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## **PERFORMING IN CHAOS: COACHING TRANSITION TO YOUNG TRIATHLETES USING POSITIVE PEDAGOGY**

*Juliet Paterson and Kass Gibson*

This chapter provides insight into the first author's experiences of using *Positive Pedagogy for Sport Coaching* (Light and Harvey, 2019) as part of an empirical study conducted in part-fulfilment of her Sport Coaching: Children and Young People Master's Degree, at a University in the UK. During this study she was supervised by Dr Kass Gibson, who is co-author of this chapter, even though it is written in the first person, following the introduction. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching (PPed) in facilitating a holistic, child-centred approach to coaching children and young people in triathlon clubs. During the study, Juliet's coaching considerations in planning, delivery and reflection were structured by the PPed framework (Light and Harvey, 2019).

Within this chapter we focus on a training session which aimed to improve awareness and decision-making during the discipline of transition. After setting the context briefly and explaining the study upon which this chapter draws, we provide detail on the planning and delivery – as well as reflections on the experience. Moreover, Juliet reflects on her continued use and refinement of PPed when working with young athletes of differing ages, abilities, and

experiences, at various stages along the competitive regional pathway. She also reflects on how this framework has guided her in her role as British Triathlon's Southwest Regional Lead for 'Skills School', a national initiative supporting the development of coaches working with children and young people in triathlon clubs and school settings.

### **The context**

I began my Masters' studies with a belief that, at grass roots level and in primary school education, sporting experiences are powerful. I have personally witnessed and experienced the incredible influence that excellent and effective coaching can have in guiding improvements, in the physical, technical, and tactical performances of young people. In addition, I have also developed a deep understanding of the positive impact this can have upon the future personal, social, emotional, and cognitive development of each child and young person in our care. Therefore, my professional focus has always been to ensure children experience the positive power of sport, which necessitates holistic and humanistic approaches to coaching.

Throughout my early professional experiences in clubs and schools, working as a swimming and athletics teacher/coach and subsequently a developer of primary school teacher swimming practice, I advanced by evaluating and applying the effective practice of my own coaches, tutors, and colleagues. My early experiences highlighted that effective coaching aims to achieve the child's individual and developmental needs as well as their aspirations, is therefore child-centred, prioritises early positive experiences and always considers the child as a person first and performer second. This was further highlighted as excellent practice when I embarked on my primary school teaching career, where I supported the development of PE as lead for the subject in schools. During my teaching career colleagues and ongoing professional development opportunities were again the main point of reference for guiding improvements in my practice. Therefore, I had not based my practice on a single pedagogical model but rather been involved in a successful cyclical process whereby I adapted with an intricate knowledge of what the children in my class needed to develop successfully for their life ahead.

During the initial stages of my Master's studies, I evaluated 'what is excellent and effective coaching of children and young people in sport?' which reinforced these priorities as key to ensuring the holistic development of young participants. As such, I reviewed the

application and influence that athlete/student-centred coaching/teaching. For example, 'Teaching Games for Understanding' (Bunker and Thorpe, 1982) and 'Games Based Approaches' like 'Game Sense' (Light, 2013) and how these impacted upon the coaching practices of team games' coaches. I also evaluated the influence these had on participant's learning, performance improvements and positive experiences. I was particularly interested in how these approaches seemed to be able to develop participants holistically so decided to implement them in triathlon, which was a rewarding but challenging and time-consuming task.

*Positive Pedagogy for Sport Coaching* (Light, 2017) offered specific support to guide technical improvements within triathlon, from a holistic as well as humanist philosophical position. Not only did it focus on individual sports but also aligned with my own personal philosophy as a teacher, coach, and educator. Furthermore, I saw an opportunity, beyond advancing my own personal knowledge, to apply - *and evaluate* - PPed in my club settings. In conjunction with other pedagogical frameworks that prioritise learning over performance, PPed supported me in developing coaching practice across the Southwest region, for British Triathlon. Indeed, as part of broader shifts in coaching British Triathlon Federation conceived 'Skills School' (2016a, b), an initiative designed to support coaches in moving away from a reliance on traditional, reductionist coaching methods common place in its subsidiary disciplines, particularly swimming and athletics. Instead, encouraging coaches to use 'Guided Challenge and Discovery' methods (GCD). GCD methods promote the use of exploration, questioning, and view creative, engaging coaching methods as valuable tools for enhancing young athlete skill development as well as continued engagement with triathlon but also sport in general.

Although triathlon is a rapidly growing sport, it originates from mainly adult participatory foundations, which means it is continually evolving and adapting to the needs of new participatory groups, such as children and young people. The requirements of my studies, my professional development, and broader changes in coach education, combined with PPed, as a newly articulated approach to coaching, presented a need for applied practitioner research. This could potentially aid better understanding of how children and young people can be coached, to enable maximum improvement in performance alongside promotion of early positive experiences (Paterson, 2018). PPed appeared to provide a great opportunity to address the research gap by providing a highly effective, evidenced approach.

## ***Triathlon***

Traditionally triathlon coaching focuses on physiological training principles and technical competence to enable the efficiency and economy in movement required to meet the ever-increasing physical demands of training as determined by race intensity and distance. However, triathletes must also be psychologically, tactically, and cognitively prepared. They also need to be able to adapt to race conditions and situations that arise because formats of triathlon courses vary hugely. Such variations include, but are not limited to, swimming locations (e.g., pools, lakes, or sea); starts (wave or time-trial); bike terrains (e.g., tarmac, grass, track); regulations (e.g., draft legal/non-drafting), weather conditions, course topography and technicality. Furthermore, discipline-specific demands are complex. For example, in open water swimming, wetsuit/non-wetsuit requirements necessitate adaptations to stroke; starts vary between deep water starts, beach/shallow entry starts and dive starts; tactical considerations differ with regards to positioning at the start; confidence is required when swimming in close proximity to other swimmers; competence in performing buoy turns; adaptations to the stroke when sighting, drafting or due to environmental conditions, such as waves.

All told, this is indicative of the importance of continuous decision-making in triathlon and the need to be thinking athletes. For triathlon coaches wishing to guide the development of athletes as independent decision-makers, the emphasis of PPed on inquiry-based learning that fosters ‘curiosity, thinking and reflection’ makes it an ideal approach for developing adaptable athletes as self-regulating learners.

## **The Study**

For this study I used a Practitioner Action Research (PAR) approach to evaluate the experiences of children and young people in triathlon clubs, who were coached using PPed. PAR offered me the opportunity to address calls for more practice-based, theory-driven,

context and domain specific research of pedagogical approaches for coaching (Kirk, 2005; Oslin and Mitchell, 2006). I adopted PAR to provide a thorough understanding of how PPed influenced my coaching practice and triathlete experiences and learning, which I hope is evident in this chapter. The sessions I report on took place in junior triathlon clubs, with a total of 36 junior triathletes, aged 10-17 years. I coached these triathletes at two clubs, over a period of 15 weeks, during pre- (Spring) and mid- (Summer) race season in the UK.

The unit and weekly coaching plans that I designed, focused on employing the PPed core features (see, Light and Harvey, 2019). I created the weekly plans to be appropriately challenging and provide progression across sport-specific skills outlined in the ‘The 4E’s Guidance Matrix: Skills Development’ (British Triathlon Federation, 2020). Furthermore, I used Fosnot’s (1996) ‘Big ideas’ to provide the core concepts that PPed aims to link questioning and its inquiry-based approach to. In the case of triathlon, this can include understanding how to maintain momentum by focusing on efficiency and economy of movements. This combination allowed me to draw sessions together to encourage ‘flow’ *within* and *between* sessions, aiming to increase the depth of learning and empower learners (Light and Harvey, 2019).

As coach and researcher, I recorded my own reflections of applying PPed and my perceptions of impact, in a coach’s field journal. Additionally, I used the field journal to record the triathletes’ immediate responses and reactions to the sessions I had delivered. Considering the triathletes’ reflections of prime importance in guiding my practice, their reflections were gathered during post-unit group interviews and within written reflective logs, which they completed at home, some of which are shared in this chapter.

## **The Session Design**

In this section I reflect upon a session focussed on transition that I designed and coached around the pedagogical features of PPed. With appropriate adjustments, this was successfully implemented with young triathletes of differing ages, experiences and at various points along the regional competitive pathway in both club and young athlete development settings. I also used this as an exemplar of best practice when working within my development role, with triathlon coaches and teachers across the region.

### ***Creating the learning environment***

A key consideration for understanding and applying PPed was the emphasis on *learning* within the performance-focused culture of sport and the construction of a supportive environment to encourage inquiry, risk-taking and creativity. To create this environment, I considered the triathletes' main reasons for attendance which were, principally enjoyment, improving performance and developing new skills. The young triathletes in the study also expressed a desire to join triathlon clubs because of the unique experience provided that is distinct from that at separate athletics and swimming clubs. To meet their needs and provide a positive experience I tried to create an engaging and explorative environment for them by designing activities to encourage experimentation, strategy creation and problem solving. This planning was detailed, complex, and required dedication and commitment to a constant cycle of reading, adaption, and re-reading of PPed. As Light and Harvey (2019) suggest, the relaxed demeanour of a PPed coach typically belies the hard work involved in planning that is not visible.

During this session and others like it, I encouraged the young triathletes to explore and critically reflect on their 'known knowledge' and current processes, aiming to facilitate development of 'new knowledge' (Light, 2017). I did this by:

1. Reflecting on their current individual practice

2. Considering other options and choices available for developing this practice through collaboration with fellow triathletes
3. Experimenting with these other options
4. Devising solutions, thus finding a preference that suited them.

When applied to individual sports for technical improvement, PPed often involves creating a problem to be solved through a discovery, or guided discovery approach (Light, 2017). In my sessions I focussed on the following three areas:

1. *Exploration of technique*, for example: exploring changes in the streamlined position from the pool wall (minimising resistance); cycling cornering technique (maximising propulsion); the arm action in running (maximising efficiency and running economy).
2. *Exploration of tactical scenarios*, such as: positioning during an open water start; exploring pack positioning when riding in draft-legal races; experimenting with running strategies according to terrain/topography demands.
3. *Exploration of physical intensity*, for example: exploring the notion of ‘pacing’; using ratings of perceived exertion to guide personal physical application; using negative splits to reduce onset of fatigue in running.

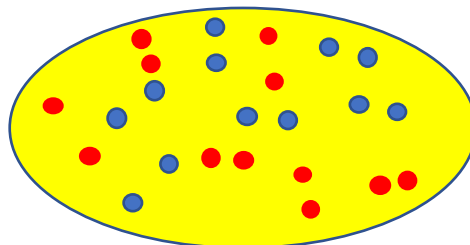
The session I reflect on, in this chapter, focused on improving performance on approach to, during and on leaving transition.

Transition (the so-called fourth discipline) is unique to triathlon and involves entering a designated area to transition from the swim phase to cycling or cycling to running. Transition can be chaotic, and triathletes must be able to adapt to and make good decisions in this chaos. Indeed, British Triathlon recognises such chaotic conditions, and promotes the use of a coaching method dubbed ‘choreographed chaos’ (British Triathlon Federation, 2016, 2020).



Here coaches provide opportunities that require triathletes to adapt to any given situation, introducing triathletes to chaotic conditions, by choreographing this carefully. However, while a (young) triathlete can plan to be prepared, set up ideally to execute the fastest transition time, the ability to make decisions independently throughout transition is crucial.

I designed this session to develop awareness of the options open to the triathletes in transitions and give them opportunities to make decisions and reflect on them as well as being aware of others in transition. I wanted to increase their confidence and support them in independently responding to others as well as changes that may occur while mounting and dismounting the bike. First, I created an area which necessitated riding, mounting, and dismounting bikes in close proximity to others. Through careful consideration of spatial constraints, I prepared an oval of yellow cones, approximately 25m x 15m. Inside this oval, I placed approximately 10 mount gates (2 red marker cones 1m apart) and 10 dismount gates (2 blue marker cones 1m apart) randomly (Figure 1).



To emulate ‘chaos’, all children were simultaneously active. While I had planned in detail, the understanding was that the plan was not set in stone, but rather ‘written in the sand’ and ready to be adjusted according to my observations, analysis, and subsequent judgements of progress in learning. This required me to be comfortable with constantly adapting but also

highlighted a need for me to have a detailed knowledge of the progressions available to appropriately adjust to the triathletes' needs.

## **Coaching the session**

### ***Introduction***

A significant accomplishment for me, across all the clubs I coached in, has been the fine tuning of the introduction. The phrase 'start as you mean to go on' eloquently describes the importance of a well-considered introduction that leads fluidly into and reflects my pedagogical approach for the main part of the session. So, in consideration of the PPed core features, I began each unit with a big idea such as on maintaining momentum. I began by saying, 'Over the next five weeks we're thinking about how we can maintain momentum during each phase of a triathlon, specifically enabling us to race through transition effectively.' At the beginning of each session, I then created a session focus, linked to the big idea of maintaining momentum such as 'Today we are going to explore how we may need to adapt our mounting/dismounting technique and our transition plan, depending on the actions of other triathletes, to maintain race momentum'. On this occasion, the focus was received with considered nods and immediate athlete engagement, noted by maintenance of eye contact, alert body posture and eagerness to begin.

### ***Main Activity***

After the introduction I gave an instruction to provide minimal structure, reinforcing the idea of independent exploration. I asked them to explore the On/Off challenge which involved pushing their bikes towards the red cones, where they mounted their bikes, cycled towards two blue cones and dismounted at them. They repeated this for three minutes, going in any direction and approaching gates in any order they wanted to. They were all immediately surprised when

I explained this challenge, looking at each other, laughing in disbelief and checking with me to make sure they had understood what I wanted them to do. They asked me, 'We do this altogether?' and 'In any direction?' to which I replied: 'That's the challenge!' Again, laughter followed, with some asking, 'Can we start?'

I noticed older and more confident riders charged into the oval, while less confident and experienced riders were initially more tentative, taking time out to observe the others and then joining the activity in their own time, challenging themselves without my prompting, just 'having a go'. For a few minutes I provided them the opportunity to become accustomed with the task and environment and used this time to take note of proficiency levels and decide how to adapt to these. This approach worked well, and I could see triathletes of all abilities, developmental stages, and levels of experience engaged in the activity. Crucially, this approach accommodated the diversity which is evident in most junior sessions and often exacerbated by the 'drop in' nature of the participating triathlon clubs.

After this, we regrouped and I encouraged them to consider their initial feelings, using 'skinny' questions. These questions served as reminders of the 'rules' of transition, such as where they should mount the bike. More importantly, the questions increased subsequent opportunities for self-reflection on the *how* such as, 'How did you mount your bike?' I then repeated the On/off challenge and asked them, 'This time think about what you are doing to adjust your mounts and dismounts when riding in close proximity to others.' Some children more used to being told what to do, asked for clarification while others relished the freedom. Challenging them to critically reflect on what they had been doing stimulated immersion in the task and they seemed both grounded and attentive.

Usually, each practice session was followed by discussion and reflection but to provide more children with the opportunity to share I varied how I did this. For example, at times I used the technique of paired reflection, 'Think, pair, share.' Here I used 'fat' questions to probe

triathlete consideration of any adjustments made. This probing of changes in practice enhanced triathlete levels of cognitive and physical engagement, advanced opportunities for corporeal learning and was evident throughout this and all sessions. On occasion, I also needed to teach discussion and diplomacy skills (Slade et al, 2019) to the group and felt that this encouraged them to engage in dialogue and confidently justify the decisions they made. The open and supportive environment I had been building seemed to encourage the triathletes to contribute to discussions and debates with questions acting as “invitations for dialogue” (Light, 2017:68).

To provide multiple opportunities for practice I set another challenge, aiming to enrich their understanding by facilitating experiences of *in the moment* reflection. I asked them to try different solution to any problems they might have and to consider trying one their partner shared with them. To encourage meaningful sharing and debates, I used ‘Question starters’ (Kracl, 2012 in Harvey and Light, 2015) with small groups of triathletes. At first, the younger triathletes took offence if directly disagreed with but, through explanation and repeated attention to teaching diplomacy skills, I encouraged the triathletes to begin to see others’ opinions as non-threatening and increasingly valuable.

Pleased with progress, I then raised the level of challenge. They repeated the ‘On/off’ challenge, but I asked all riders to push their bikes around the circumference of the yellow circle and on hearing my call of ‘transition!’, push their bike to any red gate, mount, cycle and dismount at the blue gate, and repeat it. I also asked them to count how many dismounts they could perform in 30 seconds, and on completion I used questions to encourage quiet reflection. For example, I said to them, ‘Have a minute to think about how adding a competitive challenge impacted on your technique and/or preferred strategy’ followed up with, ‘Now adjust something to help improve your score.’ I then asked them to repeat the activity, but with the challenge of having to ‘beat your own score’. This was followed with discussion as a whole group of the positive changes they found aided their performance to direct attention towards

not only to *how* to perform skills efficiently but also *when* to apply them, *where* and crucially, *why* (Light, 2017; Light and Harvey, 2019).

### ***Conclusion***

For the final activity I asked all the triathletes to race through a more traditional, linear transition area, aligning with competitive race environments. I then drew the group together and asked them to share ideas, solutions, and improvements with a partner as is common practice in PPed. I then asked them more general and open questions such as, ‘What have you learnt or become more aware of today? Is there anything you have improved today? What have you identified you want to work on more?’ As a result of this session and based on my observations and questioning I felt my triathletes developed improved awareness of others in approach to, during and on leaving transition. They also seemed to gain an appreciation of the many possibilities for performing the same task. This was due to sharing and sampling a multitude of strategies aiming to aid independence in adaption, specifically valuable for maintaining momentum through transition. At this session and sessions at other clubs the triathletes responded more positively to questioning each week, ‘warming up’ to the method and increasingly empowered by the process, as one said to me, “I like to be challenged in thinking if I am doing something correct or not, rather than being told”.

### **Reflection and evaluation**

Over the past two years, I have found applying the PPed approach in junior triathlon club and young athlete development settings a beneficial and enjoyable experience, advancing my own performance as an effective coach. Designing and implementing sessions, as described above, was reflected on positively by the triathletes. Triathletes reported improvements in engagement, increased perceptions of competence, increased confidence, and connectedness.

Importantly, the development of positive character traits and independent decision-making abilities were also evident in their reflections (Paterson, 2018). The PPed framework has been a comprehensive point of reference - informing both my coaching and my role as a coach developer. This has been particularly valuable when guiding coaches' creation and maintenance of learning and learner-centred, inquiry-based environments to enable increased understanding of the significance of adopting humanist and holistic approaches to learning and experiences for triathletes of varying ages, ability, and levels of experience.

PPed core features offered me clarity in planning questions to advance understanding of the *how*, *what*, *where* and crucially the *why*, not often recognised as valuable with athletes of such a young age. As such I modified my practice, subsequently improved the quality of learning experiences and the impact I have had upon the individual development and performances of the triathletes I work with. More specifically, as evidenced throughout this chapter, PPed has informed and enhanced questioning, which has consistently guided improvements in triathlete learning, the creation of an effective inquiry-based environment and, critically, their development as independent, adaptable decision-makers. This has only been possible through designing a range of questions and questioning strategies that go beyond traditional focus on *how* and *when* to perform certain skills. During planning I create a range of questions to elicit understanding of *where* and *why* such skills and adaptations are beneficial. This shift in practice ensures contextualised understanding and meaningful experience by developing cognitive reasoning and empowering triathletes to be active in *their own* learning process.

This has been necessarily challenging. Indeed, developing a repertoire of questioning skills has been time consuming. Improving the impact of questioning upon learning also required me to educate the participants in how to respond, discuss and listen within discussions. This necessitated considering my own behaviours carefully. For example, how I should

respond to and reflect on the answers children offered, to open up opportunities for purposeful debate to enhance divergent thinking capabilities. Critically though, throughout this, I have needed to remain attentive to maintaining balance in the sessions, appreciating that while questioning is valuable, there is also a place for constructive, specific, and individual feedback. Contra PPed literature, questioning has not been the ‘dominant’ method for improvement (Light, 2017), but rather as Cushion (2013:66) reflects a coach must ‘learn when to ask and when to tell.’ PPed, then, has not been a case of developing technical coaching skills – such as questioning – but focusing on learning and increasing the depth of this learning to create a socially-supportive environment. When aiming to sustain engagement, ensure meaningfulness, and support continuation in triathlon specifically, but other sports too, the creation of such environments is critical for nurturing the development of positive, supportive relationships and concomitantly meaningful learning.

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