What makes up a good coaching session?

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ConnectedCoaches Content Champion and Senior Fellow in Sports Coaching at the University of Winchester, Richard Cheetham, talks about what makes a good coaching session. Using one of his students’ gymnastics coaching sessions on how to perform a dive roll, he emphasises the importance of the key elements.

Coaches should adhere to a framework of core elements when delivering their sessions. Richard Cheetham explains what these core elements are and why a structured approach is critical to the learning process.

- Make the content and learning objectives of your session clear in your introduction.
- Work hard to develop the partnership between yourself and the learners.
- Planning and preparation are key to engaging participants.
- Get them active early: if they are all active, they are all engaged.
- Enjoyment and engagement levels will slip if you cram too much technical instruction into one session.
- Help promote a positive coaching environment by focusing on each individual’s achievements.
- Ask a lot of questions, and get the participants to ask themselves questions – and provide answers – before, during and after the sessions. Reflection is paramount.

In many ways, sports coaching is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

It can be extraordinarily difficult for a novice to fully grasp the gamut of principles and methodologies that go hand in hand with good coaching practice.

It throws up dilemmas and challenges that can change from session to session – and sometimes during the sessions themselves – which can derail your thinking and knock your confidence.

Nobody ever said coaching was easy.

But what at first may appear to be a mountainous challenge can be reduced to more of a molehill by following a few basic rules.

As ConnectedCoaches Content Champion Richard Cheetham neatly summarises in the video above, a good coaching session is built on a foundation of core elements.

And if you follow this framework for structuring your sessions, the numerous pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that make up good coaching practice will fit together a whole lot easier.
Establish the learning outcomes

You wouldn’t have the urge to watch a film if you switched it on halfway through, or begin reading a book if the first 10 chapters had been ripped out, as you wouldn’t have the first idea of the plot.

The start of a book or film determines the middle and the end. And that is also true of a coaching session.

It gives you the chance to explain to the participants what you will be trying to achieve in the time you have with them, and sets the tone for all that follows. A good beginning will also grab the interest of your audience so they give you their undivided attention.

‘I think it’s vitally important to have absolute clarity between yourself and the participants from the outset as to exactly the content of the session is going to be, and also the reasons why you have chosen that content,’ says sports coach UK tutor and Rugby Football Union (RFU) educator Richard, who delivers workshops on how to deliver engaging sessions.

If, for example, you are planning to focus on decision-making skills in the session, you need to explain the context to them, and stress why it is important they quiz themselves during the game.

Ask them at what point they think they might need to make a decision. What kinds of decisions might they have to make, and for what purpose?

It is important you make this question and answer phase a staple part of your introduction so that the learning objectives are clear in the players’ minds when they begin the game. It will help them put theory into practice, and will result in more insightful feedback when players are asked to reflect on the session.

The more habitual this process becomes, the more adept they will become at finding answers to their questions.

As a development technique, it is simple but highly effective.

The goal is for the participants to slowly become familiar with your coaching style.

‘It is so important then that you have that partnership between the learner and yourself,’ adds Richard.

‘I find with my students that they begin to understand the good habits that I want them to develop. It takes a while, but they learn that questioning is important before, during and after a session, as is the type of question they need to ask themselves.’

Getting active and staying engaged

The process of establishing the learning outcomes will only work in combination with good planning.

Preparation is the first challenge a new coach faces.

Coaches must ask themselves a series of questions, such as: ‘What am I going to do in the session, why am I going to do it and how am I going to do it?’

Failure to address the questions: ‘What is my audience?’, ‘Who are my audience?’ and ‘What is appropriate for them?’, for instance, could leave you totally unprepared.
The age of the participants may mean you need to modify your language and the amount of detail in your explanations. There might be different motivations at play too depending on whether you are coaching within a curriculum-based environment, like a school, or at a club, where the participants are paying to be involved. The audience, then, is an important factor to consider.

Having planned your session meticulously and established the learning outcomes with your students, you will have the foundation needed to ensure a smooth transition to phase two of the session, which is to get the participants active and engaged.

‘Engagement is a critical part of delivering a good session. You have to make people interested and attached to that learning,’ says Richard.

‘The RFU promotes the APES principle: active, purposeful, enjoyable and safe. That first element is crucial. If we’re all active, we’re all engaged.

‘It was one of the things I remember most from taking my first coaching qualifications. So, yes, that questioning and that stating of the purpose of the session is vital, but don’t let that stretch on for too long because participants really want to get involved.’

And when they are being active, they want to be having fun. The onus is on the coach to think of creative ways to keep participants engaged, preparing different but purposeful and relevant exercises that involve lots of interaction.

Using one of his students’ hockey coaching sessions designed to practise applying pressure in defence, Richard highlights the importance of coaches making their sessions engaging, active and enjoyable.

Don’t overcomplicate practices and activities. When it comes to the message you want to transmit, think quality over quantity. If you bombard them with dossiers’ worth of technical instruction in a single one-hour session, they will likely forget most of what they have been taught.

‘No more than three main coaching points in a session is a good number to aim for,’ explains Richard.

‘There is a lot of evidence now on the role of memory and how we learn. Beyond three, you then start to forget. If you are given direction or instruction, you will remember the first thing you hear and the last thing. There is a high probability that, if you give more than three instructions, they will not remember them all.’

He recalls a presentation he attended where a coach introduced eight tactical moves in microscopic detail: ‘After he’d finished talking about the first two, I was completely lost.’

A positive coaching environment

I ask Richard if coaches should demonstrate new skills to their students.
How to angle the arm when throwing a ball or how to grip a racket is one thing, but what about showing them exactly how to execute a complicated move, or how to position their body for the perfect take-off or landing?

‘Modelling is a common coaching expression,’ says Richard. ‘For me, if I have an expectation in a coaching session, I will show the people I am teaching how it looks. It’s important to act out what you are looking for because people like to learn visually. They want to see it through actions, not just words.

‘That modelling, that demonstration, is absolutely critical.’

It is a fail-safe method of building confidence levels in your charges too, as the quicker they pick things up, the happier they will be.

‘Confidence is a positive attribute so it’s important you try to get them to have some success, in whatever form that is, very early on in a session because it helps you create a positive environment. It’s human nature that we become more positive the more things we achieve. I always remember the phrase, “early success breeds confidence”.’

Striving to create a positive coaching environment is another of the core elements that make up a good coaching session.

Do not overstretch participants by setting unachievable goals beyond their capability, and make sure you recognise the successes of every individual.

Richard recently returned from Dublin, where he gave a presentation on the future of learning to triathlon, cycling and running coaches.

One of the areas he focused on was individualised learning programmes and the idea that a one-size-fits-all approach to coaching can hamper development – with the coach needing to be aware of every individual’s abilities, achievements and aspirations.

He used the example of keeping a photograph and video diary of the season to illustrate this point.

‘I thought of an idea whereby cycling groups could record their rides, taking photographs and videos of the hills and routes they have undertaken, so they can reflect back on what their training programmes have looked like and what they have achieved.

‘So through creating a picture diary, they will find it easy to track their progress. This also means you are engaging with them as a coach as it enables you to say: “OK, let’s see what you have done over the last three months or six months.” Those photos will help to recall the challenges they have overcome and show their achievements.’

**Reflective practice**

Anything that promotes reflective practice – a key stimulant of continuous learning – is to be encouraged.

Almost everyone has an iPhone, smartphone or tablet so it makes sense to tap into that technological resource. Rather than shy away from the use of smartphones, why not find ways to use them positively in your sessions?

‘If I was doing a closed skill,’ says Richard, ‘such as a free throw at basketball, a tennis serve or a golf swing, I would look to give my phone to a friend if I was serious about improving, and I would keep my own photo and video diary of my progress, looking back on what I have achieved, comparing the video of
week one to week six, and then show my friends, parents and coach what I have learnt in that time.

‘What I am looking to show in the few examples I have given is that success is an individual measure. So when you state the aims and objectives at the start of a session, while not everyone will achieve the ultimate goal, it is important to focus, upon reflection, on what you have learnt.

‘I can teach a lot of people juggling in 15 minutes. But those who can’t may still have made progress. Some might have struggled to catch with their left hand. But if, at the end of that 15 minutes, they can catch the ball in their weaker hand, then they have achieved something.’

Reflective practice is not about a coach holding court in front of their players, telling them what strings they should have added to their bow, it is about giving the players a voice.

As Richard states, evaluation is the key to progression so get them to divulge to the group what they know now that they didn’t before, what they can do now that they couldn’t before and in which areas there is still room for improvement.

Physical literacy

For a developing coach, understanding the process of learning far outweighs the need to have an expert knowledge in your chosen field.

Getting your message across successfully should be the first priority. And remember, learning is a marathon, not a sprint. Don’t worry if the participants don’t get things straight away. They will learn at different rates.

‘Coaching is like a good presentation,’ says Richard. ‘It is not about telling everyone how much you know. It’s about developing the knowledge among the participants and allowing them to recognise what they have learnt and how they can improve further.

‘Participants want you to find a way for them to pick up the key elements of what you are trying to put across in a way that they won’t forget.’

Hopefully, the pointers contained in this article will serve coaches well, no matter how wide or narrow their experience, and go some way to helping them unravel the coaching riddle.

Let’s finish with one final example that ties in all the core elements of the framework – an exercise that establishes clear learning examples, creates a positive environment, immediately engages the audience, is creative, and provides coaches and participants with plenty of opportunities for reflection. It ticks every box.

All aboard for a visit to the zoo.

Richard details an exercise he devised based around a theme and a story that the children he worked with thoroughly enjoyed.

He explained to them in the introduction to the session that he was a zookeeper and they were the animals. The challenge was to escape from the zoo without waking up the zookeeper and then to evade capture.

‘You can teach adults about jumping, landing and body position, but with children, you might want to introduce a game-based approach. Ask yourself: “How can I deliver that technical language to the group I’ve got in front of me?”’

‘I came up with the idea of animals escaping from a zoo, and the children all had to come up with a
different animal. Then we linked movement skills to the animals they selected.

‘One of them chose a kangaroo so I asked them how a kangaroo moves. “It jumps and it lands,” they told me. From that aspect, you teach them how it jumps, and they perfect how to jump properly. Then you look at how to land and the importance of a gentle landing, and the best technique to achieve that.

‘It’s about being able to put the learning in a language they will understand. It’s beyond technical knowledge, it’s about how coaches deliver that knowledge.’

The children were instantly engaged too because it was a theme they could relate to.

It seems so simple when written down, but as a new coach, it can be an easy trap to fall into whereby you bypass that creative thought process.

You can picture the colourful scene that quickly evolved at Richard’s session.

Besides the kangaroos, there are lions running amok (‘the yellow bibs were the lions, the blue bibs were the lunch so you’ve got evasion, chasing and footwork’). Horses are galloping around with riders on their backs (‘so we had piggybacks and showed them how it was important to have good posture – like having a squat bar on your shoulders’).

The poor flamingos, meanwhile, are envious observers, standing balancing on one leg while chaos ensues around them, desperate not to flinch an inch and attract the unwanted attention of the alligators who are crawling on their bellies, waiting to strike.

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