needs as a coach we need to support them in a range of ways to learn – even if they are not practiced in that way of learning yet. So if as coaches we 'label' a learner in a certain way all we are doing is limiting their learning potential. What in fact we need to be doing is responding to learning differences as we see them, and at the same time developing our learners to learn in as many different ways as possible to help them on the journey to becoming an ultimate learner!



# LEARNING DIFFERENCES COACHES MAY NEED TO RESPOND TO AND/OR DEVELOP...

Although there is still much debate and disagreement in the research around learning, there is one thing that is agreed by all and that is: learners will learn in different ways. So as a coach it is essential for us to appreciate this and have an understanding in what these different ways may be, thus enable us to respond accordingly and also develop our learners in their learning. Here's a selection of some ways learners may learn and how we could respond as a coach:

Way in which learner might learn	'How' we could respond as a coach to support/develop the learner
Socially (interpersonal)	Pair learners up to work on things together and provide each other feedback Facilitate teams of people to work things out to develop understanding
Independently (intrapersonal)	Allow space and time in a session for individuals to work at their own pace Set individual tasks for people to work on, coming back when they need help/feedback
Actively	Minimize the talk and maximize the action Work with a lot of active discovery based sessions or structured practice sessions
Logically/systematic	Break the strokes you are coaching down and use a 'chaining' process to build them up gradually. Plan a day's session with plenty clear sections within it which progress towards an agreed outcome
Needs to understand	Allowing plenty of time to provide in depth explanations of what is required Be available and create time to respond to questions, so you can provide verbal clarification of the theory behind the practice
Big picture/holistic	Introduce the whole skill, get learners going with it and then shape as required When introducing the day/session ensure you start with the big picture of the aim for the day.
Thinks about things	Wait for the learner to come to you before asking questions, allow them time to reflect and think When asking questions before or after an activity, make reference to previous experiences to allow them to reflect back and think how it supports the new learning.
Musical/Rhythmic	Make reference to sounds and rhythm when introducing a stroke to tune learners into the timing and feel of things Encourage the use of singing, humming or mantra's to support the rhythm of a stroke

## SOME ADDITIONAL LEARNING DIFFERENCES TO CONSIDER...

There are a couple of other key differences in which learners may go about their learning, or need to go about their learning to develop:

### **Feedback:**

There are many different types of feedback and ways to gain it, and inevitably this will be very different depending on the learner. Some will need lots and some will need little, but everyone will require some! The differences in how they gain it can be broadly split into 'they gain it themselves' or 'they gain it from others (coach/peers)'. The differences in 'what' the feedback is about can again be broadly split into feedback about 'how something is done (process based)' or feedback about 'does it work (outcome based)'. As coaches we need to respond to 'how and what' our learners feedback needs are, as well as developing their ability to gain feedback in a range of ways about a range of things.

### **Goals:**

For a learner to learn they will inevitable have a goal in mind – this in essence is the motivation of learning. Again understanding the differences in these goals will help us respond to the difference in how our learners will learn. Again there are broadly two main types of goal that will be motivating them: mastery goals where the focus is on self-development for them to be the best they can be, and performance goals where the focus is in being better than others and then being the best there is. As a coach we need to understand the difference in what motivates our learners, respond accordingly in the goals we agree with them and of course develop their motivational goals in a way that supports their learning the best.

## **SUMMARY**

Coaching is a complex, messy and difficult business – and this is perhaps because it deals with people! People are all different and as coaches it is our job to embrace this and respond accordingly. In this we are looking to meet a learners learning needs that will be changeable based on task and context, yet at the same time develop them as learners by helping them develop a range of ways of learning. Hopefully by considering ways in which learners may engage in the learning process, how they need feedback and the goals that may be motivation them; then we as coaches may be able to respond to their learning differences in a optimal way. Good luck!

By Doug Cooper, Glenmore Lodge  
Scottish Paddler 116, October 2017

