

Are you teaching or preaching

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If you want to ensure that your shooters achieve the successes expected of them, as a coach you should be striving to adopt a 'teaching' rather than a 'preaching' form of education. This article provides information about how to ensure that you are 'teaching' your shooters rather than 'preaching' to them.

Teachers or coaches are people who help others to learn and/or understand new information, processes and skills. So considering what the coach's job entails and the influence we as coaches have on our students, we should all be very effective teachers. But although we are in touch with cutting-edge information and innovative training techniques, we are not automatically exposed to or taught the skills of teaching or coaching people well. Many coaching courses educate graduate coaches about the technical aspects of the sport such as correct stance, posture and aiming techniques, yet these courses neglect to address such important issues as effective communication and the process of effective teaching.

Preachers often opt for making something known by advocating a virtue or action in a moralistic way. Coaches who preach rather than teach can frequently be found making loud public proclamations in the hope that others will flock to them and follow their methods by being the most convincing with their vocabulary and/or arguments, but which are without true substance. In this situation, young shooters do not necessarily learn, but more often they adopt similar beliefs without actually gaining an understanding of the process.

As coaches our students often come to us with an expectation that we are the fountain of knowledge and, therefore, they often accept what we tell them without question. Unfortunately, if we rely on this preaching method of coaching where there is no learning integrated into our students' shooting experiences, there is always a chance that students will reach a point where they fail to progress because they lack the understanding, not because they lack the skills.

The challenge with learning is that it cannot always be observed directly through performance, but rather it is inferred by changes in behaviour. Put simply, if you instruct your shooter to set up his/her posture using your preferred technique and your shooter simply agrees without really understanding the processes behind that instruction, then you will be preaching rather than teaching and your shooter will be accepting this preaching method of education.

If however, you discuss with your shooter the mechanical and physical theories of this technique then he/she may or may not adopt that posture, but will be more educated about the technique and learning by your shooter has taken place. Chances, therefore, are that your shooter will be in a better position to determine what is right for him/her and the postural stance that he/she adopts will be based on a good understanding of the technique and its relationship to him/her as an individual.

Teaching new skills effectively, particularly skills relating to movement and shooting techniques, are fundamental to your success as a coach. Yet many of us don't fully understand the process by which new skills are learned, let alone how this learning can be promoted through effective teaching methods. The bottom line is that if we teach effectively and our shooters learn well, then they are more likely to achieve success in the results that they seek. Ultimately this means that, in general, shooting standards improve.

Let's look at some learning theory.

Professor Antoinette Gentile (1972, 1987, 2000) put forward the simplest theory of learning to explain the learning process. Gentile says, there are two stages of learning. Stage one is known as 'Getting the idea of the movement' and involves the student gaining a feel for the pattern of movement and the coordination required to complete the skill. It also requires the learner i.e the student to practice during which time his/her performance will be both successful and unsuccessful. Eventually, however, the student focuses on the movements that are most successful and comfortable for him/her and the new skill is reinforced.

Stage two is known as the 'Fixation or Diversification' stage. After much practice the student can adapt this new skill to other situations and then becomes more consistent and more proficient in his/her performance.

As new skills are learned, the brain will seek out other patterns of movement that it has previously mastered and can be integrated into the new skill. This is known as a 'skill bias'. If the bias from a previously learned skill is very distinct and dominant then learning the new skill will be based on the bias of the old skill. For example, if you attempt to correct a shooter's technique, you should be aware that the shooter will have a bias towards an old technique, so it may take time for him/her to learn and adopt the new skill and override the old one.

Electromyography (EMG) is a technique for evaluating and recording physiologic properties of muscles at rest and while contracting. EMG studies have shown that when a person learns a new skill, he/she will firstly use more muscles than is required to perform that skill. The sequence of muscle contraction is likely to be incorrect and the action may be very rough. Yet with practice, the person learns to use only the minimal number of muscles that are needed and the sequence of muscle activation becomes more appropriate to the skill.

It is important to remember that this learning and bias overriding can be a very frustrating time for shooters. It is during these transition periods, that people tend to lose motivation, drop out or, at minimum, have many unsuccessful attempts at adopting the new patterns of movement. As coaches, we often have excellent coordination and body awareness when shooting, but remember that our shooters may require a longer time frame to master a new skill. As teachers, we need to allow them the time needed to progress to the point where they are successful by providing additional motivation and practice during the process. Thus we can create an environment conducive to learning by saying and doing very specific things to assist our students.

If we leave beginners to learn by themselves, the learning, as we are all aware, will be less than ideal. Beginners typically think too much about every part of the new movement and will unknowingly direct their attention to cues that may be inappropriate. The success of a good demonstration is, knowing what the student 'sees' and not what the student 'looks at'. With practice the beginner learns to focus on the best cues and becomes better at detecting and correcting errors.

Remember that incorrect cues given as instruction can also negatively influence the development of the skill. Instruction is the key to proper learning. Currently you may be demonstrating and simultaneously explaining a new technique and, while this may traditionally have been regarded as the best method of instruction, the fact is that we may be limiting our shooters' learning abilities by overloading them with information.

Points to remember

- Students generally have a limited capacity for information so keep instructions limited to one or two at a time.
- Each instruction or cue should consist of short and concise phrases of between one to three words.
- In the early stages of learning don't direct your student's attention to anything specific to the skill as this can interfere with their planning and their control of the new technique.
- Be careful when offering verbal cues as they can have a biased impact on the way the new skill is performed. Allow your student to establish his/her own strategies for performing the skill.
- The timing of cues can interfere with learning so it is important that you time your cues carefully to allow the student to understand and take on board the information at the appropriate time.
- Wherever possible, use words that your student uses to describe or explain what he/she is doing. Words chosen by the student are more effective as they actually have specific meaning to a student and are, therefore, more readily understood by that student.

Based on these key facts about coaching, here is a teaching strategy that you can adopt when coaching:

- Demonstrate/describe the start position and end position and let the learner work out how to move between the points.
- Verbalise cues only when your shooter is in the assumed position.
- Demonstrate full movement without using too many words.
- Allow your shooter to perform the skill eight to ten times before you jump in and cue corrections.
- Let your shooter explain the movement back to you, to give you ideas on cueing words and in order to focus attention to specific aspects of the skill.
- Don't over cue.
- Don't speak unless you have to.
- Give the shooter time and encouragement to develop his/her own pattern of movement.

The development of new skills is a complex process, but it is also a process that takes place with or without help. Remember, 'practice makes permanent' and whether that practice is good or bad, it will reinforce the movement. As coaches and instructors we can ensure that skill development of new and existing techniques are good, but we must use a teaching approach and let the natural development of the motor program follow its own course with our support and guidance.