

Coaching

Back to the Future: Is Ancient Wisdom the Way Forward?

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Back to the Future: Is Ancient Wisdom the Way Forward? Street Soccer Coaching

Introduction

Does our coaching actually help players learn?

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| “Why Students Don’t Learn What We Think We Teach” |
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This is the title of a 2008 keynote lecture given by Robert Duke, a professor of music and human learning. It is an interesting question because it challenges a very commonly held assumption. Learning is led by the teacher and followed by the student, with the supposition that we, as teachers and coaches, in some way set the agenda. It also suggests that the teacher led method is best. In the vast majority of teaching and learning environments in the world, the curriculum is designed by the teacher and delivered by the teacher. This educational structure is based on the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, while later testing to see how fully the information has been absorbed; however, the model is not limited to academic learning. It also forms the basis of coaching in sport and therefore in soccer. The use of a teaching and coaching curriculum is now common place in soccer coaching programmes and academies. Many of the coach education structures have been designed to reflect the educational models of teaching and learning that are used in academia. That is not so surprising when we consider how coaching has been heavily influenced by physical education historically.

Although the academic teaching and learning model is very well established and accepted, it has started to draw some criticism from a number of very senior educationists. Sir Ken Robinson (2006, 2010) has highlighted a number of issues in the way that we develop learners through education. His viewpoint is that the current model is actually killing creativity and suppressing intelligence, rather than promoting it. Knowing that soccer coaching adopts the same teaching and learning model as mainstream education, these issues are quite likely to be mirrored in soccer.

In school, success is achieved when a student gets the ‘right’ answer; students are actively dissuaded from getting the ‘wrong’ answer. At first glance, this may seem like a pretty good basis to build an educational model. Why would we want learners to get the ‘wrong’ answer? However, when we consider this issue in greater detail, we can see the inherent weaknesses. If a child was schooled during the Middle Ages, they would have been taught that the world was flat. That was the ‘right’ answer. This simple example illustrates that sometimes the ‘right’ answer isn’t always right. And maybe the best way of doing something isn’t always the best. Perhaps there is a different solution or a better answer. The notion that there is only one correct (best) answer is quite limiting. It stops us from exploring other possible solutions and coming up with new answers. Therefore, when learners are focussed on getting the ‘right’ answer, their thinking becomes corralled and fenced in. They are surrounded by a set of walls that keep their understanding trapped in a very limited space. The walls are further strengthened by the use of tests and exams measuring the student according to their ability to recite that ‘right’ answer. The

student has no room for mistakes, no room for discovery and no room for creativity. Essentially, an educational prison is created.

One of the criticisms Robinson and others would levy at academia is that it teaches a very small portion of the person. Robinson feels we educate the head, particularly the left side of the head. It is the logical, thinking, reasoning and calculating part of our brain. Arguably the vast majority of our education is directed to our left brain. Traditionally the subjects receiving the most time and attention, and those that have the most *value* are mathematics, languages and sciences. We are taught them in a very logical and calculated way, with most of the educational system devoted to advancing our knowledge in these areas. This has led to the idea that education's role is actually to perpetuate education, i.e. the job of kindergarten is to qualify you for school; the job of school is to qualify you for college, and so on. Our qualification is judged on how perfectly we can recall the knowledge that has been transferred to us and communicate it in a way that is recognised and valued by the educational system.

Surely soccer coaching doesn't work like that...or does it? In reality, soccer coaching is very similar. Often players are taught the best way to kick a ball. There is a perfect model and the coach's aim is to help the player achieve this perfect model. If a player's technique doesn't match our view of the perfect model, coaches will normally look to correct the errors. Many coaches would argue that a great deal of their job is focussed on error correction. The presence of a 'right' and 'wrong' answer, reduction in mistakes and error correction, illustrates that soccer coaching actually reflects the limitations of mainstream education. Far from promoting creativity, this approach arguably stifles it.

In both coaching and teaching, we tend to value some things more than others. For education, subjects like mathematics, languages and sciences tend to receive more acclaim than the arts. The reason for this probably dates back to the industrial revolution. Our educational system is traditionally designed to produce workers who can contribute to our industrial economy (Smith 2000, Robinson 2010). Although the needs of our economy have changed drastically, the system has changed very little. Nowadays the people who set the agenda for education are themselves academics. They create a structure they have an affinity for and that they understand. Being researchers and educationists, they naturally value things they have been successful in. Many within our culture still believe a good education (i.e. high test scores and grades in mathematics, languages and sciences) is the basis for a successful career. The irony is that many of the wealthiest people on earth have made their money through drama (film stars), music (pop stars) and sport (where do we start?). In addition, many of the world's business leaders left school with almost no formal qualification and would probably argue that their most valuable education has come from the 'University of Life'.

Perhaps our view of intelligence needs to be widened beyond the limited view of academia. Howard Gardner, in the early 1980's, proposed that human beings have multiple intelligences, (eight according to Gardner), including verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist. This shows a very diverse view of intelligence. It supports Ken Robinson's

(2010) perspective that many people in our traditional educational system may conclude they are not good at anything because the things they are good at may not be valued by the system. He proposes that education dislocates people from their talents by forcing learners into a very narrow definition of achievement. If we don't give the right answers in a select number of subjects, we could be judged not to have achieved in our education. In reality, intelligence is both dynamic and diverse. It can grow, shrink, shift and change constantly. The neurons in our brain create networks and linkages. They can do this because they are alive. Under a microscope it is possible to see neurons creating new networks and abandoning old, unused ones. This neurological behaviour underpins the adage, "if you don't use it, you lose it". It proves that a diverse range of stimuli, along with the presence of multiple possibilities, actually increases intelligence.

As soccer coaches, we need to be aware of the potential limitations and dangers that accompany coaching models that have been derived from education. There is no doubt soccer coaching has become standardised. It could be argued that as a consequence, soccer coaching has become akin to mass production. Has soccer coaching become another embodiment of the fast food culture in which we find ourselves? George Ritzer (2004) argues that much of our society has started to become just like the fast food industry. It is standardised, convenient, quick, cheap, tasteless, devoid of any real substance or nutrition and is addictive. Are we producing football that is more like a McDonald's meal or more like a meal from a Michelin starred restaurant? Does it have character, uniqueness and individual flair? Is it a little experimental and risky? Are we producing football that could be called 'a twist of imaginative genius', (the description given to Raymond Blanc's restaurant *Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons*), or are we producing a Big Mac?

The criticisms of a 'production line' approach to education and coaching have probably been exacerbated by the introduction of a prescribed curriculum. Smith (2000) traces the origins of curriculum back to the Greek word for 'course'; however, since that time it has become a method of planning and structuring teaching. Interestingly, I have not said that it guides learning because, as Robert Duke (2008) pointed out, what we teach and what is learned is often different. Smith (2000) goes on to recognise that the curriculum is designed to transmit a body of knowledge from teacher to student. In addition, it attempts to achieve a certain end result in the student that he terms the 'product'. Smith (2000) proposed that education is most often seen as a technical exercise. Objectives are set, a plan is drawn up and then applied, with the outcomes (products) measured. Further, Smith explores the construction of the modern educational curriculum. Much of its design is based on 'time in motion' studies of the industrial work place. These studies identified the features of an industrial/manufacturing environment and then assigned importance to them based on their impact on the workplace. As a result, the left brain subjects -- mathematics, languages and sciences -- became dominant.

This design cannot cater to the holistic education of humans in the modern world. Can we still be educating our youngsters based on a set of criteria that dates back to the turn of the 20th century? If that is the case, our soccer coaching methods surely can't be based on the same principles, or can they?

The methodology used to design the educational curriculum has also been used by researchers studying soccer. Time in motion studies underpin much of our scientific understanding of the game. The data that we take from this research influences our coaching practices and therefore the soccer curriculum. We also use the same principles of the 'product centred' curriculum used by our educational counterparts, thus it stands to reason that soccer coaching may be open to the same criticisms.

The rationale behind having a curriculum is recognised by many. In education, it provides a common structure and aims to allow each child to have a similar educational experience. To create standardisation, it is necessary to eliminate as many variables as possible. One of the greatest variables in education is the teacher. Therefore, the process of standardisation, many claim, is actually neutralising the role of the teacher in the learning process. Or has the process of standardising the teaching process been taken too far? The National Curriculum in the UK has come under fire from a number of prominent individuals. Hensher (2009) suggests the National Curriculum stops students from suffering from afflictions such as "having a sense of personal identity." Kelly (1990) goes further and criticises the underlying assumptions, basic value system, conceptual structure and the degree to which it reflects understandings of the learning process.

Yet, despite experiences that can be gleaned from mainstream education, sports development and coaching has followed the trend. One of the most obvious examples of this is the widespread adoption of the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model proposed by Istvan Balyi. The LTAD model, first published in 1990, outlines a structured model for developing athletes from 6 years upwards. Balyi, who built his model on the back of a periodised training programme used by Canadian alpine skiers, has now sought to apply the model to athletic development across other sports. Since the turn of the millennium, many organisations have adopted the model as the structure for player development. In fact, in the UK the LTAD model heavily influences major sports development policy through the National Framework for Sport (2004) and Game Plan: National Sports Policy document (2002).

Despite its widespread acceptance, the LTAD model actually has come under severe criticism. Prof Dave Collins (2009), a senior sport scientist in the UK, says "LTAD is a pile of poo in terms of evidence. Not only does LTAD not work, there's no evidence for it. It really ticks me off." Collins' comments are supported by Dr Paul Ford (2009) who has explored the non-linear growth patterns in young performers. He is concerned that the LTAD's structured approach doesn't account well enough for the individual, biological differences in the development of young athletes. Ford concluded that "a lot of the necessary scientific evidence appears to be missing." Similar criticisms have been voiced in relation to the psychological (MacNamara 2009) and social (Toms 2009) development of young athletes. In fact, Taylor (2010) seriously questions whether the research evidence that Istvan Balyi uses to support the LTAD model does actually support it (Vorontsov's 1999, Viru et al 1999). Perhaps more worryingly the Loko et al (2003) findings from research, with over 1500 athletes aged 10-17, contradict one of the key arguments underpinning Balyi's model.

These findings place the argument for structured, curriculum style development in sports on shaky ground. If a modern, educational approach to teaching has inherent flaws, is there any guiding wisdom we may draw from? Is there a method we could explore that might potentially be more effective for learners and young players? Perhaps we need to go back further into history to find the answer.

Several of the great Greek philosophers dedicated themselves to the study of knowledge and learning. Aristotle's view was that education should not be viewed in terms of 'product', but instead it should be viewed as a 'process'. His view was based on creating an interaction between teacher, student and knowledge. It is an active process. To Aristotle, the purpose of the exercise was the cultivation of wisdom and knowledge. Interestingly Aristotle uses the word 'cultivate' rather than 'manufacture'. Sir Ken Robinson (2010) proposes that we move from a manufacturing, or industrial view of education, to an agricultural model that focuses on creating an environment where learners can grow and flourish. In Aristotle's view, the process-based approach leads to the students being able to think for themselves, while making decisions and responding to their environment. Smith (2000) describes it as "an ability to think critically in action." In fact, the ancient approach, known as praxis and suggested by Aristotle, is based on a simple process of planning, doing and evaluating, while being shared between the teacher and the learner. This incredibly simple process is at the very heart of human learning. We plan, we do and we evaluate. It is the process we used when we learned to walk, talk, eat and move.

It could be argued that this method remains a very effective basis for coaching today, recognizing how this simple approach has endured through the centuries. Surely the very fact that it survives today tells us that it does work. However, it is ironic then that modern day education seems to have forgotten this very simple and fundamental truth. Rather than building a teaching and learning system around it, mainstream education has created something that appears to ignore this vital approach.

It is not only Aristotle who would argue against today's structured form of teaching. Aristotle's own teacher, Socrates, proposed a method of learning that was, in many ways, the polar opposite of today's curriculum-led approach. Socrates did not believe in the concept of a 'right answer'. In fact, Socrates probably would have considered the idea of a 'right answer' being, in it self, ignorant. History suggests that this view has considerable merit. Many things humans have considered to be factual have since been proven to be wrong. At one time science believed the atom was the smallest particle in the universe. It was a fact taught in schools and recited on exam papers.

Socrates' approaches have given rise to what is now termed the *Socratic Method*. The goal of this method is to aid continual self-improvement, while building on the understanding that, as humans, we acquire knowledge and understanding throughout our lives. The idea that we acquire it suggests that learners seek knowledge. Robert Duke's statement also suggests that a learner dictates what they learn and that teachers cannot

impart (or dump) knowledge into their learners. Socrates would probably go further and suggest that we actually do not need to impart knowledge to them.

“Socrates believed that teachers should not lecture to students but should attempt to identify the untapped knowledge that lies deep within everyone” (Overholster 1992).

In the *Socratic Method*, a teacher and learner agree on the topic of learning. The teacher’s job is to help the student by challenging and questioning, thus the learner can discover new answers and solutions. Through this process, greater knowledge and understanding is gained. The learner also explores various answers and works to find ever-better solutions; errors are embraced by both the teacher and the learner; both also embrace the notion that they don’t have the ‘right answer’, even though they may have one possible answer. The ultimate goal is to increase understanding through enquiry, with the method providing the freedom to think. In the absence of pre-existing answers, it encourages problem solving, creativity, critical thinking and unique solutions.

In the words of Maxwell (2009), to employ the *Socratic Method* requires “a cup of open-mindedness, a pinch of humble servility and a passion to explore.”

In Ancient Greece, the approaches of Socrates were in direct opposition to the Sophist movement. The Sophists were a group of teachers who professed to have expertise within a particular domain. Many of them taught their skills for a price and marketed the value of their knowledge to potential learners. A Sophist’s knowledge gave him power and status and their teaching often commanded a high price. This may have led to the term Sophist eventually underpinning the modern word sophisticated. As teachers, they believed that knowledge was not acquired by the learned but was imparted by the teacher. Sophists also believed it was socially constructed which means that if the majority of people perceived the same thing, it must be ‘right’. In Greece, the Sophist movement was very powerful and held great importance in society; arguably, the same is true today. The Sophist approach to teaching and coaching still dominates our system of education.

The fact that Socrates’ views challenged the Sophist movement were enough to see him tried and sentenced to death. The Socratic style of teaching and learning presents a threat to many teachers, coaches and educationists. Coaching through the *Socratic Method* requires a teacher to recognise their own knowledge of the subject is often not relevant to the learner. As teachers and coaches we tend to use our knowledge as a comfort blanket. Our ego normally relishes the fact that we have some expertise and that we can impart our knowledge to others. It can give us a sense of purpose, importance and self-worth; however, the fact that we have a personal investment in our knowledge can be unhealthy. It can mean that we do not question it because we do not want to find holes in it. If our identity is built around our role as a teacher or coach, and therefore the knowledge that we hold, questioning this knowledge would lead us to question ourselves. This could be an uncomfortable prospect and one that could lead us to become defensive. Arguably, that is not a healthy state to be in.

So, why would a teacher or coach adopt a Socratic approach? James Overholster (1992), a professor of psychology in Ohio, suggests the following:

“Students can be a source of inspiration and creativity for teachers who take the time to foster a collaborative, investigational learning atmosphere. This atmosphere can only be attained by emphasizing the process of learning instead of just the end-product. The specific information or skills that students learn are less important than fostering inquisitive minds (Pintrich, McKeachie and Lin 1987). To accomplish this goal, teaching activities must be designed to promote active participation (Ferguson 1986; Phoenix 1987). Unfortunately, many educational activities foster a passive and dependent quality in students (Toppins 1987). Traditional lectures emphasize through content with little acknowledgment of the thought processes involved”, p13.

Although James Overholster was specifically discussing the classroom environment, his comments could also be applied to sports coaching and soccer. The rationale for using a *Socratic Method* is well supported. Self-discovery and active learning, (as opposed to passive learning which happens when learners are given the answers), has been shown to result in learning at a deeper level (Overholster 1992).

I know what you're thinking: How does Ancient Greek society impact on modern day sport? John Corlett, a professor of physical education, used Sophistry and Socratic approaches to highlight issues in the delivery of sport psychology support to athletes. Corlett (1996) describes the Sophist approach as “technique driven and concerned solely with the development of specific skills.” In comparison, Corlett describes the Socratic approach as a rigorous approach to achieving greater understanding. More importantly Corlett suggests that the two approaches may differ in their effectiveness with athletes. He suggests that a Sophist technique based approach to learning may not be as robust as a Socratic approach. In the Sophist model, knowledge is bolted onto the learner. It is added to them rather than being integrated with them. Knowledge gained through a Socratic approach, on the other hand, is much more likely to be absorbed by the learners and become an integral part of them. The results of these two approaches have implications for sport psychology. Corlett argues that when sport psychologists teach mental skills to athletes, the athletes may not be able to apply them in the ‘heat of battle’. When we try to bolt on skills they have a tendency to fall off when we are under pressure. In contrast, when we acquire deeper knowledge and understanding that becomes an integral part of us, there is a greater chance we can draw upon it in any situation.

Genuine learning has been differentiated from the gathering of information that becomes an integral part of our ‘self’. During our lives we often pick up information of which we later forget. No doubt you will have forgotten much of the information that you used in your exams at school -- the information was not fundamentally important to you as a person -- therefore, you never fully integrated the information and you soon forgot it. The same is true of skills. There are some things you learned as a child, they stayed with you for a while but were soon forgotten; however, there are things we learn that do stay with us. They are normally more fundamental to our self and who we are. Colazzi argues that these things are genuinely learned and, as such, become a part of us. Instead of dropping off, they are enduring and robust. Even in the ‘heat of battle’, this type of skill learning remains with us.

So, how do we apply these approaches to soccer coaching?

Perhaps the first thing to recognise is that as human beings we all learn through our own living experience. As Robert Duke suggests learners don't always learn what is being taught. Rather than thinking of teaching and learning as a structured process, maybe it is "an organic process by which learning is offered, accepted and internalized" (Newman & Ingram 1989). How often have you been told something but you later come to realise the significance of it (having actually learned that lesson) a long time afterwards through an experience? In reality, we learn from critical experiences and critical moments. For example, we learn to not play with fire when we actually burn our fingers, not when our parents tell us that matches are dangerous.

Knowing this, we need to recognise that we experience life through our senses – touch, sight, sound, smell and taste – thus we also learn through our senses. In sport, it could be argued that the dominant three senses are touch, sound and sight. This basic understanding of human learning can help to inform our coaching and we can actually start to use the learning experience as the basis of our coaching. International Street Soccer Association (ISSA) coaching encourages the players to focus on their senses and to understand how a skill looks, sounds and feels when they are performing. This is done using a system of questioning that follows the principles of the *Socratic Method*. As we have discovered the role of the coach is not to provide the right answer, but it is to encourage players to find solutions for themselves. The coach challenges players and directs them to focus on the information that is available through their senses.

By focussing players to understand how a skill looks, sounds and feels, the player starts to engage their innate learning tools. These are the very tools that we used when we learned to walk. When we learned to walk no one taught us. We didn't have a good grasp of language, so we really had no way of being taught in the conventional sense. If our senses provided the essential tools to learn how to walk, surely those same tools will help us to learn all other movement skills.

We learn by planning, doing and reviewing, therefore it makes sense to follow Aristotle's ideas. Perhaps as coaches our job is simply to support the natural learning process, rather than replace it with a teaching process. If we follow the simple principles that Aristotle supports, the role of the coach is to help plan, challenge, focus and evaluate with the learner. This model is vastly different from structuring the curriculum, transferring knowledge and then testing the results. Through a more Socratic style of coaching, learners can potentially gain deeper learning. The process of Socratic questioning and focussing learners on their own sensory experience, helps them to be completely present. As a result they are much more likely to experience genuine learning (Nesti 2004).

If the aim of coaching is to help players learn then perhaps our methods need to be turned around. Maybe we should adopt a method that supports learning, rather than one that imposes teaching. Perhaps our model should appreciate that the learner dictates the agenda in reality, not the teacher or the curriculum. Our sporting and educational curricula have, no doubt, been designed with the best intentions; however, their

effectiveness and validity have been seriously questioned. Models, such as the LTAD, appear flawed because they do not allow for the individual differences in developing athletes and enforce a structure that cannot suit everyone.

The alternatives to the structured, curriculum-led approaches may appear to be 'new age', but in reality that sentiment could not be further from the truth. In recent years, some have come to appreciate the inherent value of ancient wisdom. The teachings of the great philosophers of Ancient Greece are as valid today as they were 2000 years ago. They simply have endured the tests of time. The principles behind the methods of Socrates are now being applied to education, sport psychology and sports coaching. Perhaps these methods are a way forward in our quest to help our players to learn.

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