

A Manifesto to improve club rowing for beginners



By Jim Flood

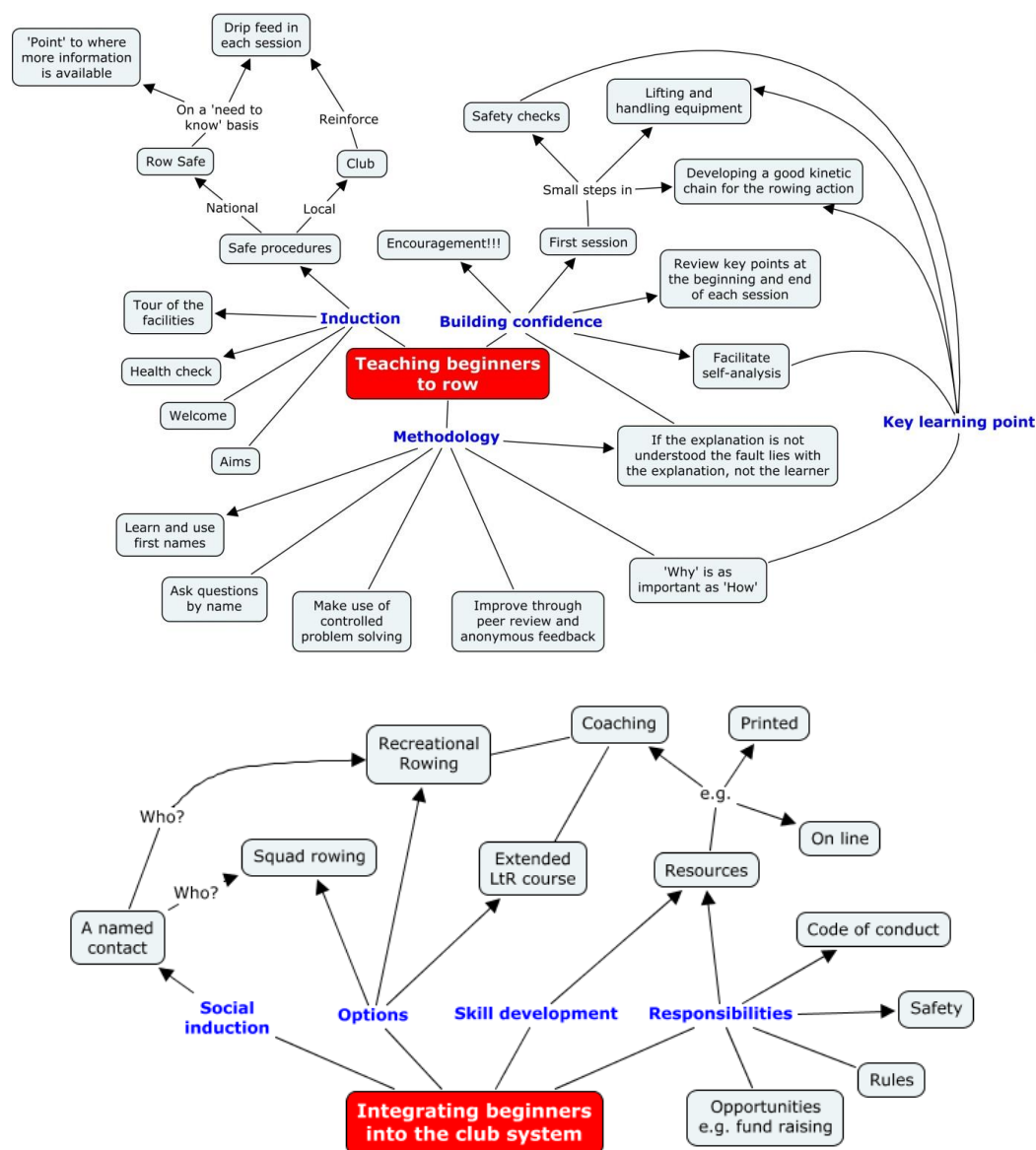
Why are we are failing many of the beginners we need in rowing?

As a nation, we might be good at producing medal winners at international events, but what we are less good at is making the sport more accessible and inclusive. Since 2012 there has been an upsurge of interest in rowing which has resulted in many clubs running Learn to Row courses. My evidence is anecdotal but I believe that we are failing to convert an acceptable percentage of the participants into active club members.

I believe that there are two aspects of this failure: one is a casual approach to the process and skills of teaching beginners; the other is the lack of an adequate system for integrating beginners into rowing as club members. I think that the main cause is a legacy system of teaching and coaching rowing that was relatively successful at dealing with natural athletes who could cope with being subject to the will of a didactic (bullying?) coach.

At a time when more people than ever before are learning to row, and many of them not natural athletes, this article is aimed at stimulating a debate about the most effective ways of getting beginners rowing quickly and confidently – and more importantly, how to develop the potential of this human resource for the longer term benefit of our sport.

The mind maps below provide a quick overview of the key points I'm putting forward:



Who should be teaching people to row?

The obvious answer is that people should be taught to row by talented teachers who are also talented coaches. All too often the attitude in clubs appears to be that 'anyone who can row can teach it'. It is not given high priority in terms of personnel (e.g. qualified coaches), appropriate equipment and time. The teaching of rowing should be seen as a key investment for the future; done well it will provide a supply of elite rowers, but just as importantly, it should produce satisfied club members who can row independently and contribute significantly to the development of the club. Grants to support rowing and the improvement of resources are increasingly dependent on attracting a wide cross section of the population to give rowing a try. This is a challenge that clubs need to respond to with their best resources. It should be noted that the [British Rowing Row Safe Guide \(3.1\)](#) specifies, as a minimum standard, that beginners should be taught by coaches with a Level 2 or Assistant Instructor award.

Clubs that ignore the Row Safe Guide about the 'controls' that should be in place when teaching Beginners, should check if this might invalidate their insurance cover.

Beginners need a warm reassuring welcome

The first visit for any beginner, young person or adult is a source of anxiety. Anxious learners are poor learners so coaches must aim to reduce the level anxiety by sending out a welcome letter with information about how to get to the club and what will take place during the first session. It's useful to put up clear signs to the meeting point, or better still have club members around to meet and greet the newcomers.

Another way of reducing anxiety is when talking to another person – and discovering that they are anxious too. So, as soon as possible ask the participants to pair up and spend a few minutes talking to each other about why they want to learn to row and what they hope to get out of the experience. Asking individuals to answer to the whole group can be a source of increased tension so keep them talking in pairs.

Learners relax more when they receive reassuring answers to three questions:

1. What will I learn?
2. How will I learn it?
3. Why am I learning it (i.e. how will the information or the practice help me to)?

An example of answers to these questions might be: "We are going to learn to use the rowing machine effectively (What), we'll take it step by step by demonstrating and practising each part of the movement so that you get one part right before linking it to the next (How). It's important to get this kinetic chain of movement correct because it makes effective use of the large muscle group and helps to protect you from undue strain (Why)". The 'What, How, Why' procedure is not a 'one shot' process. To improve the effectiveness of the learning, it requires regular reminders.

Andragogy

Many of the participants in Learn to Row Courses are adults, so it is worth coaches reflecting on the differences of approach from that of teaching juniors. Andragogy was originally used in 1833 by Alexander Kapp a German educator who wanted to differentiate the teaching of children (pedagogy) from that of adults (andragogy). It was not until the 60s that the term came into common use when it was popularised by Malcolm Knowles, an American educator. Knowles posited six principle differences:

1. **Need to Know:** Adults need to know the reason for learning something.
2. **Foundation:** Experience (including error) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. **Self-Concept:** Adults need to be responsible for their decisions on education; involvement in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
4. **Readiness:** Adults are most interested in learning subjects having immediate relevance to their work and/or personal lives.
5. **Orientation:** Adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented.
6. **Motivation:** Adults respond better to internal versus external motivators.

There is a broad recognition that methods based on this approach work well with all learners and not just adults.

“I’m no good at this”

Sadly, many of us are the products on an education system that locates the pathology of failure in ourselves. That is, if we not succeeding at something, it is our fault. Adults and adult women in particular, are particularly prone to apologise for not being able to do what a coach or teacher asks of them. Some coaches have a strong tendency to reinforce this behaviour with patronising comments such as *“Don’t worry dear. I know that you are trying your best”*, the subtext of which is *“Your best is not good enough”*. This type of experience can produce feelings of inadequacy, foolishness and shame. We have to break this vicious cycle of failure by locating the pathology of failure in the coach and the teaching methods.

Understanding ‘Why’

Much of what I was taught at school was on the basis of ‘as long as you get the right answer, don’t worry about understanding the process, that will come later’. Fortunately modern education is changing in that respect – but not rowing. Few coaches in my experience explain the mechanics of balancing a boat – and are surprised when rowers find it difficult. They are told not to row ‘deep’ but this is not related to the trajectory of the hands. So think about explaining why the body is rocked over after the finish, why the knees are held down, why the catch needs to be ‘soft’. Better still; begin by asking participants to try to work out for themselves why these things are important.



Above is a photograph of a visual aid I use to explain the effect on the boat of the rower moving forward on the slide. What will happen to the ‘boat’ when the ball is released to roll down the slide? For one explanation of the mechanics of balancing a boat, and an answer to the visual aid above, have a look at one of my other books on Rowperfect: [Balance](#)

What will I learn?

In the briefing for each session, specify clearly the anticipated learning outcomes of a session will be in terms of what the participants will be better able to do, to know and to understand. Close the learning loop at the end of the session by asking the participants to review the learning outcomes themselves. In ongoing sessions, involve them in the planning by asking them what learning outcomes/objectives they wish to achieve.

Learning from mistakes

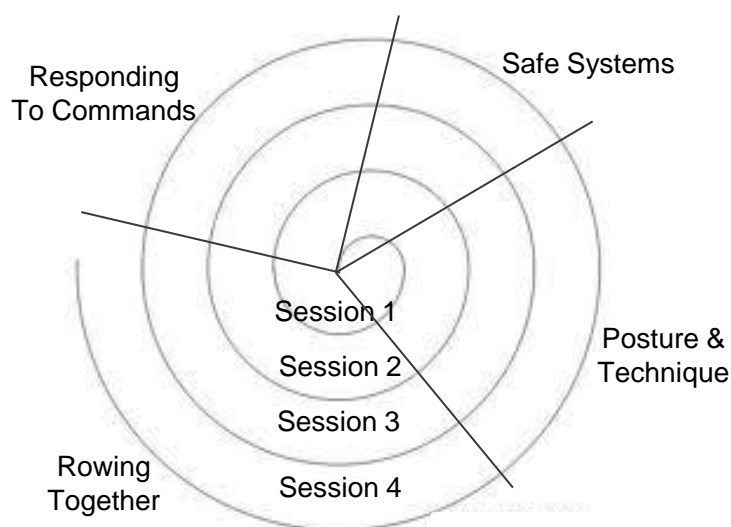
When listening to coaches, I often feel that mistakes in technique often seem little short of a criminal offence. Helping rowers to analyse their mistakes and contribute to ways of finding a solution can turn the mistakes from a 'crime' into an opportunity to participate in the learning process. For example: *"Your stroke is rather short. How do you think you might be able to lengthen it?"*

Problem Solving

Modern coaching practice in football is to ask participants how they would do things rather than simply telling them what to do, for example *"You have the ball and a player from the other team is in front of you. How are you going to get around them?"* For reasons of safety and the protection of equipment, there might not be as many opportunities for beginner rowers to solve problems in this manner. However if participants are in a training boat and the conditions allow, try asking them how they would turn the boat around, or make it travel backwards – and to think about it and try some experiments. The learning that results from this experience will be more profound. I have found it helpful to ask participants how they could solve problems such as 'rushing in to the catch'. Involving them in the process of solving a problem can result in a better outcome than simply repeating instructions or giving them the answer.

The spiral curriculum

"Right, I've done Safety, that's ticked off the list so I can now get on with what is important". This statement is evidence of a linear plan of teaching – and is not very effective. The concept of the spiral curriculum is to cycle through the key topics, and with each cycle deal with them in greater depth. Dealing with ideas in 'bite size chunks' and revisiting them regularly helps to deepen understanding and facilitate effective learning. This concept considers the learning journey to be a spiral path that tracks through each of the topics every session.



This is something that can kill you!

This phrase typifies an approach to issues of safety that is likely to increase anxiety! Safety should be dealt with as a drip feed process on a need-to-know-at-the-time basis. For example in the first session, informing people about the emergency exit procedures and the importance of reporting any feelings of discomfort during exercise is probably sufficient. Any reading matter provided should refer to relevant sections of the [Row Safe Guides](#). The broad aim should be to introduce the concept of safe systems and the responsibilities that all of the participants have in the process.

Grooving, haptics, kinaesthetic learning and muscle memory

The process of learning a new skill can be considered in terms of three stages:

1. The 'early stage' in which almost everything feels awkward and confusing. Aim to keep the exercises simple, enjoyable and repetitive.
2. The 'grooving stage' in which participants begin to understand what is required – and why. This requires lots of repetition and reinforcement.
3. The 'automatic stage' this is where the action becomes programmed into the muscle memory. The concentration here needs to be on relaxation, improving technique and exerting more effort.

Haptics is about how things feel – and achieving the right 'feel' of an action is one of the keys to effective learning. This is related to kinaesthetic learning which is both learning how to feel, what to feel and being able to make adjustments to get the 'feel' right. Most exercises in rowing (e.g. roll ups, taps and slaps) are aimed at improving the feel of what is right at that point in the stroke.

There are now very good resources available to support the teaching of good technique, for example the British Rowing posters and web based resources such as "[Rowing Technique by Flip Luisi](#)" on YouTube.

I sometimes ask participants to search YouTube for 'rowing technique' and to explain why they find a particular resource helpful.



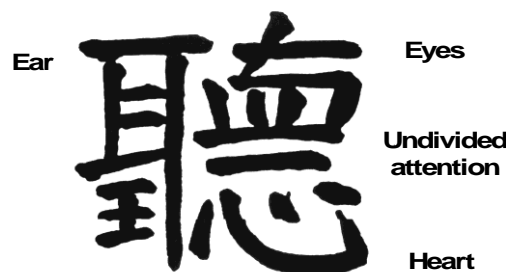
Isolating the 'feel' of squaring and feathering (and of arms and body rowing)

Asking questions to reinforce learning

In my experience this is one of the weakest aspects of coaching practice. There is a strong tendency for coaches to tell participants what they know or should be able to do (or have done) without checking on how well this has been understood. Asking questions is one way of doing this. However asking questions to the whole group simply results in the one person who knows (or thinks they know) responding. Operate a fair and inclusive system by asking questions of individuals by their first name (work through a list in your hand if you can't remember their names). Ask open questions as well as closed questions. Closed questions require a specific answer; open questions invite a more personal response: e.g. *"What was the best part of the session today?" "How did it feel when we"* What are your personal objectives for this session?

Participants can be helped to process their own learning by explaining what they have learned to someone else. One way of achieving this is to pair participants up and to ask them to review the key points they have learned in a session, and then to ask for feedback from each pair. This can provide useful feedback in that it helps to compare what the participants think they have learned to what the coach planned they should learn. It is also an opportunity to reinforce key points or correct points that have been misunderstood. Teaching something is a powerful way of learning it. Appropriately monitored, the use of the ergometers can provide opportunities for participants to coach each other.

When demonstrating or talking to a group, ensure their full attention by placing yourself in a position where you can see all of their faces and they can hear you clearly.



The Chinese verb 'to learn' has four aspects included in the character

Encouragement and enthusiasm

Encouragement is the 'fuel' that learners run on – and what ignites it is the enthusiasm of the coach. An enthusiastic coach inspires beginners to achieve beyond their own expectations – and praise and encouragement are vital to raise the level of participant's self-esteem and self-belief. Coaches should always work on the premise that all participants are trying their hardest, want to succeed and want to please their coach. If success is not being achieved, it is rarely the fault of the participants, it could be that an alternative approach/explanation is required – but it is more likely that what is missing is the encouragement and enthusiasm. Yes, some participants are 'difficult', so relish the challenge and help to improve the levels of participation in this great sport.

Progression

Progression from a Learn to Row course to being an independent rower is the biggest challenge that clubs face. The simplest progression is the participant who says *"That was great, I really enjoyed the experience but rowing is not for me"*. The next easiest is the natural athlete who is 'spotted' during the course and is quickly inducted into a squad of competitive crews. The big challenge is the middle group who need more help to row comfortably and who are unsure about what their aims or capabilities are. To avoid a high attrition rate, it is vital to have the pathway options in place, and to ensure that these are explained at an early stage, reminders given and the opportunity provided to make an informed choice by having a 'taster' session with the different groups offered.

People often make choices on the basis of the people they meet rather than the information given.

The pathway options might be:

- Continuing with an extended version of the Learn to Row course, including assisting as 'experienced participants' in other courses for complete beginners.
- Training as a cox.
- Recreational rowing through Explore Rowing or a similar 'in-club' provision. Or being pointed to a nearby club that mainly offers recreational rowing in stable boats.
- Forming mini squads that make up one crew, with spares, who can self-organise under the general supervision of a coach. The aim being to develop a crew that can row and scull independently in certain conditions.
- Direct entry to a competitive squad.

In each case there needs to be good overall supervision and monitoring of the experience. When entering a new group there needs to be an induction programme, including a 'friend' who will in effect 'take the new entrant under their wing' to ensure that they are given the appropriate opportunities to succeed. Too often a new entrant to a squad is used as a spare, only getting a seat in a boat when a regular crew member is missing. *"We haven't got a seat for you today, go and do an erg"* is heard far too often.

Too often potential rowers in the 'middle group' complain, with much justification that nothing is done for them. One source of this dissatisfaction is that they are paying the same fee as other club members but not receiving anything like the same benefits in terms of coaching and access to good equipment. Many clubs now offer a reduced fee for a membership limited to times when the club is less busy.

This 'middle group' of rowers should be nurtured. So often they are the backbone of a club in terms of fundraising and the organisation of social and competitive events.

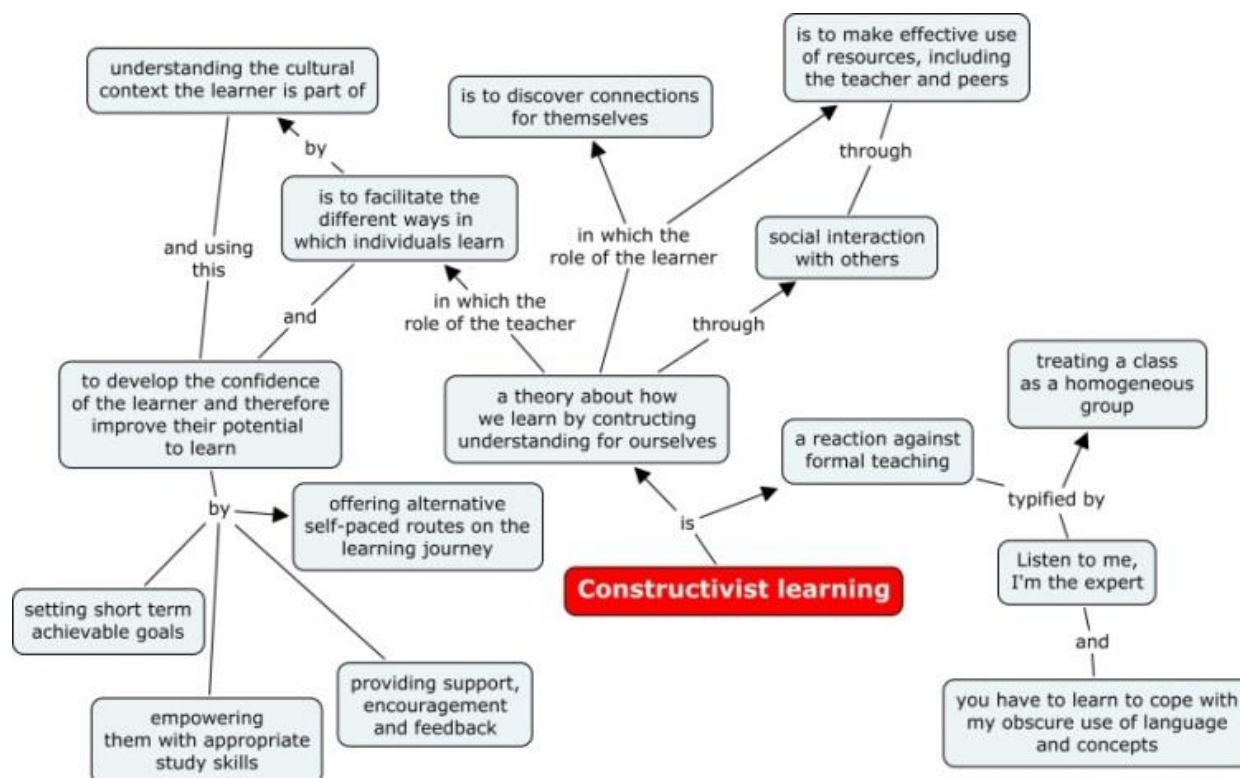
This can be fun

Okay, so children like having fun when they are learning (www.sportscoachuk.org) but it also works with adults, so think of ways in which exercises and coaching drills can be carried out in a light hearted manner. See also [Duncan Holland's eBook: Games & Challenges For Young Rowers](#)

Participant focused coaching

All of the ideas outlined so far are based on the concept of 'participant focused coaching' which is the basis for all of the [United Kingdom Coaching Qualifications \(UKCC\)](#). The British Rowing Level 2 Coaching Award is also based on this concept. Also there is an excellent report on [Identifying Excellent Coaching Practice](#) available free by Sports Coach UK Research.

The structure and philosophy of participant focused coaching is strongly related to 'constructivist learning theory' which is one of the main theories informing current education practice.



And another thing...

When giving instructions or explanations, stick to one point only and try to follow it up immediately with the opportunity for participants to put it into action. Any further points or explanations will distract from the main point and weaken the participant's understanding of what you want them to achieve.

Don't reinvent wheels

There are lots of excellent learning resources available for supporting beginners such as examples of log books, study guides and tutorial programmes.

For example:

<http://www.britishrowing.org/about-us/policies-publications/publications>

<http://www.britishrowing.org/juniors/basics>

<http://www.rowperfect.co.uk/shop/teaching-sculling-to-beginners-249.html>

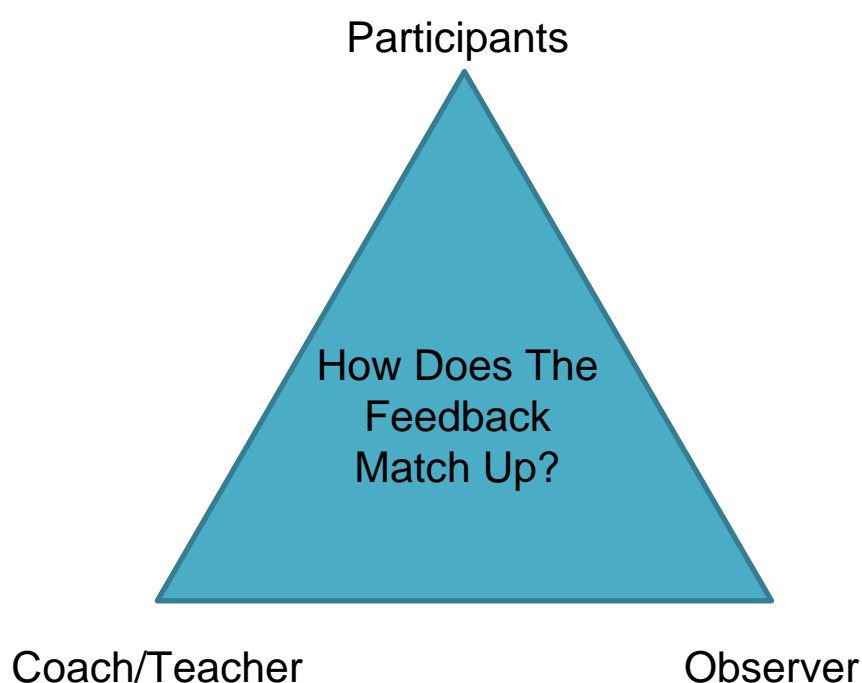
However aim to adapt resources to your own situation and circumstances. Also pick up tips and ideas from others who are involved in teaching beginners. An example of a progress check list/self-analysis sheet is included in the Appendix.

Learning can take place outside of the sessions

Between sessions participants should be encouraged (directed?) to review study materials provided, practice visualising themselves rowing and to review the last session in terms of what they learned and what they need to work on.

Feedback

Receiving feedback is risky and often neglected – but is the only way that the teaching of beginners in individual clubs will improve. It should be based on the concept of ‘triangulation’ that is taking three points of view and examining the extent to which these are congruent.



Feedback from participants should be anonymous; asking them face to face will only draw a limited response although this can be useful if they also have the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. An example of one is provided in the Appendix. Feedback forms also provide a useful checklist for anyone joining the coaching team.

Before changing aspects of a course as a result of feedback from participants, also consider your own views as a coach and the views of others who have been able to observe some of the sessions. The participants are not always right! A lack of congruence between viewpoints is a good starting point for a review of the aims, methods and procedures.

My personal tip for the day

When teaching beginners in a crew boat, after learning to 'sit the boat' whilst others row and some rowing in pairs/fours, I teach them to row with blades on the water during the recovery.

This has three aims:

- The importance of maintaining a constant hand height, parallel to the water, so that the boat is kept 'balanced'.
- Learning to row with blades in contact with the water – which is often necessary if a boat is temporarily unbalanced – as is done with beginners in a fine scull.
- Enabling the whole crew to row together at an early stage of development

I find that the blades lift off the water naturally as the boat picks up speed – and they learn to row a balanced boat very quickly.

To engage in a discussion and to share ideas about teaching beginners, contact me at jimflood42@gmail.com

Jim Flood

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Publications

Know the Game: Rowing, A C Black, 2007

The Complete Guide to Indoor Rowing (with Charlie Simpson), Bloomsbury 2012

Coaching: achieving the best results possible, Rowperfect, 2009

Coaching balance, Rowperfect, 2010

The Ergonomics of Rowing, Rowperfect, 2011

If you are interested in the development of rowing in African countries, have a look at the following websites:

<http://openergo.webs.com/>

www.theopenboat.org

This booklet is provided free, however, if you have found it useful, please consider making a £5 donation to Oxfam <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/donate>

How To Use The Following Table

The form is for you to assess and record your own progress using the criteria below. It also provides a basis for the questions that you need to ask. Discuss your assessment with other crew members, the cox and the coach.

1. I haven't a clue, will someone please explain this again from the beginning!
2. I think I understand but would benefit from a further explanation
3. I'm getting there and I know when things are going well
4. I can feel how I'm improving and I now know what I need to do to improve
5. I'm feeling confident on this aspect and I know what I have to work on

These learning objectives are a guide to your progress and a basis for discussions with other members of the squad and your coach. Rowing is a very technical sport and what feels to be a lack of progress can, at times, feel very frustrating. However, when you become aware of good progress, it is very rewarding, especially when this is also the result of a crew working and improving together.

An example of learning outcomes and self-assessment for the first eight phases of learning to row (feel free to adapt this for your own purpose)

At the end of the following sessions you should be able to:	Level Achieved				
	1	2	3	4	5
Phase 1 – in the club house					
Find your way around the club house and know what facilities are available to you					
Use an erg (rowing machine) and understand the sequence of arms – body – legs in a stroke					
Re-set the erg display so that you can check the distance you row, the rate and the time taken					
Understand the conditions of membership					
Think about what you hope to get out of rowing					
Identify the Safety Notice Board and the key messages on it					
Phase 2 – getting out on the water					
Understand your responsibilities for safety and knowing what to do in the event of an emergency					
Understanding why and how the coach makes a risk assessment before going out on the water					
Understand the importance of moving the boat out of the boat house in a safe manner					
Be able to respond to the cox's commands for moving the boat					
Know how to get into the boat without your feet touching the fragile parts					
Know the importance of wearing appropriate clothing for the conditions					
Translate the movement from the erg to moving the blade through the water					
Take a stroke from backstops and understand the 'drive' and 'recovery' phases of the stroke					
Give reasons for washing the hands thoroughly after an outing					
Phase 3 – rowing together					
Respond correctly to the cox's commands for 'Backstops' 'Ready' 'Go' 'Easy oars'					
Know your position in the boat and to be able to respond to commands specific to you: e.g. 'Take one stroke 2'					
Row continuously in time with the rest of the crew					
Respond to comments by the cox or coach on the position of your hands and body					
Understand the effect of changing hand heights on the balance of the boat					
Feel the large muscles in the legs and back doing the work – not the arms					
Understand and follow the ratio of time in the water and time on the slide					
Phase 4 – developing technique					
Improve your timing with the person stroking the boat					
Feel that you are moving together with the person in front of you					
Tap down with the outside hand and feather with the inside hand					
Feel relaxed during the recovery phase of the stroke					
Know and respond to the commands for turning the boat around – and to stopping it in an emergency					
Understand how the club rules apply to you					
Phases 5 – 8 – getting fit and being able to row powerfully					
Understand the importance of warming up, warming down and stretching					
Select and follow a programme for improving your fitness using the ergometer					
Outline your aims for rowing: e.g. to row recreationally; to row in regattas, to win events.					
Develop a good posture both on the erg and in the boat – and understand the importance of this					
Reach out for the catch, slot the blade in quickly and lock on to the water					
Drive with the legs, hold the arms long and loose and swing the shoulders back at the end of the stroke					
Draw the handle of the blade level with the edge of the boat					
Understand the importance of 'hanging off' the blade handle					
Draw the blade through the water with only the 'spoon' of the blade covered					
Extract the blade cleanly at the end of the stroke and roll it on the 'feather' position					
Have the confidence to discuss your progress with a coach					
Respond to feedback from the coach					
Understand the importance of drinking during rowing and snacking within 10 minutes of finishing					
Watch a video recording of yourself rowing and make your own analysis of where you need to improve					
Have fun rowing					

An example of a feedback questionnaire.

Feedback on the Learn to Row course						
Date		Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Pre-course information, welcome and introduction						
The pre-course information was clear and helpful						
There was a warm, welcoming and informative introduction to the course						
Issues of safety we dealt with in a clear and professional manner						
The aims and timetable for the first session were clearly explained						
As a result of the step by step coaching on the erg, I felt that I made progress						
The key points were summarised in clear and concise manner						
There was a good outline of what to expect in the next session						
Session in the rowing tank						
The aims were clearly explained and related to the previous session						
I began to get a feel of rowing in water						
I was given appropriate feedback to enable me to improve						
I was able to row in synchrony with others						
There was a clear debrief on the key points that reinforced my learning experience						
There was a good outline of what to expect in the next session						
First session on the water						
The aims were clearly explained and related to the previous session						
There was a clear explanation of the need for safe procedures						
I had confidence in the coach when we were on the water						
The instructions were clear and helpful						
There was a clear debrief on the key points that reinforced my learning experience						
Clear links were made to the Study Guide						
There was a good outline of what to expect in the next session						
Sessions 4 - 6						
There was a clear sequence and progression that enabled me to improve						
Alternative explanations/demonstrations were offered if I did not understand						
The coaching was fair and inclusive						
As a result of the course I plan to join the rowing club						
There was a clear outline of the options available if I joined the club						
I would recommend this course to a friend or colleague						

Rowperfect UK sells equipment, book, DVDs and tools for rowing and sculling supporting excellence in technique and coaching.

We aim to sell products that help improve technical skills and deliver fast boats.

Our news page includes coaching advice, commentary from around the web about the sport and product news, special offers and promotions.

Get in touch if you would like us to sponsor and support your rowing club school or university team.

Jim Flood is a coach for International Olympic Committee Coach Development Programme as well as Reading Rowing Club. He writes about what it takes to balance a boat. His approach is not prescriptive, Jim prefers to allow you and your athletes to work out for yourselves what contributes to boat balance. Jim sets out a series of exercises and tests to deliver kinesthetic learning experiences which demonstrate his deep understanding about how athletes learn and by inference, how coaches teach. Jim's mind map of balance and the elements that contribute to it is worth printing out for your club noticeboard.