

Coaching

Rapid Education – Key concepts in WW kayaking

Let me tell you all something. White Water kayaking is actually a pretty uncomplicated sport. No really, it is. All you need to do is develop your understanding of the river environment and how we interact with it. If you manage this, your performance will improve drastically. However, trying to develop our understanding of the river and how we work with it is like trying to eat an elephant – If we try and gulp it down in one mouthful, it'll stick in our throats. Consequently, I've put together a series of articles, appearing over the coming issues, covering the key concepts we need to understand in order to become efficient and effective white-water kayakers. By BCU Coach Tom Parker.

Now, it'll help enormously in all of this if you understand what you already do when you are on the water. Under normal circumstances, you would have a coach nearby who would help you sort this out, but that won't be the case for this article, unless you go on a course, so you need to be able to critically analyse your own boating, to become your own coach. There's two main ways of doing this that we need to master – reflective practice and self-analysis:

Thinking about what you do

Back in the 80s, a chap called David Kolb, unveiled his 'Experiential Learning Theory'. The theory states that experience is the basis of learning and has four key stages:

- experience;
- reflection;
- abstract conceptualisation;
- experimentation

OR

- do;
- reflect;
- think;
- modify

Thinking about what you do



This process should be an upward spiral of development, if you will but rarely is. Why? Because, as a nation, we are pretty poor at reflecting on the details of what we do. Countless times I see people nail a line or move and say "that was good" or, conversely, mess things right up and complain "that was rubbish". What did you do that made it good or bad? Why did it go well or less well? If you can get into the habit of analysing the details of what you do, you can keep the elements that work and change those that don't – leading to improvement!

Now we need to link back to developing our understanding of the river and our moves otherwise, reflection or not, all our efforts could be going in the wrong direction, so to speak...

Working out what you actually do

There are two broad ways of working out what you do at any given point on the river – holistically and deductively. Holistic analysis, from a coach's point of view, is how we spot obvious things that are leading to a dodgy performance. You tend to look at the whole picture and the answer becomes obvious. As an example, can you spot what the boater is doing wrong in this example (Photo 2)?



Working out what you actually do (Photo 2)

Now, holistic analysis is great for big, obvious actions and factors but when we are kayaking on white-water, our actions are normally more complicated – for example (photo 3)

We need to take more of a Sherlock Holmes approach – deductive analysis

When we analyse our actions deductively, we break down what we are doing into three smaller chunks – Body, Boat and Blade. The trick with using the '3Bs' is to see how much each of them are moving, both individually and in relation to each other. Getting the relative amounts of movement in each aspect right will result in the motion being the most efficient and effective.

Flags and markers

As coaches, when we analyse what someone is doing, we gauge their movement by using a system of flags and markers. In the following example (Photo 4), we can gauge how fast the boater is moving by seeing how quickly they move pass the tree on the bank beyond them:

We also need to be able to gauge how much different parts of the body are moving in relation to each other and the boat. Now, at this point, you need to focus on certain parts of the body, generally the nose, shoulders, elbows and hands. Imagine a luminous glow coming from each of these, kind of like how they filmed the movements for 'Gollum' in Lord of the Rings. You also need a couple of these luminous marks on the boat; one roughly level with where the feet sit in the boat, and another on both the front and back of the buoyancy aid, high up and central (Photo 5).

In addition to this, you need to imagine a couple of luminous lines on the boat. One runs the length of the boat, dead centre, cutting the boat and boater in half. The other runs across the boat, just in front of the



Working out what you actually do (Photo 3)

boater. Sounds complicated but this example (Photo 6) should help.

So now we have a set of markers to use on others and ourselves. Marvellous! But how do they work? Well, since we are analysing what movements we are making, look at the luminous points and see what shapes they draw during the action (if you have trouble imagining the marks, stick little bits of gaffer tape to where the marks should be).

Now comes the science bit (concentrate!) – is the shape we are seeing the one we should be seeing?

For example, when someone is paddling forward, the mark on the shoulder should move back and forth, drawing a line. If it isn't, why is that? Is it effective?

So how do we know what the shape should be? There isn't an easy answer to this one. Essentially, we need to understand how each stroke should work. If you are unsure, watch other skilled boaters, both in person and on videos, check out pictures in magazines and books (Chapter four in the BCU Handbook is a good place to start), always keeping these markers



Flags and markers (Photo 4)

During the next month, get down the local lake or canal and run through your foundation skills. Break them down into the 3Bs and try to work out what you actually do, using flags and markers



Flags and markers (Photo 5 and 6 below)

in mind. Observing the shapes other people make will become easier with practice and experience.

The skill of analysing our own actions is also tricky and takes time to develop. During the next month, get down the local lake or canal and run through your foundation skills. Break them down into the 3Bs and try to work out what you actually do, using flags and markers. If you can get someone to video you, even better, as you can go over it again and again, relating what you actually do to what you have observed to be effective in others.

In the next Canoe Focus, we'll be looking at what is probably the most vital key concept in white-water boating – reading the river.

Take care folks. ●
TOM PARKER



Tom Parker – Coaching and Guiding offer high quality personal coaching at all levels, coupled with a comprehensive range of BCU and Rescue 3 courses.

Tom would like to thank Pyranha, Palm Equipment, System X and Smith Optics for all their support.