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Making the familiar strange: one action that can transform your coaching

Having ventured into unfamiliar territory, Richard Bailey is convinced that an understanding of the impact of the new should be an essential part of the coach's approach to the learning process.

I have recently achieved an amazing thing, and I feel very proud of myself. In fact, as I walked away from the encounter with a broad grin on my face, I found myself doing that least English of all things: I punched the air!

So what have I done? I've opened a bank account.

I accept that you might not be too impressed, unless you are a close friend or family member who generally assume that even the most basic life skills are beyond me. But there is another element to the story: I achieved this feat in another country, and in another language; Germany and German, respectively.

Although I speak enough German to make my way around the place with only occasional humiliation and ridicule, I have found myself paralysed with anxiety at the thought of doing something that would ordinarily be an everyday task for most people. I feared that my how-much-are-the-Lederhosen language skills would not stretch to conversations about current accounts, variable interest rates and regulations about money laundering.

Anxiety of this sort has been a recurring experience since I moved to Berlin a couple of months ago, and every time I walk into a shop planning to buy some bread only to leave with 10 metres of garden hose and a box of Tampons, I find myself jolted into an awareness that I am a novice with regard to an endless list of activities.

My banking adventure brings to mind a comment from the Russian writer, Viktor Shklovsky: "Art makes the familiar strange so that it can be freshly perceived. To do this it presents its material in unexpected, even outlandish ways: the shock of the new."

That pretty much captures my outlook since moving to Germany: the familiar has become strange (and this is not including the genuinely strange aspects of German life!).

Zen Buddhists talk about 'beginner's mind' (Shoshin, 初心), which is characterised by an openness to new challenges and the absence of prejudice. For the beginner, even the most rudimentary task is thrilling or scary and new. For a bewildered foreigner, beginner's mind is not so much a spiritual goal as a lived experience.

The beginner's mind is the learner's mind, and it is very difficult to artificially generate, because it is so difficult to shut up the continual audio-commentary produced by previous experience. It is an usual teacher or coach who, when attending a course on a subject they know well, doesn't find the mind forcing the information provided through the filter of their own presuppositions and prejudices: I agree, therefore it is right; I disagree, so it is wrong; this is similar to how I teach; I wouldn't do it that way!

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This sort of dialogue seems to be the default way the human mind makes sense of the world, by seeing how new experiences fit in the pre-existing patterns that allow it to operate. But there are clearly consequences. The Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki wrote: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few."

If we genuinely wish to experience the beginner's mind, we need to learn how to suspend judgement and just experience things fresh and shiny new.

This creates something of a problem for the expert or experienced teacher or coach, those purpose and function are premised on the absence of beginner-ness. The novice approaches the expert precisely because the expert is more familiar with the activity than they are. But even the most traditional and didactic teacher or coach needs to react and adapt to some extent to the idiosyncratic needs and responses of the students in front of them. So the expert's strength can also easily become their weakness, as the challenges facing the novice become progressively more alien. The coach who thinks they understand the experiences of their most inexperienced students is almost certainly wrong!

How can a coach of twenty years possibly understand the fears and challenges of someone taking their very first lesson? Or deal with a lack of comprehension of the most basic ideas? And if they can't do this, how can they communicate in a way that truly connects with the novice?

After years of trying and failing, I have concluded that it is probably impossible to do this through a feat of imagination. I cannot forget what I have learned though years of practice, and I cannot shed the sense of familiarity and expertise that accompanies it.

So I am left with just one alternative: to become a beginner again. As far as I can tell, the only way a coach can understand the beginner's mind is to become a beginner again. Learning something that is new-alien, unfamiliar-disorientating, and exciting-nerve-wracking offers an unparalleled first-hand appreciation of the challenges that the students' experience everyday, and of which most coaches are more-or-less unaware.

Most coaches and teachers would accept, I think, the need to attend courses related to their sport or subject. Continued professional development is self-evidently necessary in order to keep in touch with new ideas and extend skill-sets. But I do not think any of this is as important as learning something completely new.

Stepping outside of the comfort zone means stepping into an area that is unfamiliar and uncertain, and in which possibilities are still endless. Beginner's mind cannot be imagined; it can only be lived.

Richard Bailey is a university professor, writer and public speaker.

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