As club coaches we are fortunate to see our players twice a week for periods of time that may differ from club to club; how effective we are during this time and the lead up to the competitive season, is the basis of this research. Empowerment of the athlete through identification of their learning styles, the ability to make decisions under pressure and to encourage effective communication through player and coach, is challenging if it is our fulltime position and extremely demanding when it’s added to our day to day life.

Looking at some areas to help coaches with these dilemmas:

- Maximising skill learning through identification of learning styles
- Decision making within our coaching - Situational Play/Game sense
- Effective feedback

Many coaches are aware that their players have different needs when it comes to learnt knowledge or skill acquisition. Indeed we will often look at one player in the group and if they acknowledge they have understood the coaching instruction we assume the rest of the group understands as well. Within educational settings the use of learning styles or sensory/perceptual preferences has been prevalent, however in the area of sports coaching it has been less innovative. (Sports Coaching Vol 27) Identification of your players’ learning styles will help coaches utilise coaching strategies that match their players styles. There are many different terms used to characterise these styles, verbal (auditory) or doing/active preferences when it comes to learning of new information. According to the Australian Institute of Sport (Farrow, Skill Acquisition), there are four broad areas of learning styles;

**Active/Reflective**
Active learners just want to do the drill, run through it a couple of times first then get into it. They will prefer to work as part of a training group rather than an individual. From a coaching perspective it is important to understand that they can be unpredictable and may have tendencies to act without thinking.
Reflective learners tend to want to think before executing and may require time to understand the “why” behind the activity. Coaches need to be aware that this type of player may over think the exercise and almost create ‘paralysis by analysis’.

**Sensing/Intuitive**
Sensing learners like to maintain order, tried and tested methods of instruction, they dislike new approaches. As a new coach with new ideas, there may be a need to approach sensing learners and explain within the group prior to training.

Intuitive learners enjoy the challenge of something new, theirs is the ability to change and adapt during competition and have the ability to work and think fast. A coach looks for this in their major decision makers on the field.

**Visual/Verbal**
Visual learners prefer demonstration, video footage, pictures or diagrams. Coaches can adapt their instructions to ‘paint a picture’ of their skill.

Verbal learners require their information via spoken or written word. This is likely to be the most common form of instruction given by a coach, however according to Brunner and Hill (1992), it is probably the least preferred learning style of most athletes.

**Sequential/Global**
Sequential learners like to have the information in lumps before they are able to connect the information together. Coaching wise there must be a logical order on how you present the information.
Global learners like to see the big picture and will worry about the details later. Coaching a global learner may require the coach to explain within the drill where this fits within the overall plan or strategy for the game. A real game sense or situational game play style best suits this learner.
“An athlete’s preference for one style over another in each of these above categories may be mild, moderate or strong. Research has demonstrated that despite a person’s intellectual capacity, if new information about a skill is presented to an athlete in their preferred learning style, then reinforced using the remaining preferences, this will enhance learning and increase athlete motivation” (Brunner and Hill 1992)

Coaching adaptations to learning styles of their playing group is critical. If there is a discrepancy between the preferred mode of communication and their player’s mode of receiving this information, learning of the required skill or concept of the game will be inefficient.

If the coach can manage to coach their team as individuals and cater for their individual learning styles on a regular basis, learning will become more efficient and thus the results should begin to speak for themselves. See Appendix One.

*Decision making within coaching sessions*

“ That’s what you need to do, as a coach…you have to create game-like situations, whatever it may be. Constantly making adjustments, making drills increasingly complex and more game-like, so that guys see the situations in practice that they’re going to see in a game” (John Wooden Head Coach UCLA Bruins 1948-75).

Technical and tactical proficiency and the size or strength of the player is often used to determine if they are elite to the sport or less-skilled. As coaches it may be true to say, we spend a large amount of our session time refining or even constructing these qualities.

“Decision-making is the ability of a player to quickly and accurately select the correct option from a variety of alternatives that may appear before the ball is passed
or kicked or an opponent moves” (Farrow and Raab 2008). Within coaching circles it has often been referred to as ‘he’s a good driver in heavy traffic’ and from the previous section on learning styles, the intuitive learner enjoys adapting to what is unfolding in front of them, ‘reading the play.’

Before looking at how decision-making can be embedded into our sessions it is important to understand that there seems to be a systematic process that all decision makers go through prior to the final execution. To illustrate each of these stages we will give a brief Rugby example. Backline player running towards the try line, a defender begins to approach, at this point the backline player is presented with the decision problem, what action should be taken now the defender has approached? The backline player identifies the constraints of his behaviour (e.g. He cannot pass left to right) and prioritises his goals (e.g. retain possession, score if possible). The backline player can now generate possible solutions, pass, kick or run to space. The player now selects an action; he initiates the action by performing his choice (runs directly at defender to create space for the player on his right, where upon drawing the defender, passing to open player to score a try), allowing the backline player to positively evaluate his decision. (adapted from ‘Developing Sport Exercise Chp10)

Within Rugby it is the ability of our key players to recognise patterns and anticipate what comes next, their ability to ‘read the play’. According to some research, it is thought that elite players have developed the ability to rapidly recognise and then memorize patterns of play executed by their opponents. As rugby coaches we can begin to see the essence of game sense or situational play within our sessions. This can help lead to an understanding or recognition to what will occur next. Abernethy has concluded that the ability for a player to read and recognize plays from the opposition is transferable through team sports. During our sessions, how many times do we change from Rugby to another sport to emphasize patterns of play or spatial awareness?

Decision making development and evaluation from the player must begin at the start of the season, as not all ‘Learning Styles’ will adapt to this. Use of video and effect presentation of ‘What next?’ scenarios can lead to players taking responsibility to read the play on and off the field.
Off-field education in the decision making process is crucial to emphasise the importance of player responsibility for learning as well as been backed-up by on-field training.

“We distinguish decisions about what movement is to be carried out (what decisions) from decisions about how this movement should be carried out (how decisions). The main conclusion is that what and how decisions should be combined quite early in the learning process or early in the season.” (McPherson).

We can split our decision training into these two sections, what decisions and how decisions.

Complexity – following the logic of most coaches in developing simple to complex progression for skill development. Simple 2v2 or 3v3 situations where the attack or defence is controlled to be more passive or aggressive, more variable situations and in addition to more choices by increasing the number of players at any one time. Depending on your player group, the situation may actually begin much more complex and thus ask players to adapt to the changing situation. This however is only recommended for coaches who believe they have a highly skilled playing group.

If-Then Rule – Again building on the complexity of 2v2 or 3v3, the ‘If-then’ rule may be, if the defenders rush, kick ahead, or if the defenders maintain their space, attack the space between them. To enhance the positivity of this concept, as a coach you can ensure that maintaining a slow defence prioritizes scoring opportunities or passing skills are increased by setting up a good and faster defence. Therefore the ‘if-then’ rules must be explicit prior to the commencement of the game.

Creative choices – this approach among all others is key to a player or players adapting to game time situations and recognising weakness in the opposition, by repeatedly identifying a weakness and exploiting it. Structuring such a session at training may be as simple as designating one or two players in a defence team to miss tackles or shoot from the line, placing the emphasis on the attacking team to remember who and where the mistake was made, identifying the player or players and consistently looking for these players without variance in their options.
Therefore, structuring a training session to require your playmakers to remember the areas of weakness of their teammates actually becomes the training session. NFL coaches such as Lombardi and Belichick are famous for running the same options over and over until players identify the weakness and exploit it. Belichick in the weeks leading to the playoffs, made his third string quarterback learn the characteristics of the opposing quarterback, down to how he moved his hand prior to a snap. During the playoffs New England held the NFL’s leading offensive team in yards to its lowest all season, and its quarterback threw more intercept passes in one game than he had all year. The Patriots were empowered to read the play and the players thus anticipated their moves.

Option Generation - is very similar in style to creative, asking the players to play the same situation but using a different set of options. Expert players are often well guided if they trust their first choice (their intuition - notice the link to the learning style). These are the choices that ‘often generate their highest success.’ (Abernethy 2002).

Judith Rink, summed it up best when she said:
“Transfer of practice to the game environment depends on the extent to which the practice or training resembles the game. If the athletes do not practice the game-like scenarios, they will not play the game well, yet, if practice is too game like, it may be too difficult to integrate and perform the emphasized skills. The resolution of this implication is that practice needs to occur at a level that incorporates as much of the game as the players can successfully manage.”

*Effective Feedback – asking meaningful questions*

“Asking the right questions takes as much skill as giving the right answers” Robert Half.
Wayne Smith suggests that to truly empower athletes to take responsibility for an action or learning, the activities must be fun and engaging. The use of low order and high order questioning by the coach to pose a question to the player to solve a problem; when the player begins to form solutions they begin to take ownership and remember.

‘Feedback is defined as information on actual performance, in relation to intended goal or performance (Biggs 1993). In order to encourage learning and empower the player, feedback is key in the process of aiding learning. When provided constructively and artfully feedback: 1) provides learners with accurate information on their performance in relation to the target performance, 2) provides motivation for empowerment, and 3) promotes behaviour and skill change.

As a coach how then can we define effective feedback? According to Ende (1983), ‘effective feedback is the exchange of information that is: based on first-hand data (e.g. observation or videotaped performance) limited to behaviours/skills that are remediable, and phrased in descriptive and non-evaluative language.’ Ende goes on to give Eight Key components of Effective Feedback;

1. Coach and athlete work as allies
2. Well-timed and expected
3. Based on first hand data
4. Limited to behaviours that are changeable
5. Phrased in the descriptive language
6. Specific performance not generalisations
7. Subject data should be labelled as such
8. Decisions and actions are emphasised not assumed intentions

Above all, the feedback must not be judgemental, otherwise feedback will begin to diminish the player’s confidence and thus not stimulate their ability to learn. Depending on the maturity of your players and when you establish the culture of feedback within your club, you will have a profound effect on the athlete’s capacity of self-regulation and reflection.
Feedback is not all about questioning, but also another key factor, the ‘pause’. Molloy (2009). Molloy and others suggest that coaches’ use of pausing as an ‘opportunity space’, allows for the player to reflect on and reframe their response. As coaches we need to ensure we develop the correct skills to provide accurate and constructive feedback.

Conclusion

1. Know your players – understand how they learn and ensure you accommodate the majority as often as you can. Take a whiteboard to training!!
2. Provide opportunity for players to make decisions during training, implement game-sense or situational play, where each learning style can use their talent in identification of patterns and opposing plays. Taking ownership for what happens at training will hopefully flow on to what happens on match day.
3. Use feedback to enhance your player’s knowledge of their performance. Using low and high order questioning to establish ownership and reflection on their actions.
4. Ensure feedback is part of your coaching early in your relationship with your players.
## Appendix One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Style</th>
<th>Instructional Approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active</strong></td>
<td>Allow the athlete to immediately practise the skill with minimal or no instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reflective</strong></td>
<td>Try to provide a few minutes of ‘thinking time’ after teaching a new skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual</strong></td>
<td>Allow observation of the skill by video, demo or watching others during ‘live’ action. Further progression of learning would use video of the athletes performing the desired skill</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal</strong></td>
<td>Provide a succinct description of the skill components to the athlete</td>
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References


