

Teaching practical skills

Simple methods to help teach groups

Not all young people prefer the same way of learning. As leaders, or instructors, it's important that we teach practical skills using methods that allow young people to learn in a way which works for them, not just the way we prefer to learn ourselves. We can improve our effectiveness by using some simple teaching models or structures.

For skills that have real practical applications (for example, cutting up onions, paddling a canoe, lighting a fire, and so on), often simple teaching models or structure improve how effective we are at teaching young people. These include:

- Using CLAP to supervise a group while teaching
- VAK learning preferences
- The IDEAS coaching model
- Teaching positively

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Using CLAP to supervise a group while teaching

Young people learn best when learning by doing – that means giving them the opportunity to get hands on and explore a subject. As leaders, we have to manage our learning environment in a way that both helps young

people to learn and keeps them safe while learning. CLAP is a simple acronym that helps us to do this. It stands for 'Communication', 'Line of sight', 'Avoidance', and 'Positioning'.

Communication

If a member of the group breaks a rule, or does something wrong, it's often because we have not communicated a piece of information effectively. To enhance teaching, try:

1. Clear and simple instructions

- Don't use 20 words if 5 will do
- Limit information to bite size chunks
- Slow it down and take your time to get it right
- Speak loudly and try not to mumble

2. Check understanding. Never assume they understood what you just told them, use questioning to make sure they really got it. You can do this by:

- Asking short, fact checker questions, for example, if you've said the boundary is the red line, ask 'Which colour line do we not go past?'
- Asking deeper questions to engage the group with the information, like, 'When do you think we should check our harnesses are still tight?'
- Getting them to practice before trying things properly. Tell them 'We're going to play a practice round of stuck in the mud, so this one doesn't count'.
- Asking them to summarise the information, for example, by saying 'In pairs, summarise what you need to do in one sentence.'

Line of sight

Set clear boundaries to work within. Once young people demonstrate that skills have been acquired, you might let groups use skills remotely. For most teaching however, you will always have the group within your line of sight, allowing you to intervene for safety or provide coaching whenever you need.

- Arrange the group so they can all see you clearly when teaching. Consider environmental factors as well, such as looking into the sun.
- Hard boundaries; be clear where groups can and can't go. Features such as fences or field edges can be useful boundaries if the activity is in a fixed location.
- Dynamic boundaries; 'Stay wherever you can still see the red bag.' This type of boundary is useful for journeys or where there are no obvious hard boundaries.
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Avoidance

Anticipating and avoiding problems will help your teaching go more smoothly. This could form a part of your risk assessment; remember the risk doesn't have to affect safety, it could also affect the success of your teaching.

- Avoid things that will distract your group. This could be other groups, something happening in the background, or even giving them the equipment before you've explained what you want them to do with it.
- Avoid unnecessary hazards which present a real or perceived risk to your group. Real hazards must be avoided for obvious reasons, but also consider things which you know are safe but might make your group feel uncomfortable. In other words, learn in a safe location. For instance, don't learn to tie a knot at the top of a crag when the bottom is just fine.

Positioning

You need to be dynamic as a leader, moving around to the position where you can be the most effective. Simply put, this means making sure you're in the right place at the right time.

- Be aware of the whole group. Don't focus on just one area, or stand facing away from some members. Move to your learners instead of them coming to you.
- Move to protect the group from hazards. For instance, getting to the front of a group before a busy road crossing, or standing where you can grab a rope if the belayer fumbles their hand movements.

VAK learning preferences

It is widely disputed whether some people have specific learning styles or preferences, however, it's certainly true that some information is better understood if taught in a specific way. Combining different methods of providing information can give people the best chance to understand the information we teach. One simple model is to consider three simple ways in which we can give information:

Visually – showing learners how to do something by demonstrating or modelling it.

Auditorily – explaining or telling learners how something works step by step.

Kinaesthetically – giving them the chance to learn by doing and apply learning for themselves.

We can combine all of these learning preferences using the IDEAS model, which can be applied to nearly all practical skills to provide a structure to our teaching.

The IDEAS coaching model

You wouldn't start building a house if you had no idea what the house was supposed to look like. Most people want to see something done before they have a go themselves. It helps the brain put the theory into practice and means there are less misunderstandings from the language you use.

The IDEAS model has five stages that make use of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic ways of learning preferences: Introduce, Demonstrate, Explain, Apply and Summarise.

	What you're doing...	Example... using a fire steel
Introduce	Give some context to help understand what's happening. Don't overload learners with knowledge at this stage.	'We're going to use a fire steel and striker to make sparks which will light our tinder.'
Demonstrate	Show them the skills from start to finish without talking. Learners often only copy half of what you show them so make your movements slow and over the top to emphasise correct technique.	Kneel down in a stable position. Calmly and deliberately pick up the fire steel and striker. Position your hands. Find the angle. Strike to produce sparks. Repeat a second time.
Explain	Repeat the same process as before but at each step, use simple, clear instructions to explain what you're doing. You can add extra relevant information if it explains why you did things in a certain way, or how something works.	'First, find an area away from things that might catch fire.' 'Kneel down so you are nice and stable.' 'This is the fire steel. It's quite soft, so when we strike it hard enough, friction makes little shavings come off as sparks.'
Apply	Get the group to apply their knowledge to reinforce their understanding. Examples could be them telling you how to do it, trying for themselves, or playing a game.	'Take one of the sets, find some space away from others and practice making some sparks. I'll come over and help you if you need me to.'
Summarise	Sum it up and tell them what will happen next. This would usually be something which builds on the skill just covered.	'Excellent, now that we can all make sparks, let's think about how we use them to light a fire.'

Teaching positively

Finally, the way you word your instructions makes a big difference. You should be positive in the information you give; this is reassuring and sets a standard for the

behaviour you're looking for. Tell people the positive things you want them to do, instead of giving them ideas of the bad things they could do.

Positive Instructions

- 'Wait for me to give you a thumbs up before you start climbing.'
- 'Only walk when collecting arrows to make sure you don't trip up.'
- 'Everybody, look at me and listen for the next instruction.'

Negative instructions

- 'If you start before I say so, then you'll have to wait until the end of the group.'
- 'Don't run up to the arrows because you might trip and stab yourself in the eye.'
- 'Everybody shut up, I'm trying to tell you what to do.'