



7 COACHING NOVICES

When I first began coaching paddlesport, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to introduce others to an activity which had brought so much into my life and had fundamentally changed it forever.

INTRODUCTION

I know that I am not alone in having experienced this feeling of privilege. My early teachings were to non-canoeists, mostly people on multi-activity taster holidays. My enthusiasm endured for first one and then a second summer of this type of teaching, but slowly the novelty began to wear off as I became jaded and less motivated. I hungered to teach canoeing at a higher standard; I sought out friends and colleagues who had the basics but wanted to get better and I made opportunities to teach beyond 'taster' sessions. I found my enthusiasm returned, there were new challenges to cut my teeth on and once again I was an excited coach.

Sadly I was young, impatient and misguided. Eventually I felt I had discovered all there was to learn about coaching beginners and I wanted to move on once more. I foolishly bought into the idea that the more advanced your students and the environments that you coach in, the more exciting your work and the better a coach you were. I embarked upon a journey to reach the top of the coaching ladder to teach at the most advanced level, and I remember thinking

arrogantly that a day would come when I would never have to coach beginners again!

How little I knew about both coaching and life. The journey was long, but I got there only to discover that the most exciting coaching is that of beginners!

A problem with 'advanced' coaching can be that the more canoeing or kayaking experience a person has, the more deeply ingrained any bad habits are likely to be and the less a person is likely to accept they have them. They may also have been influenced by a number of different coaches, all of whom have their own strong opinions about how things should be, each leaving behind a legacy for the next coach to work with or overcome.

By complete contrast however, the beginner is a totally blank sheet of paper, "they don't know what they don't know yet" so they are a joy to coach. They trust you implicitly, not questioning where a series of exercises may be going, not comparing your approach to that of another coach. They just let you get on with moulding them into the best possible expression of a canoeist that they can be.

I've been fortunate to coach in a number of different disciplines up to advanced levels. I have seen, experienced and coached all manner of paddlers and thus witnessed the results, both good and bad, of my own and others' coaching. I've seen the pitfalls created by teaching particular techniques in certain ways, training skills in others and introducing things either too late or too early.

When a paddler has a weakness in their paddling it can be traced back to a root cause. This root cause is invariably something they either started or didn't start doing early in their paddling career. Either way the problem started when they were a beginner. The longer we leave these unchecked the bigger the problems in the future:

It is a lot harder to undo bad habits or replace them with better practice than it is to teach the correct thing in the first place. The analogy of a wall is the best way to explain it:

'A wall can only be built as high as the strength of its foundations will allow.'

Eventually you get so high and realise that to go any higher the foundations need strengthening and improving. But as the wall is now quite high, it's going to be a bigger and harder job to take the wall down to get to the foundations than it would have been to put better ones in place to start with.'

So if we can give beginners a good foundation in basic techniques in the first place there will be little to put right later on and they can just keep on adding and improving. To understand what are good foundations and how best to coach them, we need to examine some of the common bad legacies that more advanced paddlers carry with them.



OVERHEARD ON THE WATER

Coach: "Ah but there's no 'right' way to do anything". (Referring to the fact that skilful application of technique involves adapting it to the individual's physiology, the context of the environment it is being used in and the use it is being put to).

Experienced Coach: "Quite right... but there are some definite 'wrong' ways of doing things". (Referring to movements that could cause injury or are demonstrably less efficient or effective).

▶ THE COMMON LEGACIES

These can be grouped into 3 areas:

1. Flawed or weak basic techniques and skills.
2. Inability to adapt.
3. Lack of self-awareness.

BAD LEGACY 1. – FLAWED OR WEAK BASIC TECHNIQUE AND SKILLS

As techniques are the basic building blocks, which become adapted and applied skilfully to become 'Skills' then it makes sense that our basic technique should be as perfect as possible. Common errors or weakness in basic techniques often stem from paddlers learning 'cheating' tactics or coping strategies. This is where a technique is learned that enables a paddler to achieve an outcome quickly or with less effort. They get results and are happy, but they haven't learned the best way or process of doing it. Left unchecked the paddler can become highly proficient at the 'coping strategy' and practises it so frequently that eventually it becomes their reaction. The paddler will still get the results they want, particularly where the environment is flat and not too testing. However when put under more pressure, coping strategies are seldom a sufficient substitute for good technique, and ultimately the technique and consequently any future skills based on it are likely to fail.

▶ Example – Edge Control In A Kayak

A beginner learns a basic version of edging and recovering an off-balance boat using their trunk, hips and legs. In an attempt to hold the boat further and further off balance, they discover that leaning backwards and laying on their rear deck seems to make it easier. This is their 'coping strategy'. This apparent increase in performance is because the paddler's centre of gravity has been lowered by leaning backward therefore allowing them to take the boat further over before reaching the point of no return! Unfortunately, leaning back causes the trunk muscles to be far less effective at hip flicking and thus less effective at righting the boat. This is because when leaning back, the trunk muscle groups are stretched out and are not able to create the necessary hip flicking movement. However the paddler doesn't realise this because on flat water they are able to compensate for the ineffective hip flick by using their shoulder and arm muscles to pull the boat back upright with a strong support stroke or brace. The paddler continues to consolidate this 'coping strategy' through further practice and their natural reaction to being off balance becomes leaning back.

As edge control is fundamental to all support strokes, the paddler imports and adapts this technique into all support strokes, rolling and anything involving hip flicking and edge control. Whilst still on flat water they are likely to maintain a high degree of success due to support from their support strokes. They continue to be successful, unaware that brute strength is making up for the poor technique.

However if they progress on to paddling in white water and/or on the sea they will encounter problems. In these environments the water no longer has as much support as it has a broken surface and is seldom flat. They find themselves failing to support or roll in waves and rapids and consequently they swim a lot. Their coping strategy has reached the limit of its effectiveness, their upper body strength is no match for the sea or river. The only way they will upright their boat is using the powerful trunk and hip muscles, but because they are leaning back these are not able to work properly.

To progress they must go back and relearn the basic fundamentals of hip flicking, edge control and support strokes. They need to remove the instinct to lean back and instead sit upright or forward.

COPING STRATEGIES

It makes sense for the coach to identify the common coping strategies found in paddlers and, based on these, form strategies to prevent them occurring in beginners.

Here are some examples of good technique, common coping strategies, what problems they may cause and how we might proactively prevent them.

► Posture In Edge Control



Photo 1 Upright or forward using edge control.

✓ **Desirable outcome:** Sitting upright or forward whilst edging/hip flicking allows trunk and core muscles to move unhindered and provide powerful, uprighting movements and effective balance control.



Photo 2 Leaning back using edge control/hip flick.

✗ **Problems:** Restricts movement - causes trunk muscles to be ineffective, puts reliance on upper body strength; weakens all forms of edging, hip flicking, stability and rolling.

○ **Prevention:** Encourage good form and technique in early trunk and edging use, sitting upright or forward. Discourage leaning back in all stability situations.

► Head Position



Photo 3 Head low, towards water when rolling or recovering.

✓ **Desirable outcome:** Keeping head low, towards the water when rolling or recovering causes good spinal 'C to C' movement, keeps centre of gravity low and allows effortless finish.



Photo 4 Head high reaching away from water when rolling or recovering.

❌ **Problems:** Head high discourages good spinal hip flicking movement and raises centre of gravity, making recovery harder.

⦿ **Prevention:** Encourage head to be last thing to come out of water/upright when rolling/recovering.

► Positive Correction



Photo 5 Using forward strokes to correct when paddling forward.

✓ **Desirable outcomes:** Using only forward strokes to correct encourages the paddler toward good, fluid, forward paddling where subtle corrections occur instinctively within the cyclical pattern of movement. This helps to retain forward speed whilst correcting.



Photo 6 Using reverse strokes to correct when paddling forward.

❌ **Problems:** Reduces speed, discourages corrective forward paddling, can encourage stalling later on, i.e. in white water break-ins/outs or paddling out through surf.

⦿ **Prevention:** Teach forward paddling corrective strokes and stern rudders at the earliest opportunity. Teach sweep strokes in forward only version and in two halves, front half (change direction) and rear half (correct direction), see BCU Canoe and Kayak Handbook. No reverse strokes early on.

► Forward Paddling



Photo 7 Good forward paddling technique showing rotation, upright posture and push/pull action.

✓ **Desirable outcomes:** Underpins everything, early good posture and rotation here breathes the same into all other movements.



Photo 8 Weak forward paddling technique.

❌ **Problems:** Underpins everything! Bad posture and no rotation will undermine all their other paddling.

⦿ **Prevention:** Teach and encourage good forward paddling; go for flat water journeys early in paddlers' learning, and work on forward paddling whilst on these.

► Trunk Rotation



Photo 9 Good trunk rotation throughout all manoeuvres.

👉 **Desirable outcomes:** Maximises reach and keeps shoulder joints within a safe range of movement. Encourages paddlers to turn toward the new direction and look where they are heading. Encourages use of powerful trunk and core muscles, as well as dynamic rotation to help the boat turn.



Photo 10 Poor trunk rotation throughout all manoeuvres.

✗ **Problems:** Limits reach and leverage of strokes. Power comes from weaker arms and shoulders, rather than from stronger trunk and torso movements; encourages dangerous strain on shoulder joints; discourages paddlers from looking where they are heading; discourages dynamic rotation and stability in turning movements.

🕒 **Prevention:** From the outset, teach turning the torso and presenting the chest and shoulders before using the paddle when learning strokes. Encourage rotating the body into the turn when teaching turning manoeuvres.

► Future Water



Photo 11 Paddler looking to the future water whilst turning.

👉 **Desirable outcomes:** Getting paddlers to look where they are going encourages kinaesthetic paddling (feeling what the boat is doing) and allows the brain to collect more information and anticipate the next manoeuvres, thus smoother paddling.



Photo 12 Paddler staring at their bow whilst turning.

✗ **Problems:** Discourages awareness and anticipation of water features and environment ahead of boat. Discourages kinaesthetic awareness and feel of lower body movements.

🕒 **Prevention:** Encourage paddlers to 'look where they are going' from the outset.

Remember that paddling is developing very fast, so we will continue to discover that what we are teaching today may be creating bad habits for tomorrow. Therefore this is an area that, as coaches, we should be continually evaluating and updating.

See if you can think of some more common coping strategies!

BAD LEGACY 2. – INABILITY TO ADAPT

Time and time again you come across paddlers who are only able to perform when they are in their boat, gear and often at a familiar venue, paddlers who don't like change, or having to do things in a different way. If you delve deep you will usually find that these paddlers were not exposed to a wide variety of changes in their early paddling experiences. They probably used the same boat, paddle and gear and associated their performance with this.



KEY POINTS

- Canoesport is an open skill. Open skill development benefits from exposure to a variety of experiences. This includes equipment and venues, not just what you do.

An early learner who is encouraged to try different boats and visit different places will create a broad skill base to build on and will be open to a great many

experiences. They will also overcome one of the greatest bad habits, that of developing a paddling style which only reflects one type of paddling; this is very limiting.

► Example

A beginner joins a club that has a white water bias. They learn to paddle in a 2.5m river kayak on flat water. Consequently they develop a forward paddling style appropriate to a short boat, i.e. very limited trunk rotation and never paddling for more than a few moments before stopping. They find certain strokes difficult to learn, such as sideways strokes on the move. As these strokes seem to have no useful application in such a short boat they don't persevere.

Much later in their paddling career they develop a passion for sea kayaking, but find that it exhausts them. This is due to having a paddling style that is less effective and efficient in a sea kayak. Unfortunately due to the lack of variety in their early paddling experiences and having strongly reinforced a particular paddling style, they will have more difficulty in developing and adapting than someone who had a broader range of experiences in their early learning stages.

► Varied

Ultimately the broader, richer and more varied the experiences a paddler receives early on, the more adaptive and versatile they will be later. This is exactly what we do with children's education – general early on, specialising only later when sufficient breadth has been attained and a specialism has been chosen.

BAD LEGACY 3. - LACK OF SELF-AWARENESS

Skills within paddlesport fall into two main areas. There are those which are tactics and strategies based on knowledge of the activity and the environment in which it takes place, i.e. tidal planning or choosing a line down a rapid. These we call cognitive skills. Then there are the other skills, which are about physical movements and controlling your boat. These are motor or the physical skills of boat handling.

It is generally the motor skills we are most concerned with when coaching beginners, because without the ability to move around within the environment we can't take them into it to learn more about it!

If, when learning and improving motor skills, a student relies too heavily on feedback from the coach to gauge their performance, their progress can be slow and often confused - *Why?*

Answer - The coach can only say what they have seen and they may of course have missed things. They also have to communicate their observations to the learner; the learner receives this, processes it and incorporates it into the preparation for their next practice. Each of these stages has the potential for the clarity of information and relevant detail to be lost because of an individual's different interpretation. A bit like a game of 'Chinese whispers' - the end message may not be the same as the intended message.

To avoid these interpretation/translation difficulties, it is far better to encourage the learner to 'listen' to their own kinaesthetic feedback. That way they will know for themselves what the practice felt like. This route has little room for misinterpretation and encourages self-learning.

This doesn't make the coach redundant in terms of feedback. There is still a very important role for the coach. Sometimes the student's perception of what they are doing may be different to what they actually are doing. In this situation the coach can help point this out to the student.

► Example

A coach is trying to encourage a paddler to sit more upright when they are paddling. Based on their own internal feedback the student feels they are sitting upright. The coach however sees that the student is still slouching, though not as much as before. The coach suggests that the student tries leaning forward. When they do this, they are in fact sitting upright. The coach then explains that when the student feels upright they are actually leaning back a little and when they think they are leaning forward, they are in fact upright. The coach helps the student to 'recalibrate' their awareness of their movements.



TOP TIP

- Video playback can be a powerful tool to helping these situations, letting the student see exactly what they are doing and compare it with what their movements tell them they are doing.

► Self Recalibration

The earlier the student learns to do this the better a learner they will become and the more open to constant learning and improvement they will be. They will be able to adapt and modify their practice even without the coach being present because they are able

to be self-aware and analyse their own movements against what they have seen others do, what they have learned recently and what they have experienced feeling before. Most people do this naturally, but the more conscious of this process we become, the better we are able to use it, and the less likely we are to practise bad habits without realising it.

Having briefly looked at the common bad habits a beginner can pick up, we should now incorporate these into the broad principles of how to coach beginners in a positive way.

▶ GETTING THEM HOOKED AND CONTEXTUALISING

It doesn't matter how good your coaching may be, if your students don't come back for more they aren't going to get any better and turn into a paddler. As we know, paddlesport can be a very frustrating activity to learn as a beginner and certainly not the most exciting if it takes place at the same flat water venue every time. People will soon tire of practice, exercises and playing games unless they see a purpose to boating that justifies all the effort involved in getting better at it.

One of the most exciting and attractive aspects of kayaking and canoeing is journeying, exploring places and seeing views that are unique to being in a very small manoeuvrable craft. It's possible to give beginners, even with very limited abilities, regular tastes of this. This will keep them motivated, give them an idea of what it's all about and hopefully help them to catch the paddling bug!

The double bonus is that journeys and exploring allow newly acquired techniques and skills to be adapted and applied in a variety of different ways and environments, leading to a broader skill base.

The triple bonus is that if recently acquired techniques are used and applied appropriately in the correct environmental context, understanding and retention of these is far higher. It makes total sense that if you learn something new but don't apply it in its intended way, you won't understand it as well. If you just practise it because that's what your coach says you need to do, then its application, context and use in the intended environment has to be imagined. This is far more likely to lead to the technique being practised in an abstract and often misunderstood or incorrect way, one that doesn't help its future use in the correct environment.

In contrast, applying new techniques and skills in the appropriate environment and context instantly cements their place and use in the paddler's mind. The retention is far greater because their brain has understood and personally experienced an application for it. They understand the whys and hows of it and they are using it in response to the real environment... the environment is doing the teaching for the coach, as long as the coach has chosen the correct environment to start with.

▶ Example

The Stern Rudder. This can be learned relatively quickly and then practised repeatedly with games etc., but it is not contextualised or applied in a varied way.

If you went for a journey on a canal, or narrow river you would use this again and again to go through narrow gaps. Alternatively, on an open lake trip if you had to paddle downwind (the wind on students' backs) they would have to use the stern rudder to keep the boat running straight against the wind and any possible swell. They would also learn how to use the rudder as a continuation of a forward power or sweep stroke, thus breaking down the barriers between stroke boundaries!



TOP TIP

- If you have paddled into the wind to make it easier for a group of novices to paddle in a straight line and practise their forward paddling, what better way to get back to your start point than to introduce the stern rudder and then ask them to practise it in context, i.e. running downwind?



KEY POINTS

- If you have introduced the stern rudder using the IDEAS model, remember that the A for activity should be the largest component. As well as practising by using games that involve using the stern rudder, try and include as many activities that use the stroke in context, such as steering the boat through narrow gaps and steering the boat whilst travelling downwind.

This kind of practice is more natural and occurs with less conscious effort than in a formal coaching session, where it is often practice for practice's sake. You can't

get better at a physical activity without doing it, so what better way of doing it than go on a journey?

That said, games also have an important part to play:

1. They are fun.
2. If all you have is a small pond, a journey may not be an option, in which case make your games many and varied.

So incorporate journeys into your sessions and where possible take your students to places that are new to them so the fascination of exploration and discovery distracts their attention from the process of paddling, meanwhile contextualising learning and improving without even being aware of it.

► FAMILIES OF STROKES

If you read the Star Test syllabi or one of the many technique books on canoesport, you would be led to believe that there are a vast number of different strokes to be learned. Each of these appears to be an isolated 'paddle waggle' that does a specific thing, a stand-alone stroke of its own rather than a variation of another. Reality is that most strokes have far more similarities between them than differences. When we paddle without thinking, our strokes tend to blur and blend together making it very hard to isolate and identify individual named strokes.

The point of isolating and defining strokes is meant to be an aid to learning and coaching to present a logical structure and progression and to allow coaches to explain specific techniques in isolation. However this tends to present a bewildering number of strokes, which is often an obstacle to most students.

The danger is that, rather than see the similarities between strokes, learners see the differences and in doing so miss the fundamentals of boat manoeuvring. Coaches may likewise see and teach them as different, almost unrelated strokes and techniques, which adds to the difficulty and complexity of learning. The learner also perceives strokes as having one definitive version to aspire to, rather than a number of subtly different versions, all of which are acceptable in the right circumstances. This is best illustrated through the so commonly heard question: "Is my 'so and so' stroke correct?"

All of this leads the paddler away from fluid paddling, and toward a more robotic, mechanical style where paddling appears to be a series of pre-organised sequences put one after the other, rather than a fluid movement.

It's important to remember that paddlesport takes place in an extremely open environment, so it is inappropriate to encourage pre-organised sequences or versions of strokes. Instead they should be adaptable and have a myriad of applied interpretations.

It is better to nurture good quality basic movements that move the boat in all directions and keep it upright. We can then progressively apply and adapt these to an infinite number of situations. We will end up with a far greater range and variety of effective 'strokes' in this way... they just won't all have specific isolated versions with accompanying names.

► How Can We Do This?

We can take all of the traditionally isolated 'strokes' (both canoe and kayak) and, based on the way in which they work, trace them back to a basic version from which a beginner can develop them. By starting with a basic movement or stroke and developing it into other versions, confusion is reduced, progression is more gradual through adaptation and we remove the perception that there are so many different new strokes to master. Probably of most importance is that we encourage the students to understand the dynamics of how and why a boat reacts the way it does through experimentation and personal discovery, thus having much greater ownership, understanding and belief of what they have learned.

The other plus side is that this requires little in the way of complicated explanations from the coach as each version is a small step or adaptation from another previous one, consequently making coaching far easier and less problematic.

THE FAMILIES

A natural, logical learning progression can be found within each stroke family... but what are the families?

Each one of us may take a slightly different approach to these families. It is important for the coach to understand the interrelationship between the strokes, and based on that, establish their own families and progressions.

As an example here is the way I view them:

- Propulsion - is paddling forward and backwards.
- Steering/Turning - is sweep strokes and stern rudder.
- Sideways - all sideways movement and bow rudders, cuts and jams.
- Balance - edging, leaning, supporting and bracing.

STEERING/TURNING

Steering/Turning includes what people would commonly call sweep strokes, but broken into two versions, the bow sweep, which is a 'new direction' stroke (first half) and the stern sweep which is a 'correction' stroke (last half) as described in the Basic Strokes section of the BCU Canoe and Kayak Handbook. In addition 'stern rudders' fit in here as they are little more than a correction 'sweep' stroke that has reached the back of the boat. I teach them as exactly this and refine them later. All other strokes which have an effect on directional control fall in the sideways family.

► Coaching Forward Paddling Through Steerage

The steerage strokes are usually the first ones people learn and they underpin most other strokes, techniques and manoeuvres. They are also an inherent part of forward paddling because of the correction element. A beginner trying to paddle in a straight line will be spending more time correcting than actually driving the boat forward. We all know this, so why not concentrate on coaching corrective steering strokes before getting people to work on forward paddling!

Remember the point about applying strokes correctly and contextualising them? Well, sweep strokes are a classic example of how people don't do this!


Typically sweeps are introduced as one long stroke from one end of the boat to the other. This will turn the boat round on the spot, something we all need to do from time to time, but not the most frequently used application of the sweep. What we far more regularly do is use it as two very separate halves: correction, back half, or new direction, front half.

When a sweep is introduced and taught as a going round in circles stroke, it has exactly that effect... people perfect going round and round, but they don't learn to stop the spin and point in a particular direction. Pointing in a particular direction is the application of virtually all sweep strokes usage whether that be correcting back to where you were heading, or steering away to point in a new direction. Spinning round in a circular pattern is a process of using a sweep, it is not outcome or goal, therefore we should concentrate our coaching and exercises on the applied use of the strokes and their intended outcomes.

In practice this is very simple. People are introduced to the corrective and new directive versions of sweeps and are given the opportunity to practise a basic working version of this. Earlier on I highlighted the pitfalls of encouraging reverse strokes as correction, so at this stage all the directional control is applied through forward strokes. You then coach its application through various games. Here are some examples:



Photo 13 The Clock Game



EXERCISES


- exercise one:** Using physical markers, or the analogy of a clock face, students use the new strokes to turn the boat to point in specific directions. The directions are called out by the coach. When they have turned the boat they must hold it still, pointing in the new direction.

A by-product of this game is that the stern rudder position is ‘accidentally’ discovered when corrective strokes finish at the stern, thus beginning to establish the blending of rudders with corrective sweep strokes. You will find that if you spend ten minutes playing this game the positive effects on forward paddling are immense - students will correct naturally with little prompting. They will be using appropriate corrective sweeps and stern rudders to maintain a direction.

- exercise two:** Later on you can get students to use the new direction sweep as well as the correction by paddling around buoys or markers or in the shape of a box or triangle, etc.

SIDEWAYS

Sideways is by far the biggest family of strokes. It is all strokes that displace the boat sideways. It includes all forms of drawing, but also hanging draws and turning strokes that use a drawing effect like the bow rudder. For the canoeist this family is twice as large because of the ‘pry’ and the ‘jam’. I will explain the sideways family from the kayak perspective first of all. The canoe strokes follow the same logical pattern but twice, once for draw and once for their pry/jam cousins.



TOP TIP

- A coach I know thinks of the family of strokes I call ‘sideways strokes’ as ‘Vertical Paddle Strokes’. Whatever works for you!

► Draws

The basic stroke from which all the kayak sideways family stems is the ‘draw’, the basic version being performed without an underwater recovery. All the other

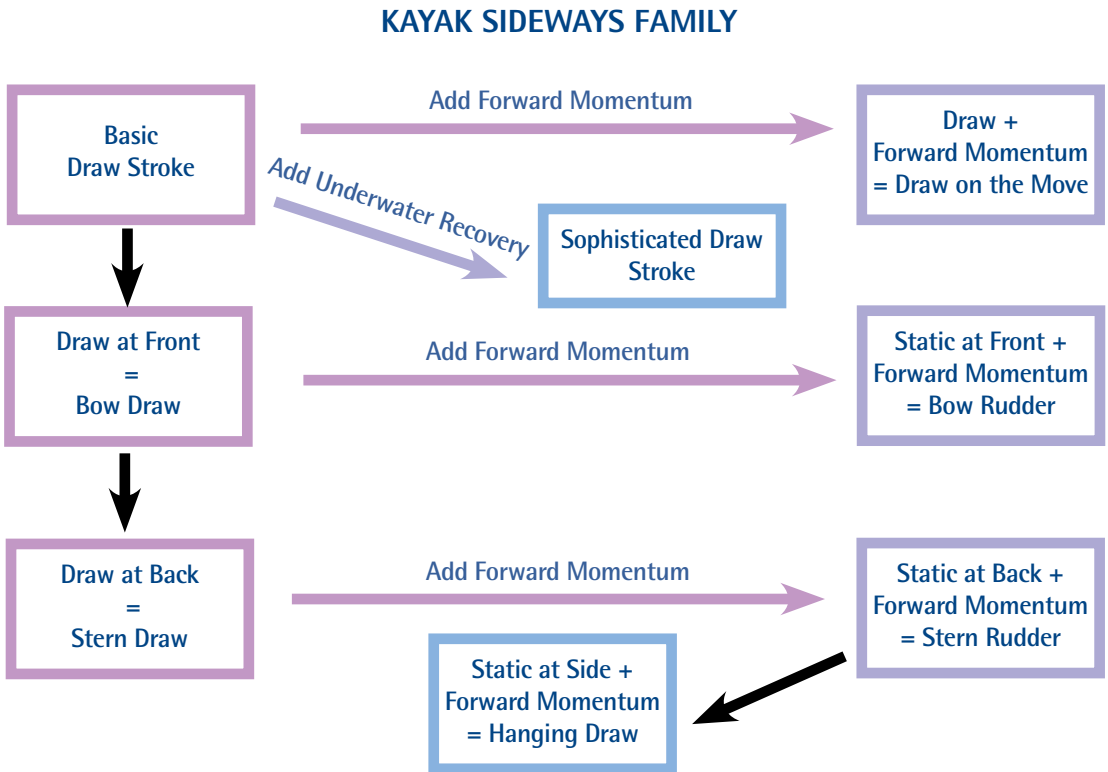


Fig. 1 The kayak version of the Sideways family

strokes develop from this because they are a draw placed either further forward or back to get a different effect, or they are held statically whilst the boat's forward momentum creates the draw effect on the boat like air does on an aeroplane wing.

The flow charts shows one way of viewing the similarities and how the strokes develop out of the basic version.

For the ease of communication I have used the conventional names for these strokes, however when

coaching beginners, I avoid the use of traditional names and also the approach of presenting each of the above 'pigeon holed' strokes as a defined isolated version. They don't need to know the name of the stroke to be good at it, they just need to know what it can do for them and then to begin practising it with context and application.

Names can be introduced later as a reviewing tool as they progress and precise terminology becomes a help rather than a hinderance.

CANOE SIDEWAYS FAMILY

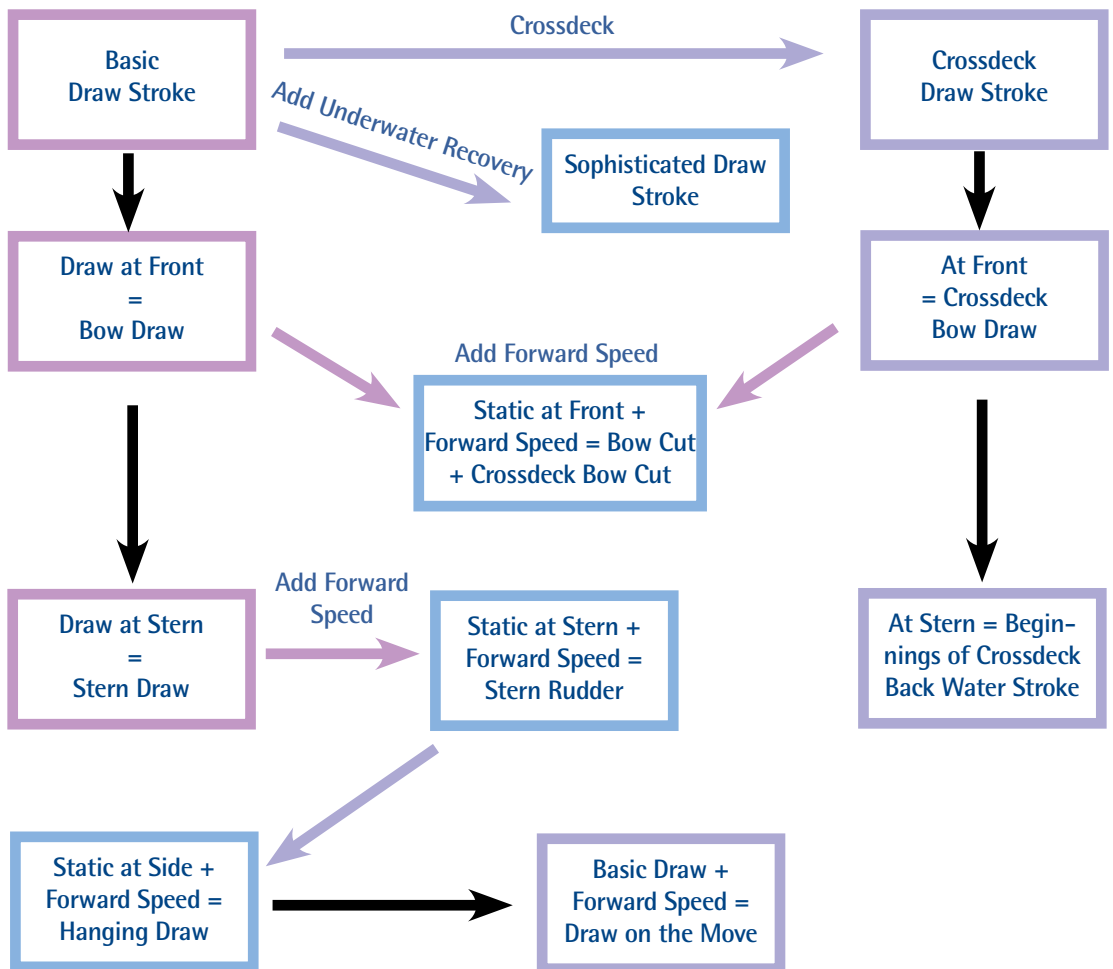


Fig. 2 The canoe version of the Sideways family

► The Pry Cousins

Draws are all strokes that move the boat toward the paddle. Pries and their static version, 'jams', move the

boat away from the paddle. A jam is really a running pry positioned away from the centre of the boat to encourage a dramatic turning effect.

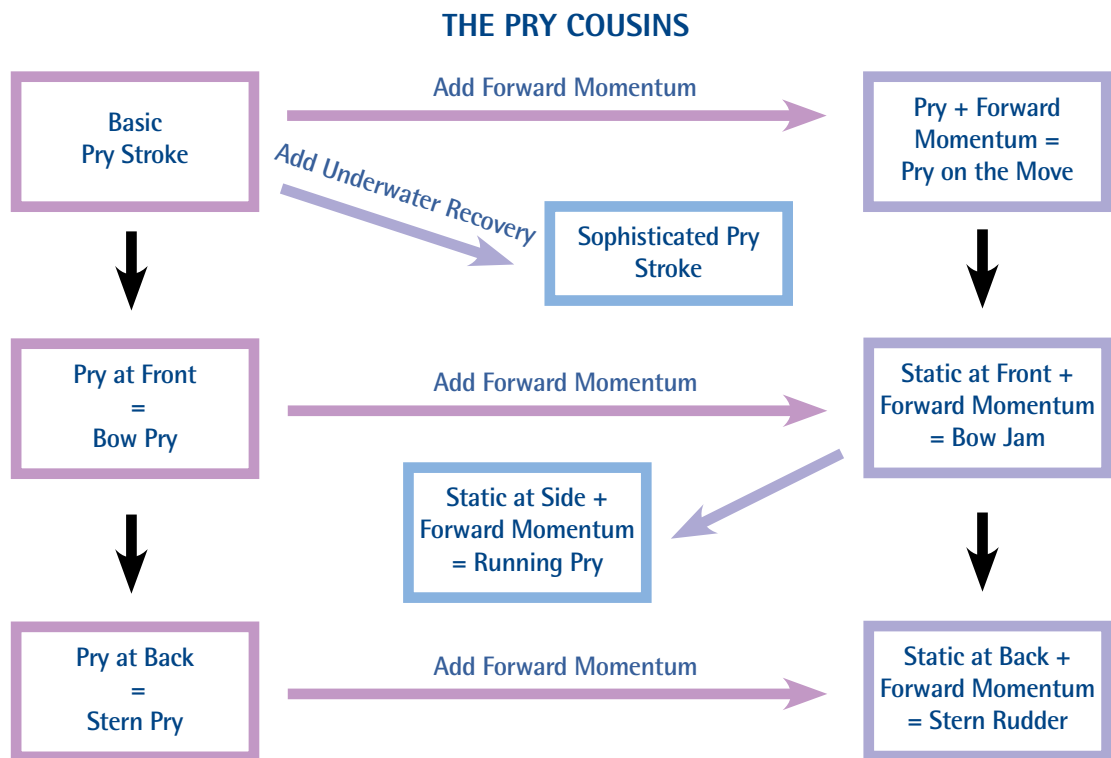


Fig. 3 The Pry cousins

► Coaching Tactics For Sideways Family

All these strokes either move the boat, or part of the boat toward the paddle or away from it. If we adopt this approach of ‘growing’ each stroke from a version before it, as in the previous diagrams, the students understand that there is no definitive position for the paddle, but that by subtly changing its position and feathering we can get different results. It is important to encourage this by getting students to experiment with positioning throughout their practice and to be able to say what the effects of the different positions are.

There are some strokes that fall into the Sideways family that people often find the most difficult to both coach and learn, for example the hanging draw or bow rudder.

There are three probable reasons for this:

1. Many of these strokes require the boat to have a certain degree of forward momentum to work. Student practice is undermined by the inability to move consistently forward with enough speed to engage with the stroke.

2. When the boat has forward momentum and the paddle is entered into the water to initiate a stroke, the shock or resistance of the water is often too much for the learner to control and this undermines success.

3. The kinaesthetic feel of a bow rudder, hanging draw, bow jam, etc. done well cannot be explained – it has to be experienced. Once a student has felt this, it is easier for them to replicate it. However getting that first time experience is difficult.

All three of these problems can be reduced greatly by adopting a common principle when coaching Sideways displacement strokes:

Get the student to concentrate on the sideways stroke and you create the forward momentum – for them!

The principle for this relies on the student positioning themselves, or being positioned by the coach through direct physical guidance. Momentum is then applied by either pushing or pulling the boat. This requires either being out of your boat, or getting the students to work paired up, one in a boat, one doing the positioning, pushing and pulling.



BOW RUDDER

- **one:** Get the student to present the paddle as if they were going to draw the boat sideways.
- **two:** Adjust their position to be appropriate for a bow rudder turn.
- **three:** Give their boat a big shove forward. *Voila! You have a bow rudder being experienced.*
- **four:** The student now knows what it feels like. Next time they can be shoved out and *slice*, not stab, the paddle into position, thus increasing fluidity and reducing stalling and loss of control.



14a



14b

Photos 14a-b Bow Rudder exercise



HANGING DRAW

- **one:** Attach a throw line to the bow of the boat.
- **two:** Get the student to present the paddle as if they were going to draw the boat sideways.
- **three:** Push the student away until they reach the full stretch of the line.
- **four:** Pull them slowly in toward you. They can adjust and experiment with the position of the blade as much as they want because the boat is not slowing down. *Voila! You have a hanging draw being experienced.*
- **five:** The student now knows what it feels like. The next time the student is pulled in they can *slice* the paddle, not stab it, into position, thus increasing fluidity and reducing stalling and loss of control.

N.B.: Because of the sideways movement the line puller should ideally move sideways along the bank, staying in front of the boat, otherwise the line will affect the sideways movement too much.

All manner of sideways strokes (and the stern rudder) that require forward momentum to work can be introduced this way. It has the advantage that students learn to feel pressure build up on the blade and adjust to it, because they are not distracted with getting the boat moving forward. They can concentrate on the new element of the stroke and add the momentum themselves later when they are ready.

Another advantage is pairing students up to work in collaboration with one another (see coaching methods).



15a



15b

Photos 15a-b Hanging Draw exercise

Very little positioning problems occur because direct physical guidance removes complicated and misunderstood explanations and demonstrations. However, if you have a very visual learner, a demo will be a good

idea and later on, when it comes to refining the movement, explanation will come into its own (see next chapter). By using this holistic approach to strokes we can significantly speed up the learning curve with an increase in performance and more skilful, fluid and adaptive paddling in the long term.



KEY POINT

- When coaching this way it is important to select the appropriate method of propulsion - there is no point in pulling a boat on a throw line if you want a student to experience a turning stroke, as their bow will be pulled back on line away from the intended direction!

BALANCE

Balance is a family not based so much on strokes, but on the technique of balancing the boat using the trunk and hip muscles - *essentially edging and leaning*.

We have previously discussed why it is important to introduce correct balance control early in a paddler's career. What I will do now is talk about how.

► Coaching Tactics For The Balance Family

The biggest obstacle to learning with this family is the fear of getting wet or being upside down. Most people are not relaxed enough and are too stiff to improve, because they don't want to get wet. This makes sense because the very reason we are learning these strokes is to avoid getting wet in the first place!

To reduce the impact of this we should reduce the environment to be less intimidating. This could mean using a pool to introduce balance strokes, or use shallow areas of an outdoor environment.

I typically use the latter, choosing an area shallow enough that should someone go too far and begin to capsize, they can put their paddle on the bottom before they go all the way over. An alternative in good weather is to get people to work in pairs with one partner stood in the water to right a capsized student (see BCU Canoe and Kayak Handbook).

All of these approaches increase effectiveness of a coaching session because students are less intimidated.

Another interference connected with not getting wet is the body's natural reaction to keep the head above water at all costs. This results in many people rearing their head away from the water when being near, or off balance.

As previously discussed, this can create a really bad habit in the long term.



Photo 16 Rearing their head away from the water when being near, or off balance.

To prevent this from establishing itself as a bad habit, we must encourage students from the outset to use a 'C' shape with the trunk and neck when edging and balancing.

When done correctly this gives maximum control and power from the trunk, and looks like this:

This equates to head away from the water whilst still in balance and head toward the water as you upright the boat.



Photos 17a-b 'C to C' - Head away from the water whilst in balance and head toward the water as you upright the boat.

Below is one method I use to introduce edging:



INTRODUCING EDGING

- **one:** Begin teaching edging by getting students to do this 'C to C' action slowly on the land, sat down out of their boats. This way it is slow and controlled, the 'below the deck' action is visible and, most of all it's definitely dry!
During this, focus on the use of the outer buttock as a point of contact.
- **two:** They can then transfer it to their boats on the land, or go directly to the water. Persistently reinforce the head movement. Focus on the outer buttock and also upward lift on the knees.
- **three:** Once people have this basic edging action get them to find the maximum amount of edge they can hold without falling in; this is their edge score of 3.
- **four:** If a flat boat is scored zero, then they should be able to find edge score 1 and 2.
- **five:** Now we can play a game where the coach calls out left or right followed by number 1,2,or 3 and the students have to hold that edge until a new number is called out.

In a similar way to the sweep stroke exercise, this gives a controlled application to edge control, rather than alternate edge to edge wobbling which does not encourage holding an edge.

All this is done without a paddle. Without the complications of paddle movements it makes it easier for the beginner to understand the basics of boat balance. It is then a simple progression to add the paddle as a point of contact on the water, which allows the trunk to flick away from it, first in a down-pushing position (low brace) and then for more dramatic loss of balance by hanging the body from under the paddle (high brace).

Introducing balance and hip flicking without the paddle allows the emphasis to be on posture, co-ordination of body parts and development of a powerful side bend in the trunk. It also discourages reliance on upper body strength when paddles are introduced.

It is the co-ordination of the head and the hips coupled with a powerful side bend that are the essential foundations of good supporting and rolling technique.

So often when coaching rolling it is these two ingredients which are missing or weak that are the obstacle to success. The stability family starts with edging, evolves through supporting, to finish with rolling as the extreme version of a high brace. Also included is the relationship between edging and leaning.



Photo 18a Edging on land.

Photo 18b Edging in the boat without a paddle.

Photo 18c Edging with paddle.

► Dynamic Balance

As the boat speed increases with forward or backward momentum, it is possible to substitute edging (with an upright body) for leaning the boat and body together. Many coaches refer to this as static and dynamic balance.

We can begin coaching dynamic balance very soon after students have successfully completed the balance exercise. The following exercises could be used:



DYNAMIC BALANCE

- **exercise one:** Students to paddle a straight line holding edge, different edge scores on both sides.
- **exercise two:** Students paddle large diameter circles holding their boat on an edge score throughout. Paddle circles with different scores on both sides.
- **exercise three:** Paddle a 'figure of eight' course holding the boat on edge and changing it for the different turns. Try different scores.
- **exercise four:** Get the boat up to maximum speed and then, using a new direction sweep, carve a turn using edge. Use different scores.
- **exercise five:** Do the last exercise again, this time edge the boat as much as possible.



19a



19b

Photo 19a Static balance

Photo 19b Dynamic balance



20

Photo 20 Dynamic balance Exercise 2



21

Photo 21 Dynamic balance Exercise 5

During this last exercise students should discover that they have exceeded their static score of 3. This is because speed gives you more stability and therefore allows you to go further over before the point of no return - dynamic balance!

Balancing then needs applying and contextualising, perhaps within journeys, or polo. Polo is a great activity as it usually involves more unpredictable off-balance opportunities than most other things, making people react and stay upright.

Just make sure that coping strategies don't begin to creep in. This may happen as the focus will move from process (good technique) to outcome (winning and not capsizing).

If a student is able to achieve this level of performance using good trunk control then they will have an excellent foundation for their future paddling.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF LTPD

The LTPD pathway promotes the concept that novices need to focus on developing quality skills and that this is best done by experiencing a wide variety of craft, venues and situations that are individually suitable.

The art of successful paddling lies in the paddler being able to create a union between themselves, the boat, paddle and the water around them, to such a degree that to an onlooker these components look as if they are working together as one. In order to achieve this, a strong connection between the paddler and their boat, paddles and the water is vital. Imagine a pony carrying a heavy load; the pony will move far more freely if the weight of the load is well balanced and attached firmly to the pony in the right place, rather than being loose and shifting. Now replace the pony with the boat, and you, the paddler for the load! The goal is to balance your weight in your boat, in a manner that allows you to follow the motion of the boat, and become part of it. If your weight is not centralised (either forward/back or side/side) the motion of the boat, its balance and flow are severely compromised.

The connected paddler has not simply outfitted their boat correctly, but:

- Has active posture, allowing the body to move freely, with the muscles being sensitive to movement and being quick to act.

- Is balanced, giving the body the freedom to generate powerful and efficient movements, allowing the paddler to react to the movements of the boat/paddles around them, and has co-ordinated efficient movements.

This allows the paddler to feel and anticipate the movement of the boat through the water and efficiently transfer power from the body to create movement of the boat. The paddler can perform strokes that generate power, turning and stability, control the speed, angle, edge and trim of their boat, and move efficiently and economically, resulting in the controlled and efficient movement of the boat to achieve a desired outcome.

These qualities are fundamental to skilful paddling and need to be taught alongside any stroke or technical development. The concepts are not just the domain of the experts, but should be introduced gradually from the first time a person sits in a boat. The more varied a paddler's experiences the better these concepts will be developed and the easier it will be for them to develop complex specialist skills as they progress.

See Chapter 10 'Coaching Young Paddlers' for more details about how these principles should be applied specifically when working with young people.

See Chapter 1 'Coaching' for a basic introduction to LTPD.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Ultimately you can take all the best coaching methodology there is and apply it to your students, but there are certain things that are essential for your students to be able to learn.

BOATS AND GEAR

At this level where students are trying to become paddlers, their boats and paddles need to be sized and fitted appropriately for them. It is very hard to learn about balancing a boat if you cannot reach the footrests! Take the time and effort to help students gain the most from their efforts and your coaching – make sure they have a good fit in their boat and their paddle is appropriately sized for them and tell them why this is so.

TEMPO AND ANIMATION

By tempo and animation, I mean the changes in pace and flow of the session. This includes the variety of different approaches used, e.g. some paired up work, some individual, some group. Try changing location within a session even if there are no environmental benefits, it will still be a change for your students. Within a whole session try contrasting static sessions with short journeys to a different location for another static session. Some of the paired work involving pushing and pulling boats gets people out of their boats and again adds variety. All these changes keep the students' minds alert and interested, it also makes the session more interesting for you. It is incredibly important that beginners are having fun and learning experiences are enjoyable. This may sometimes mean

compromising on coaching ideals to maintain student excitement and your session's tempo and animation.

FEEDBACK AND REINFORCEMENT

Throughout all your coaching remember to reinforce good practice with praise and explanations of why it is good. At a beginner's level this is more important than corrective feedback in many ways.

► SUMMARY

Now after many years of coaching, my personal mission is to strive to find the perfect progression and structure from novice through to early improver, helping the paddler to create a sound foundation so they are able to pursue any avenue within paddlesport without hinderance, bad habits or coping strategies that will have to be undone later. This is a noble mission to have, but my parting thoughts are these:

Left to their own devices, most people will work out for themselves how to manoeuvre a boat forwards, backwards, stay upright and generally go where they

want. A coach can speed up this process, and make it more efficient. Students can only progress at their own pace. Sometimes they under or over-estimate how fast that pace is and the coach can help them gain a more realistic view, but the pace must be dictated by the students' needs rather than the coach's desires.

The most effective thing a coach can do is to help each student find their own personal way of boating, whilst being mindful of not letting them acquire bad habits!

A coach does not give a student knowledge and skills, the student ultimately learns the skills themselves through direct personal experience. Your job as the coach is to provide the student with useful feedback and create the right environment in which this process can happen.

In essence this environment should be:

- ✔ Stimulating/challenging
- ✔ Fun
- ✔ Contextual/applied
- ✔ Varied

BOB TIMMS

Bob began kayaking in north-east London through school and, spurred on by the guidance of Clive Atkins, a local Level 5 Coach, he has never looked back.

Bob is a Level 5 Inland Kayak Coach and is also qualified in sea, canoe and as a raft guide. He has kayaked in South America, Asia, Europe and Australasia with some of his more bizarre achievements including a Bronze at the first (and probably last!) World Sea Kayak Championships and kayaking from Folkestone to Athens!

He's worked full time in the outdoors since leaving school, including managing Canolfan Tryweryn and instructing at Plas y Brenin.

Bob now lives permanently in Briançon, in the southern French Alps, working as a coach and International Mountain Leader for amongst others PGL, Plas y Brenin and himself as 'Bob Timms Boating and Trekking'.

