

Developing Reflective Practice in Adventure Sports Coaches

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Summary and application of learning to practice.

I know what you're thinking... Reflective practice is as simple as thinking about what I've done, and how I may change my approach next time. Am I right? Well, it turns out that it may be a little more complex than that (of course it was going to be, otherwise I wouldn't have got a Masters thesis from it!).

I focused my study on how we can develop people's reflective practice. It has been identified that there are 4 levels of reflection from merely describing an event, through to being able to examine an event from multiple angles and draw several conclusions from the same experience. It has long been argued in the academic world that effective reflective practice can support coaches in their practice, but as usual, the academics didn't try practical solutions to actually achieving this...

That's where my study came in. I developed a simple handbook, which outlined the benefits of engaging with reflective practice, and provided 4 different examples of methods folk could use to reflect. Participants were free to select the method they felt would work best for them, and left alone for three weeks. After the three weeks I interviewed them, and gathered some data. All of the participants reported an improvement in the structure of their reflections (something that has been noted as really desirable in lots of papers) and also identified that by using a structure they had been able to draw lots more learning out from events than just thinking about what they've done (this is now looking more like reflective practice, rather than just 'thinking things over'!).

For the participants in the study reflective practice has an even bigger role to play than for 'normal' sports coaches, as they work in challenging and potentially highly risky environments. This can include teaching kayaking on Whitewater Rivers, or mountaineering in the Alps over

glaciers. For them to be able to make the most of the learning opportunities in these environments they need to be exercising their judgement as to how much responsibility to share with their clients. The development of judgement in these environments has been linked to effective reflective practice too!

I became interested in this, as my main job is to teach others to be leaders and instructors in these challenging environments. For me this raises lots of questions, but most specifically how could I best help people to continue improving once their course was over, and they were qualified, in the big wide world, and on their own? I had read about reflective practice and thought that it may provide the answer, but couldn't find anything to really help me help others to develop their reflective practice. So I made something and tested it!

For me this has really helped to further my understanding both of reflective practice, and how I can help others to develop their practice. It has changed my practice as a coach – I now ensure I find a little bit of time at the end of each day to set my students up to spend some time reflecting on certain elements of the day. Depending on what I am looking to draw out will depend if I challenge them to reflect on the day as a whole or on a specific part of the day (its important to be able to reflect broadly as well as deeply!). The following morning I ensure that I discuss their reflections with them, before we commence the day's sessions. The study has helped me realise that if I can develop these habits when I am with them, then hopefully they will continue to be a part of their practice as they continue to develop as coaches! I also encourage folk to record their reflections, to ensure they don't get forgotten.

Looking ahead, I want to make a prettier version of the handbook, and have a copy printed for every member of staff where I work. The belief there is that by developing their reflective practice, they will have more capacity to develop the practice of those who they work with, as well as becoming more skilled practitioners themselves!

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