

## Are we paddling on a flat earth? Are coaching models true?



**WARNING** – this article won't give you any shiny new coaching toys. Nor any funky acronyms or mnemonics. It might make you think without giving you anything concrete to show for it. Then again it might resolve some coaching niggles that you have in the back of your head and empower you to get out there and play. If you want to cut to the chase, take a look at the "What does it mean for my coaching" box at the end.

Here are a load of facts.



George proving that men *can* multi-task

Now although I call all these things facts and might believe that they're true, they're four quite different beasts.



### **Dwarves and Giants : An "it works for me" fact**

What I really mean is, "when I've played Dwarves and Giants, I've found that kids seem to have a really good time and actually get warmed up". This "fact" is based on my personal experience of what works for me. It might or might not be true for you. Even if we watch the same game, what I perceive as a successful outcome (lots of hyperactive children running round in circles), you might perceive as a failure. It's not fixed either; maybe next year I'll find a better game and downgrade dwarves and giants to only OK.

### **2+2=4 : A self-evident fact**

I believe this to be self-evidently true. Absolutely, exactly and precisely true. It's true today and it'll still be true in a million years time.

$$\begin{array}{l} 1 + 1 = 2 \\ 2 + 2 = 4 \\ 3 + 5 = 8 \end{array}$$

## The earth is round\* : An experimentally determined fact

So you might put this in the same category as  $2+2=4$ , but it's not. If you'd asked people three thousand years ago, you'd have been told "No it's not. It's flat". People had big arguments about this for hundreds of years and it wasn't until the ancient Greek philosophers turned their minds to it, and



ancient Greek sailors actually saw it, that people started to come round to the idea that the earth is round. Even so (and in the face of increasing evidence) it wasn't until many hundreds of years later that belief in a round earth became the norm.

So this is an experimentally determined fact. People weren't sure if it was true or not. They went away and tried to find out. They found a load of evidence that supported it, and no evidence that contradicted it. Many people still people ignored the evidence in favour of their own experience (Dwarves and Giants type facts) or claimed that the earth being flat was self-evidently true ( $2+2=4$  type facts), but eventually the experimentally determined fact won out.

\*For the pedants out there; I know, it's technically an oblate spheroid.

## Learners will have a VAK preference : What sort of fact is this?

So why might I believe this to be true? Because a highly qualified coach told me so on a coaching processes course? Because someone with a PhD wrote a paper saying it was true? Maybe because like Dwarves and Giants I've played with it and found it seems to work for me? I don't think it's self-evidently true, nor when you look into it, is there overwhelming evidence that it's true, indeed there's increasing evidence out there that it might not be true.


In twenty years time as more evidence accumulates, we might end up teaching something completely different on coaching courses.

The trouble is it's really hard to set up experiments to test if bits of coaching theory actually work. Observing the curvature of the earth is a doddle compared to measuring how people behave, which is affected by so many different factors.

As a result of this **most teaching theory is made up**. Now that doesn't mean that it's wrong, and it certainly doesn't mean it doesn't work. It just means that it's true in the sense that Dwarves and Giants is a great game rather than true in the way that the earth is round.

VISUAL  
SEE IT 

AUDITORY  
HEAR IT 

KINESTHETIC  
DO IT 

As an example let's take the Theorist, Activist, Reflector, Pragmatist model of learning styles as taught on lots of paddlesport coaching courses. Since it gets used in teaching and business as well as in sports coaching, there's been lots of research done on it. It was invented by Honey and Mumford (borrowing on some earlier ideas by Kolb) around 1982.

In Peter Honey's own words it's a "description of the attitudes and behaviour which determine an individual's preferred way of learning".

But there are issues with dividing our learners into Theorists, Activists, Reflector and Pragmatist and treating them as such.

- There's no evidence in neuroscience that this reflects how the brain actually works.
- About 70% of people don't come out strongly as one type
- It's not fixed – you test people a couple of weeks later and they'll often come out as something different
- There's some evidence that matching your teaching to the learning style of your student doesn't make very much difference to the outcome.

Now to be fair, the learning preferences were never meant to be a way of classifying people so that you could go on to teach them different ways. In the words of Peter Honey they're "are a convenient oversimplification", "a starting point for discussion on how an individual learns" and are "purely designed to stimulate people into thinking about the way they learn from experience." If anything, they were designed to help managers work on improving the learning preferences that they *don't* currently exhibit.

Used like this, they're clearly useful, but if all they are is a starting point for discussion, then what do we gain by teaching all these different labels for people? Why don't we just teach that;

- 1.) People are different.
- 2.) For every person there are ways of teaching stuff that work well for them and other ways that don't work so well. So;
- 3.) It's good for coaches to have lots of ways of teaching stuff.
- 4.) With experience we might choose the way that best suits our learner.
- 5.) With a big group it might be good to repeat the same point in several different ways.
- 6.) Sometime it's more important to match the way we teach to what we're teaching, not who we're teaching it to.

Now I'm picking on Honey and Mumford, but you could equally well put Kolb's learning cycle or VAK under the microscope and find similar evidence. Once again **I'm not saying they aren't useful and I'm not saying they don't work.** I spend a lot of effort trying to suss out the learning needs of my clients and then trying to meet those needs. As it happens I don't think that there's enough evidence (yet) to settle this argument either way. What I am saying is that all these models are Dwarves and Giants true, but many people leave coaching courses thinking they're 2+2=4 true and that can cause problems.

So we've got a problem. What we have as a "dwarves and giants" type fact, which we believe because most people believe it and because it seems to work for us, turns out, when people do experiments not to be supported by those experiments.

Are we as coaches like the flat-earthers? Now remember, they weren't being dumb. To them it was *obvious* that the earth is flat. I mean it looks flat! It was the orthodoxy. Everyone thought it was true. Unfortunately, that didn't mean it was true. How many of our beliefs about boating and coaching are like believing the earth is flat?



The short answer is we don't know. There's not very much research done about coaching paddlesport, and with the best will in the world, there probably never will be. So there's not much hard evidence for most of what we do. Most of how we coach is based on "dwarves and giants" type facts rather than "the earth is round" type facts

Which brings us to the really important question. **Does any of this actually matter or is it all philosophical navel gazing?**

That would depend on you.

If it feels irrelevant to you, and isn't going to make any difference to how you coach then it *is* irrelevant to you. Sorry to waste your time; carry on doing what you've been doing!

If your coaching flows from your beliefs about how to coach, then maybe this *will* make a difference to you.

If you were a bit hung up on some bit of coaching theory, hopefully this article will free you up to stop taking it so seriously and get out and play some more.

If I've created problems for you, by chipping away at some of the foundations of how we coach, or if you've just left a coaching course with your head spinning, read on;

### What does it mean for my coaching?

Here are some thoughts. They might be useful if you're struggling to get your head round how to coach.

**Don't take the theory too seriously.** If it inspires you to try something different or if it seems to work for you – use it! But be aware that people have an awkward habit of not fitting into boxes. If lack of theoretical knowledge is constraining your coaching then go out and learn some more. If some other factor is limiting your development as a coach then go and work on that instead. Also be aware that you'll meet people who know loads of theory but can't coach for toffee and other people who have no idea about any of the theory who are great coaches.

**Try to keep an open mind** – just because some coaching doesn't fit in with your idea of how it should be doesn't mean it won't work. For example, last year I sat in on a very directive, non-individualised, coach-centred introduction to whitewater session. Exactly the sort of session we're encouraged not to deliver. My immediate reaction was eughh, I wouldn't do it that way; *but* it was safe, the clients had a great time, and learned loads. By most objective criteria I can come up with it was a really successful session. It's hard to separate what's good effective coaching and what simply agrees with my prejudices.

**It doesn't have to be true or consistent to work.** I've been lucky to work with some really good coaches, and they've told me some really clever things. It's just that some of those really clever things don't agree. Some of the things they told me on reflection were wrong, but that doesn't matter. They got me to try new stuff and experience new things. We're never going to have a definitive best way of doing anything. In many ways that's great. Wouldn't it be dull if all you had to do to become a great coach was to watch a video which told you all the absolute best ways to teach stuff?

**If it works for you use it; if it doesn't bin it.** Reflective practice, reviewing whatever you want to call it is a good thing. Get feedback from yourself, your learners and other coaches if you can. If something worked or didn't, work out why. Go back and look critically at what you've done. How can you make it better next time?

**Beware the coach who tells you this is how it must be done.** There's more than one way to skin a cat and there's more than one way to coach cat skinning.

**Trust nobody!** Just because lots of people believe something doesn't make it true. If it feels fishy, try and find out where it came from and see if it's actually relevant to boating.

**Try to coach best practice.** So you need get out there and share with other people to find out what best practice is. You go all that effort and then suddenly it'll change. What to teach and how to teach it aren't carved in stone, they're more like shifting sands.

**Keep changing what you do.** Keep playing, keep experimenting. There is no one size fits all, single best way to coach anything.

Of course you could use my own voodoo back on me and ask me “What’s your evidence base for all these recommendations?” And I’d have to admit that these are Dwarves and Giants recommendations, not round earth recommendations, but for now they’re the best I can do.

This article is available for comment, with more background at [www.georgefell.co.uk](http://www.georgefell.co.uk) If you want to email me to tell me it’s all tosh, or to teach me new stuff then you can get hold of me at [mail@georgefell.co.uk](mailto:mail@georgefell.co.uk)

Cheers,

George

**//\*\*\*\*These are some other related bits and pieces that don't seem to flow with the rest \*\*\*\*//**

So you're coaching a stern rudder to a kinaesthetic, activist. They also happen to be left brained, emotionally intelligent, ENTP on the Myers-Briggs type indicator and a Plant in Belbin. They're also a bit cold, and they really don't want to fall in. **They're also a person!** As with all people they've got a really complex set of needs and wants, some of which you are aware of, some of which they are aware of and some of which neither of you have cottoned onto.

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All this stuff is interesting when hidden inside your head, and even interesting when you're chatting idly with another coach. If you're trying to teach someone a draw stoke then that's probably not the time to talk about coaching theory.

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### **Useful references**

Meshing hypothesis (Massa and Mayer)

If you want to read more about this, Frank Coffield's "Learning Styles and Pedagogy in post-16 learning" or the Demos report "About Learning" are a good place to start before you throw yourself into reading research papers. Steven Stahl "on Learning Styles Indicators". (American) Association of Psychological Sciences, methodological review of learning styles. Dr Daniel Willingham podcast and you tube article.

### **Problems**

Reading loads of academic studies establishes how best to coach but there isn't enough evidence. The evidence that is there is often more relevant to the classroom than to paddlesport. I still need to coach something though.

Reviewing my sessions establishes better "it works for me" type facts. Sharing that stuff round is even better. That's how the idea of "best practice" comes about.

So the options would seem to be

- 1.) I try to do lots of coaching and review what I've done
- 2.) I try to work with lots of different people and see lots of different things
- 3.) I try to keep up to date with all the latest developments in coaching
- 4.) I stick my fingers in my ears, ignore all this navel gazing and just go ahead and have fun.

Confirmation Bias.

Why is doing research hard? This could be a book in itself.

Relevance of teaching research to boating. Is pseudo-scientific generalisation worse than being honest about just making it up?

There's some research done about coaching sport and there's loads of research done about teaching in schools and training in the workplace.

Medicine has all the same problems (but a lot more money) and they've come up with a way round it. It's called evidence based medicine. It involves a process of looking at what's been done and what evidence is out there, looking at the different types of "fact" and finally coming up with a recommendation based on that evidence and giving that recommendation its own truth rating. Trouble is, it's really time consuming and expensive and often comes up with the answer "we haven't got enough evidence to tell either way".

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Research in counselling, where there's an analogous situation with lots of competing models of how to do things, suggests that the model you use isn't important. Your belief in the efficacy of that model is. c.f. "if you see the Buddha in the road kill him" on psychotherapy