

Independent Driver – Independent Learner

What is your aim in driver education? Well almost certainly it is to create a safe and independent driver, but can you take them to everywhere they need to go? Can you give them your years of experience? Can you take them on every journey under every condition they will face? The answer to this is obviously no. They will need to learn much of this from their own experience. Learning from experience is, for most people, natural but that does not mean the right thing is always learnt, in fact quite often the wrong thing is learnt from experience. To learn the right thing from our experience requires the right skills, we need to learn how to evaluate our own performance. And it is here where coaching really comes in. **Coaching is about helping someone to not only be an independent driver but also an independent learner.**

Hermes, a 3 year EU-funded Project, looking at how coaching could be used in driver education, defined coaching as:

Coaching is a learner centred approach that engages body, mind, and emotions to develop inner and outer awareness and responsibility through an equal relationship between the learner and coach. HERMES 2010

This is quite a complex statement so it is worth spending a few minutes considering it.

Learner Centred

Learner centred is a term which is often closely linked with the term coaching. Being learner centred is about placing the learner at the **centre** of the learning process. This is much more than simply structuring or developing a set of lessons for a specific learner's needs. **It is also about making the learner, as much as possible, their own teacher through the development of their own self-evaluation skills.**

This is achieved by helping the learner to identify and solve their own problems. Often when training a driver, we offer a solution to a problem the driver has not really considered, for example the MSM PSL routine is a solution but before this is offered do we always ensure the learner understands the problem? For example, in teaching junctions a coaching approach would be to initially ask 'what do you think are the dangers in turning left/right?' before entering a discussion about MSM PSL, in this way the driver is focusing on the problem, which in turn makes the solution much more easily understood and implemented.

Relationship

This is the most vital element of coaching. The relationship should be **one of equals or partnership** where the learner and coach work closely together. Of course this does not mean that the coach is not responsible for safety – they are. But it means that the coach accepts the learner brings with them previous knowledge and a view of what a good driver is. This may not be the right view but it is theirs and part of changing it is to acknowledge it exists and that it is important to the learner. The aim of the coach should be to help the learner to learn through the reduction and removal of the learning barriers. These barriers include previous knowledge (their personal view of what good driving is), which can lead to resistance, and anxiety.

Resistance

We start learning about traffic early on in our life, from an early stage we are watching traffic, being driven in cars and learning what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. By the time we come to learn to drive we may have a strongly fixed view of what a good driver is and how a good driver behaves. This view of driving will be internal to ourselves, is likely to be hidden from others who we feel may not share this view, and will influence the way we interpret the driving environment. This picture of a good driver will be based on many things including:

- How our parents drove and dealt with traffic as pedestrians
- Being a passenger in a vehicle
- Our own experience of being a pedestrian
- The view we believe is advocated by our peer group
- The influence of the media
- Personal beliefs about how to behave, both on the road and in our lives generally

This previous knowledge and experience means that everything we are told about driving will be filtered or interpreted against, and through, this personal picture of a good driver. This interpretation will mean that many of the messages delivered by an instructor will be seen as unimportant, re-constructed or even rejected.

Of course this is a very negative view of previous knowledge. It can also be very positive as not all the previous knowledge will be poor or in conflict with safe driving. The challenge for the instructor is to help the learner to understand how this previous knowledge can influence behaviour and their own strengths and weaknesses.

Anxiety

When we learn something there are a number of questions that interfere with our ability to learn. These questions tend to be negative and raise our levels of anxiety, the more anxious we become the more difficult it is for us to learn. Common types of questions include:

- Will I be successful?
- Does my instructor think I am stupid?
- Can I do this?
- Will learning this be worthwhile?
- Am I making progress?
- Will I crash the car?
- This is dangerous and I could die?
- Are my friends better at this than me?
- I never find learning things easy?
- If I drive like this how will my peers view me?

All these questions increase our concerns, distract us and build barriers to success. These questions can almost become so loud to us that we struggle to listen and focus on the information being delivered to us.

Non-judgemental

One of the critical elements of the coach / learner relationship is the need for the coach to be **non-judgemental**. Being non-judgemental is also vitally important in reducing the other bar to learning, resistance. As previously discussed this resistance comes from the conflict between the learner's internal picture of a good driver and the new information being presented. Building a strong non-

judgemental relationship with a learner will help the learner to explore these conflicts in a more relaxed and constructive environment, rather than the learner hiding them away out of view of the instructor. Being non-judgemental is very difficult because even praise is a form of judgement. The aim in coaching is to encourage the learner to judge themselves whenever possible.

Awareness and responsibility

Over the past decade education has placed greater importance on the development of the learner's ability to self-evaluate their own performance. **One of the main aims of coaching is to increase a learner's level of awareness and responsibility through the development of self-evaluation skills.** To be fully self-aware you not only need to be aware of your actions but aware of the physical and emotional states that will influence your decision making process. A driving coach therefore needs to not only encourage the learner to consider their observed behaviour but also to consider the physical and emotional aspects of the decision making process.

So what is coaching?

Coaching is a set of self-reflective approaches that aim not only to improve performance but also aim to develop an individual's ability to learn, to help them to become both an **independent driver** and an **independent learner**.

If you would like further information on this subject I have written a book on the subject which is increasingly being seen as one of the leading books on subject call 'Can Drivers Really Teach Themselves? A Practitioners Guide to Using Learner Centred and Coaching Approaches in Driver Education' to find out more about the book visit <http://www.edrivingsolutions.com/book.aspx>

Ian Edwards
MSc, Dip., ASM., DSA ADI.