

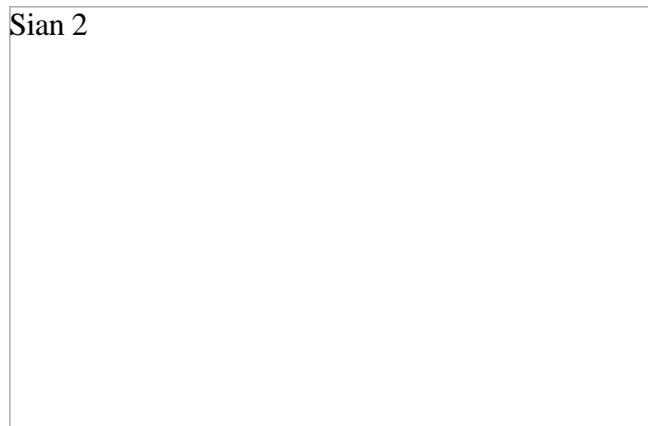
Motivation Part 3. Can motivational factors really change how we learn?

Published 17 days ago by [Anonymous](#)

Optimal learning environments

In parts [one](#) and [two](#), we looked at how to create learning environments that lead to more self-motivated, happy, healthy, individuals! These articles are written primarily to help coaches, coach developers and leaders in adventure and other sports. However, **all of the concepts can be applied to you** as a learner, participant or parent seeking to improve your skill and motivation, and to feed your passion!

Sian 2



NEEDS-SUPPORTIVE COACHING BEHAVIOURS HAVE AN IMPACT ON MOTIVATION. SIAN OF 'PSYCHED PADDLEBOARDING' COACHING ON THE BEAUTIFUL LLYN PADARN. PHOTO BY 'TWO FOR JOY PHOTOGRAPHY'.

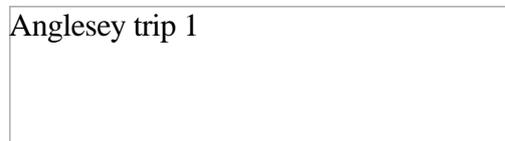
Most of you will be familiar with the term learner-centred coaching, but what does it mean, and why is it important? We will look at some contemporary learner-focused research into coaching sports skills. Most of this research comes from attempts to understand what happens when the coach stops making all the decisions and starts to give the learner more autonomy as part of developing a motivationally supportive learning environment. When both motivation and skill development are supported, we can have an optimal learning environment.

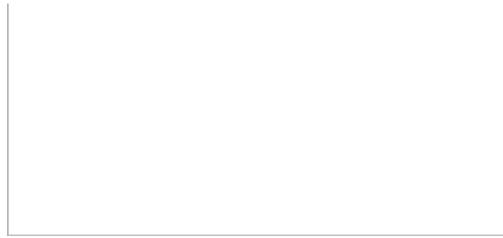
A quick recap of motivation and participation

In the first two parts of this article, we learnt that the satisfaction of our psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness will determine our motivation, enjoyment and behavioural regulation. This will either increase or decrease our self-determination. In other words, it will determine whether we are likely to carry on doing something. The exciting (and scary) part for us as coaches is that our needs-supportive coaching behaviours directly influence whether those we coach will think that their needs are being satisfied. This will then have an impact on their level of motivation and self-determined behaviour.

How can we make sure that we are not accidentally de-motivating others instead of being the inspirational coach or leader that we aspire to be?

Anglesey trip 1





A GROUP MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT THE NEXT STAGE OF THEIR LEARNING EXPEDITION AROUND YNYS MON. PHOTO BY SAM DAVIES.

We concluded (in part 2) that a needs-supportive coach will provide choices where possible, well-structured sessions, give a rationale for practice activities, and acknowledge the feelings and perspectives of their learners. They will provide opportunities for initiative taking, give non-controlling competence feedback, and communicate using non-controlling language. They will also avoid using controlling behaviours, rewards or promoting ego orientated involvement. This means that a needs-supportive coach is doing a lot!

To keep the language simple I am going to refer to the coaching behaviours as *needs-supportive*, and the environment that this creates as an *optimal* learning environment.

Can motivational factors also affect learning?

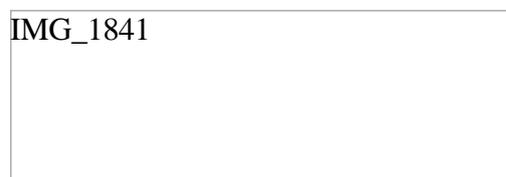
Intuitively, this seems like a really silly question to ask, because, it would seem to be an obvious “yes”. Even without any short term learning advantages from an optimal learning environment, practice conditions that increase self-motivation (self-determined behaviour) will also increase the likelihood of continued engagement. And we know that becoming skilful requires a considerable amount of continued engagement! It requires many years of deep practice. So, even without any short term learning benefits, creating optimal learning environments is really powerful and important.

There is a substantial amount of recent evidence that suggests that providing needs-supportive coaching, particularly *autonomy* support, can also result in significantly better learning. ***It changes the way we learn.*** This article will start to explore this exciting concept, and in the next part, we will look at an example of how it would work in the structuring practice schedules. We will look at how and why giving your learners ‘choices’ could not only increase their motivation and commitment, but also improve their learning.

Who is making the decisions?

Within more traditional sports, as well as adventure activities, deliberate practice has typically consisted of coach-led sessions. In a *coach-led* session, the coach makes all the decisions. The coach defines the learning environment, structures the practise activities and provides the technical and tactical content considered necessary for developing skilful performance. The research that guided this practice paid little attention to how coaches could support the needs of those they coached. In fact, motor learning research did not consider motivation at all until relatively recently. There appears to have been an assumption that in sports settings people are already self-motivated. Motivation was, therefore, something that was only important if someone did not have any *at all*. (And then, only to get people active who needed to be for health reasons.)

Thankfully, there has been a recent change in focus. Both researchers and practitioners have moved away from considering movement learning as just being about how a coach can effectively impart information. This wider view has resulted in an approach that is more learner-focused.



A learner-centred focus

A learner-focus not only considers the task constraints of a sports skill (e.g. technical and tactical), but also the environment in which the skill is performed, and most importantly, all of the nuances (including motivational ones) of the individual who is performing it.

This learner-centred focus has resulted in a growing number of studies that have examined the effects of individualising the learning environment. Interestingly, the most consistent finding is that individualisation is most effective when the learner is the one making the decisions about what or how to individualise. So, instead of the coach choosing how to individualise all aspects of the learning environment, for example, skill difficulty or progressions through practice schedules; the learners are supported to make their own choices within defined and structured frameworks.

These studies have not only found an increase in motivation when learners are given more autonomy and decision making, but also a significant increase in skill acquisition when measured in retention tests. There is still much to be done regarding researching all of the pathways that may lead to increased learning but they are likely to include to following:

1. More effortful and focused decision making by the learner
2. Increased overall effort
3. Optimal levels of challenge
4. Reward through perceptions of competence
5. Increased relationship satisfaction with coaches
6. Increases in perceived needs support
7. Increases in perceived needs satisfaction.

Giving the learner choices

Let's go back to our list of needs-supportive coaching behaviours.

How can a coach provide choices? Give the rationale for activities? Provide opportunities for initiative-taking, and promote a mastery orientated involvement? And how can they do all of this as well as individualising the sessions for those they are coaching?

One way is to allow those they coach to choose their own level of skill difficulty or practice schedule challenge. This is known as 'self-pacing'. The coach has a responsibility to ensure that the range of tasks and levels are appropriate, well-structured and have the opportunity for progression. They also need to ensure that the learners have the information they need, and the skill level necessary, to make their decisions.

When those who are learning have more decision making responsibility they are also able to start making supported judgements and develop the capacity to become more responsible for their own performance and practice. This will influence what the learner focuses their attention on, how they process information and what decisions they make.

Increases in autonomy and decision making are likely to have a very large and positive impact on the practice learners can do outside of coached sessions. The nature of adventure, equestrian and many other sports makes this particularly relevant if we wish to increase the amount of participation and practice undertaken outside of coached sessions and competitions. All of this necessitates a high level of autonomy and confidence. So the focus becomes, in part, about coaching for redundancy.

In part 4, we will explore using self-pacing in more detail by going through an example.

If you enjoyed this you will be able to find all my other ConnectedCoaches blogs, including Motivation Part 1 and 2 [here](#).

You can find out more about me by [visiting my profile](#).

Acknowledgements:

A very big thank you to everyone who proofread this for me, particularly Rosie Cripps, Sam Davies, and Greg Spencer.

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