

Creating a Learning Environment where everyone can learn to learn

“Potentiating (powerful) Learning Environments: Those that not only invite the expression of certain dispositions, but actively ‘stretch’ them, and thus develop them”

Since joining The Development Department in August 2007, it has been evident that The FA has a clear philosophy in what we are trying to achieve in the delivery of football to young players and 2008 will prove to be an exciting year with the launch of the new age appropriate coaching courses.

One of the building blocks required to achieve this philosophy which FA staff preach from our pulpits, is the need for all practitioners involved in association football, to create the ‘right environment’; a learning environment which players can feel comfortable in to take risks. This is something which our National Manager, Mr. Capello, wants the elite players to do on the pitch so surely we should instil this into our players at an early age so that it becomes engrained.

So, what does this environment look like and how can we achieve this whilst teaching those impressionable youngsters?

“The perennial educational questions are: where are we trying to get to, and how best to get there?” Claxton & Carr (1) Our friend Professor Guy Claxton mentioned again, Steve Tones (FA National Faculty: Education) made reference to Guy Claxton in a previous Insight article, as has John Allpress. John Allpress would be the first to tell you that this is not a new concept, but one which the likes of Bunker, Claxton, Carr, Popper & Thorpe all *‘sorted out for us a long time ago.’* Therefore is the above quote one we should all ask ourselves as reflective coaches?

What kind of Learning Environment are we trying to create and when we strip the academic work back, how is this translated into the world of association football? Claxton & Carr recognise that there are “...four kinds of educational environment or learning community.”

These are:

- Prohibiting
- Affording
- Inviting
- Potentiating

So as practitioners which learning environment should we choose to create and how can we do this?

Prohibiting

“A Prohibiting Environment is one in which it is impossible or dangerous to express a particular kind of learning response. A tightly scheduled programme where children move from one routine to the next in rapid succession” Claxton & Carr (1)

Is this a ‘coach centred drill approach to coaching children’? Is this kind of environment one which a coach is driven by what they have planned and therefore the learners are subjected to the coaches needs? Is the emphasis on the ‘what’ and content driven? For example “I’ve planned it for this session, so I am going to get through it” Therefore is the coach meeting the needs of the individuals or are the learners meeting the needs of the coach?

Affording

“An affording environment, is one which provides opportunities for the development of a range of learning attributes, but they may not be sufficient for all children” Claxton & Carr (1)

It seems that in this type of environment differentiation may be limited. For example: When working with any group of players we have difference in ability in all of the four corners (Technical, Physical, Psychological and Social): Those working towards, those coping and those striving, so the coach needs to be sensitive to all the players needs. For example, for those striving in the practice the task which has been set by the coach may be too easy

therefore the learners do not face a challenge and as a consequence the achievement of the given outcome is not valued, or for those working towards, the task is far beyond their capability and as a consequence learning may not take place.

Inviting

"An inviting environment is one that not only affords the chance to ask questions, for example, but clearly highlights this as a valued activity. Asking questions or working with others is made attractive and appealing" Claxton & Carr (1)

The creation of a very open-ended environment is prominent here. There seems to be a massive emphasis upon the 'social corner'. It's all about the learners being dependent upon their peers to work things out. The skill of the practitioner here is simply to say nothing (as long as it is safe) this kind of environment is prominent in team building exercises. It is important here that tasks set by the practitioner are 'SMART'

Potentiating

"A potentiating (powerful) environment: those that not only invite the expression of certain dispositions, but actively 'stretch' them, and thus develop them. Potentiating environments involve frequent participation in shared activity (Rogoff et al, 1993)" Claxton & Carr (1)

In this situation the coaching session becomes a shared experience between the learner and the practitioner. A 'shall we work it out together environment'. When the learner asks for help they should be guided by the practitioner in a way that allows the learner to be self expressive and find out the answer for themselves, but at the same time the practitioner is on hand to facilitate and act as 'buffer' for the learner.

A support mechanism, someone to trust, someone who manages mistakes well, someone who understands how that individual learns, someone who is not going to obstruct the learners spontaneity, passion and creativity. In this type of environment the 'power' is shared. In football terms, this kind of environment creates a powerful 'trust' between the learner and practitioner. Is this potentially how we can accelerate and embed long term learning?

Possible Solution

How can we create a potentiating environment when coaching our players? One way to do this is to adopt a 90% player, 10% coach approach as a starting point.

Then be reflective...

- How many of us as coaches allow our players to take ownership by designing practices and games whilst offering support?
- How many of us as coaches allow the players to set the boundaries of the practices and games whilst offering support?
- How often do we hold our hands up as coaches and say: *'I don't know the answer to that question, shall we try and work it out together?'*
- How often do we use effective questioning with our players? Examples: **'Tell me what you mean by that'** or **'can you explain to me why you did that then'** or **'Describe how that felt when you did that'**

Can we set ourselves the challenge of creating the 'right environment'; a learning environment where everyone can learn to learn each and every time we use a football as a tool for learning?

We need to learn how people learn.

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