

Expert paddlesport coaches' perceptions of the role of practice in the development of non-competitive paddlesport athletes

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Independent Study submitted as part of Postgraduate Diploma, Performance Coaching, University of Stirling, 2017.

Abstract

Background and Purpose

While coaches working in competitive disciplines share common practices and processes with adventure sports coaches and specifically, non-competitive paddlesport coaches, there are also fundamental differences. Unique to non-competitive paddlesport, and common to other adventure sports, is the highly episodic coach/athlete relationship, that formal sessions may be separated by weeks and potentially months, and the duration of these sessions rarely extend beyond five days. These differences impact how a coach addresses the technical, tactical, psychological and physiological facets of their respective sport and necessitates that athletes engage in unmediated practice to continue their individual development. The purpose of this study was to explore expert non-competitive paddlesport coaches' perceptions of the role of practice both in their session delivery, and during the unmediated periods between sessions.

What was done?

Participants: Six expert paddlesport coaches participated in this study. All have over a decade of experience coaching in the non-competitive paddlesport disciplines, five of whom coach at the highest level in more than one discipline. They all hold the British Canoeing UKCC Level 4 qualification.

Process: Each coach participated in a semi-structured interview. Each interview discussed the coaches' background coaching experience and their perceptions surrounding practice. Interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes, they were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. The themes were organised into two categories: the role of practice in non-competitive paddlesport and obstacles to practice in non-competitive paddlesport.

Key findings

The role of practice in non-competitive paddlesport;

There were four themes in this category:

1. Skill acquisition (included Specific skill or technique, Developmental Tasks). Coaches engaged in practice designed to embed specific skills and techniques. They made references to specific processes, and practice constructs such as, blocked practice, varied practice, random practice and contextual interference. The coaches also discussed a task based approach to practice which was differentiated from other forms of practice because it forces the learner

to engage cognitively. In each case, this task based approach included the manipulation of a constraint and a reflective component.

2. Develop self-awareness (included Developing reflective practitioners, Developing self-assessment skills/tools). The coaches discussed the role of developing athletes as reflective practitioners to aid them during unmediated practice. This was approached by making the implicit, explicit; either by having the athlete/learner discover the underpinning process, or by simply explaining it to them.
3. Environmental readiness (included Developing the ability to perform in the environment, Practice in the context of the environment). Structuring practice to develop athletes' ability to perform in the environment was important and included how coaches developed practice activities intended to encourage the athlete to adapt their performance to a changing environment.
4. Task and goal setting (included Practice sessions inform future tasks and sessions, Developing goals through practice). Four coaches discussed how they use practice to 'demonstrate' or 'unlock' an athlete's potential, which influences and/or informs the athlete's goal setting.

Obstacles to practice in non-competitive paddlesport.

There two themes in this category:

1. Time Constraints (included Limited contact time, Too much time, in the context of a full-day session, Athlete/Learners have limited time for practice). The limited contact time influenced the importance coaches placed on developing autonomous athletes. Three coaches discussed the challenges presented by the common long day format of sessions, in particular cognitive overload. This was actively monitored and an appropriate balance with practice found. The limited time on the part of the athlete to engage in meaningful practice was also an obstacle to unmediated practice.
2. Motivation (included Different Interests, Lack of a defined performance outcome, No summative assessment/competition, Lack of clear goals/awareness of potential). Each of the above could limit the athletes' engagement in practice. The coaches discussed the coach's role in influencing the athlete's goals, and increasing their awareness of individual potential in a non-coercive way.

Points of interest for coaches

All the coaches discussed the importance of practice in the development of non-competitive paddlesport athletes. In addition, all the coaches reported integration of practice into their sessions, and attempts to structure and/or orchestrate unmediated practice between sessions. The coaches recognised time and motivation as key obstacles that could affect athletes' practice in the formal and unmediated sessions.

Conclusion

Expert paddlesport coaches engaged athletes in intentional practice during coaching episodes; and attempted to promote effective unmediated practice by providing athletes/learners with reflective tools, visual models, and various methods of gathering both intrinsic and extrinsic feedback. The coaches strategies are deliberate and intend to address facets of athlete/learner development that are unique to adventure sport, and non-competitive paddlesport. It was also evident, that the practice behaviors of the coaches, aligned closely with the tenets of non-linear pedagogy.

If you would like further information on the research or to receive a copy of the full project please contact: twright@smcvt.edu