

# Can Coaching Learn from Teaching?

## Introduction

A number of years ago there was an influential article entitled 'What a coach can teach a teacher' in the *Psychology Today* journal. The authors (Tharp and Gallimore) observed an expert coach in action and identified ways that teachers could learn from coaching behaviour. What was clear from their research was that coaches and teachers have a lot in common! In this article I intend to look at a specific example of how work that teachers undertake can enrich the coaching process. I want to tell you about a structured approach to planning, preparation, delivery, reflection and evaluation called 'teaching for understanding'.

My first task in this article is to deal with the coach/teacher definition issue. I believe that coaching and teaching are not mutually exclusive activities defined by context. We all know from our contact with performers that coaches have opportunities for 'teachable moments' when we can make an enormous impact on the way a performer performs and understands about performance. Teachers spend time coaching individual pupils. Many coaches have formal qualifications as teachers and teachers as coaches. Both groups use a mix of science and art to bring about changes in learning.

Coaches now have access to an enormous amount of information. The National Coaching Foundation continues to provide a whole range of products and services designed to improve the coaching process and the content of coach/performer contact. Teachers similarly have access to rich sources of information. You might want to have a look at two Internet sites that give a feel for the support for planning activities in physical education. One is [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk) that provides details of the National Curriculum for Physical Education and the related schemes of work. The other; [www.pecentral.org](http://www.pecentral.org) is an American site that helps teachers with lesson planning.

## Teaching for Understanding

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s an approach to teaching emerged at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that has become known as the Teaching for Understanding Project. What is of immediate interest to coaches is that it is based on a performance perspective. It regards understanding as the ability to carry out a variety of actions or performances that show one's grasp of a topic and at the same time advance it. Understanding is regarded as the ability to take knowledge and use it in new ways. In the Teaching for Understanding framework these performances are called performances of understanding. Reflecting on the process and outcomes of teaching for understanding is integral to professional development. Teaching for understanding is a carefully planned and monitored activity that has a framework of four components:

- 1 Generative topics
- 2 Understanding goals
- 3 Performances of understanding
- 4 Ongoing assessment.

Each of these fits with the coaching process. For example, generative topics are those aspects of your sport that provide depth, significance and opportunities for connections and are the building blocks of excellence that you identify for your performers.

Understanding goals are those skills and processes about which you want

performers to develop understanding. There are two sorts of these goals. One set runs throughout a whole year's work (these are also termed 'throughlines'). The other set is specific and pertains to a particular period of coaching, perhaps to a unit of work within a year's programme. Performances of understanding are those activities that require performers to use knowledge in new ways or situations. In these activities performers reshape, expand on, extrapolate from, apply and build on what they already know. Performers build as well as demonstrate their understanding. Ongoing assessment is the continual process of providing performers with clear responses to their work that will help them improve their performances of understanding.

Teaching for Understanding requires careful planning. Tina Blythe (1998) recognized planning as a personal activity. 'Each of us approaches the process differently depending on our preferred working style, the available time and resources, the subject matter and the specific group for whom we are planning'. However, there is a framework that can help us:

- Have a brainstorm session around each part of the framework.
- Refine the lists produced at the session using reflection questions.
- Finalise the plan.

You can use a brainstorm session chart, such as the one below, to draft out your ideas for each unit of work that you propose.

<b>THROUGHLINES</b> 1 2 3	
<b>GENERATIVES</b>	<b>UNDERSTANDING GOALS</b> 'Athletes will understand ...' 'The questions I would like my athletes to answer are ...'
<b>PERFORMANCES OF UNDERSTANDING</b> 'Athletes will build towards achieving the understanding goals by ...'	<b>ON-GOING ASSESSMENT</b> 'Athletes will get feedback on their performances by ...' 'The criteria for each performance will be ...'

Figure 1: Source: Blythe (1998), page 94.

After the brainstorm session chart has been completed you can refine it by asking fundamental questions of your plan for coaching. For example, how does this fit with other aspects of your work and performers' experiences? Does it capture what you think is most important for the performers to understand? Do the performances of understanding allow performers to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways (for example, do you expect performers to keep a training log or journal?). Are the ongoing assessment criteria clear and public? Are the criteria closely related to understanding goals?

You can finalise your plan graphically if you so wish. The Harvard Graphic Organiser looks like this:

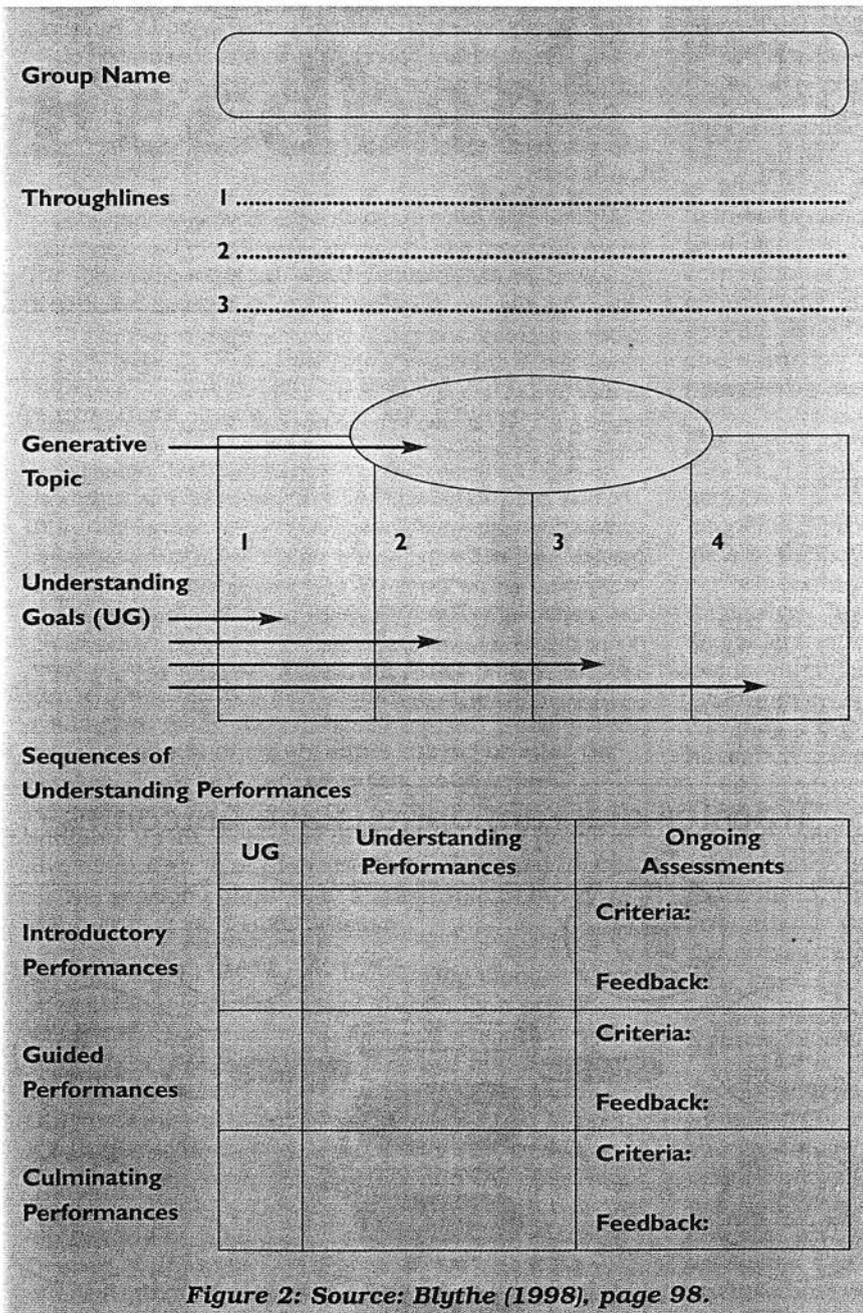


Figure 2: Source: Blythe (1998), page 98.

This is a challenging but flexible process! The Graphic Organiser can be customised to your needs. It is presented here as an example of how what is going on in teaching can affect the way we think about, plan, deliver, reflect on and evaluate, coaching. If you would like to find out more about this kind of approach you might like to have a look at <http://learnweb.harvard.edu>.

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## Conclusion

Teachers who use the Harvard approach work hard to plan lessons, schemes of work and programmes of study. Many aspects of the process will be familiar to you but perhaps in different terminology. Teachers are required to undertake detailed preparation as part of their professional commitment and for some the Harvard approach transforms teaching and learning. One teacher, for example, reported that 'writing down the performances of understanding and understanding goals gave me more time to reflect on what I was teaching and to consider how important each activity was or was not to my goals'.

One of the key principles of reflective practice is the ability to reflect-on-action when you have time to think about what you have done and what you would like to do. The identification of a teacher or coach as someone who reflects on what they do to promote understanding seems to me to be central to the vision of a coach as an active, continuously developing professional.

Reflective practice has advantages and disadvantages for the coach. It can positively affect professional growth and development by leading to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems that confront practitioners. However, it is a time-consuming process and it may involve personal risk because the questioning of practice requires that practitioners be open to an examination of beliefs, values, and feelings about which there may be great sensitivity. This is why a framework like the Harvard one is an important tool for focusing attention and action and an example of how teaching can inform coaching.

## References

- Blythe, T (1998) **The teaching for understanding guide**. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tharp, R and Gallimore, R (1976) **What a coach can teach a teacher**. *Psychology Today*, January, pp 75-78.