

How to coach a range of abilities within a large group

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Large group

Does your team training sessions comprise a mix of experienced and inexperienced performers that span a spectrum of abilities? Do you coach adults and youngsters in the same group, or teenagers at different stages of maturation? This blog provides advice on how to keep every participant engaged and challenged in sessions, maintaining individual learning pathways while being careful not to compromise support to the wider group.

- **A coach has a range of strategies at their disposal to ensure the learning needs of all participants are being met.**
- **Included below are an array of examples that demonstrate how imposing games-based constraints and encouraging creativity can develop a dynamic and motivational climate for all ability levels to flourish.**
- **Using a peer mentor as a helping hand to assess their team-mates (and each other) and provide support, knowledge and encouragement is a highly effective technique.**
- **Every participant should take turns in being a peer mentor as learners retain a high percentage of what they learn when they teach someone else.**
- **Children need to be trained by coaches on how to be involved in their own learning and to understand success criteria. This process may take several sessions and should not be rushed.**

It is a common concern of parents whose children attend primary school to question the level of individual support they receive from their class teachers.

Parents of more able children worry they are not being sufficiently challenged because teachers are spending too much time trying to develop those with special educational needs, or those pupils who struggle to keep up in lessons.

Similarly, parents of those who are not as academically advanced as some of their classmates fear the cleverest pupils are receiving more one-to-one support, to the detriment of their own child's learning and

development.

Most parents air their views privately, but some complain all-too publicly that either their child's ample potential is being stymied, or that they are being left trailing in their classmates' slipstream because of an imbalanced system.

It is a classic case of, you can't please all of the people all of the time, and I am sure this will resonate with some coaches too.

In actual fact, teachers take great pains to make sure they provide equal access to learning.

Schools have a range of creative strategies at their disposal to ensure the needs of all pupils are being met.

And while the coaching industry has its own domain-specific learning strategies to draw on, it has been quick to adopt and adapt some of the transferable techniques which the teaching profession has been at the forefront of developing.

[Several ideas were discussed in a thread initiated by ConnectedCoaches member Martin Beckford](#) that provided guidance to coaches who oversee large mixed ability sessions.

I thought it would be useful to pick some of the best advice from that conversation, and to merge in some tips from a head teacher trained in child-centred group learning strategies, to demonstrate how the two sectors can learn from each other.

Peer mentoring model

A teacher/coach cannot be in several places at once and so is unable to watch every pupil/participant all of the time. In a large group, it is much easier to monitor and assess progress if participants are divided into small-sided groups, with a peer mentor allocated to each cluster to enforce learning objectives.

Rugby coach [Jimmy Halsius](#) uses this approach in his 20-strong sessions that comprise children aged 9 to 11, whose experience range from 3 years to 3 weeks.

His advice: 'Challenge the more experienced to help the newer kids.'

Fellow ConnectedCoaches member [Reggie Wilcox](#) agrees: 'Depending on the number of coaches you have it may be worth placing a senior player in each group to lead the drill. This will allow you to focus on a skill station or group as appropriate.'

And triathlon head coach [Barb Augustinis](#) is another firm believer in utilising older or more technically adept players as mentors, saying she has used the technique in sessions where nine-year-olds were training alongside adults.

Kully Richardson is head teacher at Kirkstall Valley Primary School in Leeds. She explains in more detail the method behind the peer [mentor](#) model.

'We use the children to assess each other and themselves. It is a fundamental approach in teaching.'

The concept sees every pupil (regardless of ability) take turns at directing a small group, who choose a particular challenge that will take them out of their comfort zone.

To work effectively, the peer mentor must have a solid background knowledge of the challenge and understand the motives behind the task.

'The peer mentor is told to pay attention to the learning focus,' adds Kully. 'They will have the

assessment tools in front of them so they know what the success criteria looks like.

‘Those being directed are getting one-to-one support, while the benefit to the peer mentor is that they will know exactly what to do when it is their turn. It is an inclusive approach.’

The model, where teacher feedback is focused on the task and on improvement rather than on individual performance, enables pupils of varying abilities to solve increasingly complex problems, with a view to utilising their newfound abilities in other future scenarios.

Peer mentor

All coaches would benefit by using a peer mentor approach in their sessions

Learning retention rates

There is a danger that, where young children are concerned, if a teacher or a coach gives explicit instructions on how to carry out an exercise aimed at meeting certain learning outcomes, the words will go in one ear and out the other.

‘If children don’t do it themselves, then they won’t understand what they are learning,’ says Kully.

This is backed up by the Learning Pyramid theory developed by the National Training Laboratories (NTL) Institute for Applied Behavioural Science in Maine.

While the precise percentages are often disputed (and the original 1960s research has been lost!) it states that learners retain approximately 90% of what they learn when they teach someone else (emphasising the power of peer mentoring) and 75% of what they learn when they practice what they learned, set against a 30% retention rate when they see a demonstration.

Progress at your own pace

The teacher’s role in peer mentoring, and the process of dividing children into smaller, more easily

managed groups, is of an eager observer and question master, probing pupils to reflect on how they think they performed the task and providing nuggets of feedback to each group.

Children's problem-solving and critical-thinking skills are honed through this style of feedback.

This facilitating allows the teacher the freedom to pick out individuals who have shown a good grasp of the task, or help those who may be struggling.

That includes feedback for the peer mentor.

'You can say to them, "What you did there was really good, but that person didn't understand what you were saying because it was too long or too complicated. Can you make that instruction shorter?'

'Or you can go to a group and say, "Can everyone stop there for a second. This person was doing this and it was amazing, I want you all to try doing it like this".'

As the children improve their understanding and techniques, the teacher lets them make their own decision if they want to move on to a new challenge with an increased level of difficulty or, indeed, set their own challenge.

Teachers will also use their knowledge of pupils to gauge if they are performing above or below expectations and if the challenges are effective in promoting the quality of learning for all, not simply the many or the few.

Give it time

Of course, putting the onus on the individual to take responsibility for their own learning is a method as entrenched in coaching culture as it is in teaching.

Kully explains the key to implementing it successfully is not to rush the process.

'It takes time. You can't do it in a one-hour session. It is only effective if you have done the preparation first.

'You have to train the children into how to participate and be involved in their own learning. That is a skill in itself.

'You need to say to the children, "In this class, we all take turns to do all the roles. And these are the different roles".'

'And then you spend a lesson teaching them what their specific roles are, and demonstrate to them what this looks like. And you will spend another lesson purely on the outcomes, explaining what you want the children to get out of it – if you are the observer this is what you do and this is your focus, if you are the assessor, this is what you do and this should be *your* particular focus.

'Only then, in the next lesson, do you allocate roles or ask them what roles they want to take on, as only when the children understand what they are looking out for can they hope to achieve the success criteria built into the task.'

An addiction to restrictions

Using interactive constraints – imposed within a task, game or on an individual performer – to facilitate learning is dependent on participants and coach having a strong grasp of the learning outcomes. But the tasks do not have to be complicated in their nature and should not preclude enjoyment and fun.

The constraints approach is another hugely effective way of addressing the specific development targets of each individual within a group setting.

Rugby coach Jimmy will impose individual challenges for players during a game or set different rules depending on the ability of the player, without dividing the group according to ability and risk creating a 'them and us mentality'.

'I allow developing kids easier rules and impose more restrictions on the better players,' he says.

So one player might only be allowed to run for five steps before releasing the ball to a team-mate while another will be allowed to take ten strides before passing. Or perhaps a more talented player is told they can only score a try if they complete a grubber kick first. Simple but still fun.

For PE lessons, Kully advocates rounding up all the sports props and equipment and telling the children to choose a selection and devise a new game making use of each type of equipment.

This [games-based approach](#) to learning involves every child and further encourages the development of creative thinking.

'Each group has to give clear instructions to another group of how to play their game. Maybe mark them out of five for clarity of instructions, developing a certain skill or developing physical activity.

'The process of engaging and challenging every child is called [Real PE](#). It's noisy, but the kids love it and every single child is actively moving and thinking for themselves.

'You may have one child who is confident and one child not so confident. So, try a customised version of peer mentoring. Say to them, "Next week, you two are taking the warm-up. Get together and plan something. It's going to be three minutes long and you have to address all the muscle groups." They can practice in the playground and it will be beneficial, and empowering, for both.'

Capturing the imagination

In the thread, Barb provides some more examples of creative sports coaching methods that encapsulate this 'every single child' ethos.

For example, she would challenge her 9-year-olds to keep pace with her older and faster distance runners for short bursts.

'One nine-year-old was in each straight, so they got to sprint 80m for every 400m the 15-year-old did doing her 3000m speed,' says Barb.

She also suggests implementing a handicap system. In netball this could take the form of the better players shooting for goal with their wrong hand and from further back.

[Ian Mahoney](#) is an athletics coach who also employs the inventive staggered start tactic in his group sessions.

'Athletes push themselves to catch or not be caught,' Ian explains. 'Every runner starts at the same time, so all get the same level of intensity, and the starting positions can be adjusted depending on if it is too hard to be caught or if you get swallowed up too early.'

It's not rocket science

Fusing story-telling games with creative thinking develops a dynamic and motivational climate for all participants which encourages children to use their freedom of expression and which benefits their physical, technical, tactical and mental development.

Kully provides a simple example: ‘So if you are doing a warm-up, tell children to pretend they are on their bike, that they are about to go up a steep hill, are racing down the other side, swerving round a corner, zig-zagging through the streets, pedalling really fast to speed up, breaking sharply to slow down.’

In the ConnectedCoaches blog entitled [Let the Creative Sparks Fly](#), [Richard Cheetham](#) writes: ‘So, within an environment where children are being creative and trying things, no one person succeeds more than somebody else. It’s not a comparative measure.’

The onus is on the coach, just like it is the teacher in a classroom, to think up innovative techniques, such as the ones outlined in this blog, in alignment with structured and established learning methodology.

The good news for coaches is, it’s not rocket science. It just requires a modicum of common sense and an enthusiastic approach to learning to see it really take off.

And the even better news is you will be steering your children’s development on an upwards trajectory, affording each and every one of your group – at the risk of stretching the metaphor – the opportunity to reach for the stars.

Do you coach a large group with a mix of abilities? Which methods do you employ to challenge and engage all your participants.

Next Steps

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