

Great Coaching Podcast Transcript

- Learning -

(Series 1 Episode 5)

Voices of the Podcast

Intro / Outro Theme: Craig Blain, UK Coaching

Narrator: Kelly Brown, UK Coaching

Guest: Mark Scott, UK Coaching

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Guest: Mark Scott

We need to start feeling a little bit more comfortable with being uncomfortable. We know that stepping into that learning zone will increase the effectiveness of our learning, and we know that is going to be a little bit difficult, so really an awareness of this concept of 'desirable difficulty' is a good one for us. My name is Mark Scott, Development Lead Officer for Modern Learning at UK Coaching.

Intro Theme:

This is the great coaching podcast. A series dedicated to exploring the Great Coaching Principles from UK Coaching. Episode 5, Learning.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

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Learning is a messy business, we have an illusion that durable learning happens when things are easy and that's not always true. By applying techniques like retrieval of learning overtime, stretching ourselves beyond our comfort zone and embracing help from more knowledgeable others we can achieve more durable learning that lasts overtime. Mark kicks off by sharing his insight into how learning isn't always as straight forward as we may think, and we're not always learning by taking the easy route.

Guest: Mark Scott

Learning is perceived to be easy and a linear process that happens, however there are studies and research etc that show that that's actually not the case. There is an illusion effect that good learning happens when it is easy, basically when we are able to do it. When we achieve some success that gives us the feeling that we are learning. However, if something like that is too easy, or it feels too easy for us, then we are not really getting any stretch and therefore any deep and real meaningful learning. There is a perception around what learning is, what it looks like and probably how learning feels, which is actually contradictory to a lot

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of the research around how we learn best – so that's not saying there is no learning happening in those situations I have just described - but a lot of the research suggests that wouldn't be the most effective way that we would learn.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

For learning to have longevity and be more durable we need to stretch ourselves and fire up the neuron connections in the brain. Let's here from Mark why this is the case.

Guest: Mark Scott

We're getting a lot of strides forwards in neuro-science etc, so we're learning more and more about how the brain works and how neurons connect. We know that the brain has many, many neurons that interconnect in order for us to learn. That uses different parts of the brain that need to connect, so if we take that as an example, a metaphor really, that in order to make those many connections, it is not going to be a quick and simple and easy process. Those connections are going to need to be worked out, and it's going to be a little bit more messy to

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connect the dots and bring that together as learning that occurs over a period of time. That it is sustainable, it is durable, that it lasts.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

Common thinking is that easy learning is better. But it appears, the more effort we put into learning the better. Working within the desirable difficulty ultimately stretches and challenges us in a positive way.

Techniques such as retrieval practice of the things we have learned previously really help us to embed life long learning. So, I begin to wonder, what is the 'desirable difficulty' and what is so desirable about it?

Guest: Mark Scott

The term 'stretch' and 'challenge' they are probably words that are thrown around in education a lot, as well as coaching and other areas of learning. The 'stretch and challenge' piece for me comes around the effort that is required. So again, we are talking about whether something feels easy or feels a bit more difficult. So, the stretch and challenge might feel that we get frustrated, we get stuck in some places. The effort

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then, that is required in order to work things out, the effort that comes from doing something new or building on that learning or bringing it to mind months afterwards as another example, putting the effort in to retrieve that information is actually the bit that is really good for us to learn. Robert Bjork and colleagues found that some of those short term gains from 'easy learning', they don't last. When there is more 'desirable difficulty', that might be in conditions where learning is spaced out over a period of time – weeks, or days, or months – that produces some of those 'desirable difficulties'. It should be in reach for us, but it is actually quite difficult. It is not just that 'difficult' things are good for learning, the 'desirable' bit is an important word within this. The thing that we want to learn needs to be within reach, there may well be things that are currently out of reach for us to learn. The interesting thing about this stuff as well, when people have learned through both of those methods, the desirable difficulty creates more long term gains, i.e. when tested at a later date on a retention test – some weeks or months down the line – they performed better. The real interesting thing I think, even those that did that test, when asked afterwards "which method was the best?" they picked the easy method. So, it's back to that illusion affect, they think

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that they did learn better with the easy learning, but in actual fact it is shown that performance was better with the more difficult learning.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

Mark gives us some insight into how he has experienced the perception of an illusion effect, that easy learning equals good learning within a coaching session.

Guest: Mark Scott

So, an example of desirable difficulty and messy learning that I see; so, in my work as a tutor, I see many coaches who don't want to try new things, so they will feel safe. I see many coaches, who basically repeat the same old stuff. And I think a bit part of that might be perceptions from others, so perceptions from parents or participants as well. That they have an idea of what good learning in a coaching session might look like for example. So, some of the things that we know around what does make good learning in a coaching session, might not be the same ideas that parents or participants have. So, I think some coaches - particularly those less experienced – really struggle with that and

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struggle with trying new things because they feel some other people may have a negative perception of that.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

The term 'generation effect' can be used to describe the layering of learning that happens over time making the foundations of learning much more concrete. Ultimately, it is a combination of being comfortable with being uncomfortable in order to stretch and challenge ourselves whilst revisiting learning frequently overtime in different ways. Let's hear more.

Guest: Mark Scott

The generation effect - when we are talking about 'generation' we're talking about, "can you generate things?", "Can you generate new ideas?" – if I as a coach, when I am learning things, if I can generate new things, some new answers, come up with solutions to my own problems, or problems that are going on, they are thing that would lead to that deeper more durable learning that we've been talking about. It's a bit more difficult than, as an example, someone just telling me things.

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But this only comes, the generation effect only kicks in if I am capable of answering that question. So, it's not just throwing things out there for people to come up with their own ideas. There needs to be some sort of scaffolding going on from the people who are doing the teaching, if you like, to get the coaches being able to come up with those ideas themselves. We need to start feeling a little bit more comfortable with being uncomfortable. We know that stepping into that learning zone will increase the effectiveness of our learning, and we know that is going to be a little bit difficult, so really an awareness of this concept of desirable difficulty is a good one for us.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

Mark describes how we can often feel a bit stuck when taking a challenging route through learning, and he refers to this as being in the 'learning pit'.

Guest: Mark Scott

There is a concept called a 'learning pit' and it often feels like going down into a pit, and that is where the learning pit comes from. So, it

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might be that there is an easy option, I can take an easy option to go over the pit, or around it. But sometimes I think we need to choose to go down the pit, and that might be a conscious decision, but sometimes it might not be, sometimes we might just end up down there through the problems we are trying to solve. But, I think we need to remember that this can be a good thing. So again, as long as things are kind of within reach or we have some support and help we can get out of that pit.

There is a bit of a resilience piece around this, kind of a motivation that we need to have a mindset really that we are going to embrace that challenge. I am sure we have all had these situations - I've had plenty of them – where you just think, “Oh, I can't do this”, “I don't have a clue what is going on here”, we've got ourselves into the situation where we're thinking “I'm never going to be able to work this out”, that's kind of when you are in 'the pit'.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

If you have taken the time to listen to the other podcasts in this series, you may recognise some of the sentiments that Mark is talking about within the other Great Coaching Principles, if you would like to listen to

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the other episodes of the Great Coaching Podcast, search the UK Coaching website at ukcoaching.org.

Being in the learning pit is a positive sign that we are stretching ourselves and that we are in the zone of desirable difficulty, but I wonder, how do we work through challenges to get out of the pit? Mark begins to explain how.

Guest: Mark Scott

It's just around trying to have a little bit of a mindset of "how am I actually going to work this out myself?! I know this is going to be good for me, I know that this is going to help my learning. Can I work it out?" And there might be various ways of doing that, and one of the main ways that we would get out of that is through help. One of the problems for me – linking to the learning pit – is that quite often we are asking new coaches to start coaching with a games based approach. So, take football as an example, if that's an 11-a-side game, we're expecting a coach to put on an 11-a-side game, that's 22 players running around on a big massive pitch and we're expecting them to do some coaching there. Then that is

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quite a difficult thing for them to be able to do. We're almost throwing them down into a pit within that situation. So, learning to play through games is great for the decision making, and strategy, and all that kind of thing, and being able to make up their own mind and decisions, but actually that might be quite a difficult situation for coaches to be able to do. Coaches then need to embrace that challenge and embrace that situation.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

Ultimately 'we' don't always need to have the answers. We should embrace the network of others out there that can help us overcome our learning challenge. This may be people we know, or people we are yet to discover. The person who helps may also be a different person, depending upon the different learning challenges you may face. Let's hear some final key thoughts about this 'thing' called learning.

Guest: Mark Scott

The main way that we would get out of that pit would be through help in some shape or form. So, "can I seek out people who have the skill set,

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the experience or the knowledge who can actually help?” This is really key for any coach who wants to learn - that social side of things – your network you have got, and can you develop more of a network? If we think of apprenticeships over the years, of people who have learned from their ‘master’ if you like, in various fields, that social side of learning is really important. Asking, “Can I find someone with a higher skill set than me within this particular challenge that I am going through at the moment, that will help get me out of the current problem I am facing and give me some support, in the right way in that they will know how to help me, how much to help and how much to let me work it out myself.”

Getting some of the myths busted a little bit, coaches do have a responsibility on themselves as well to get out there and get stuck in a little bit more. Some of the words we’ve used today, “the difficulty”, “effortful”, there might be “frustration”, even “failure”, the “resilience” facing the challenges and getting out of the pit itself. They are all associated with difficulty really and this thing called “Learning” isn’t actually an easy process, and it’s not supposed to be. Thinking around, if you can just slow things down, and actually really take some time to consider and get stuck into some things that are going to provoke,

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create thought, challenge me in terms of “how can I adopt this challenge?” and get some real good solutions to my problems. Struggling through it sometimes is where some of the best learning happens.

Narrator: Kelly Brown

The next time you are feeling challenged when learning, see this as a positive challenge. Seek support from more knowledgeable others and get comfortable with being uncomfortable, because this is where the true magic of learning really happens.

Outro Theme:

This has been the Great Coaching Podcast from UK Coaching. If you would like to find more episodes on the great coaching principles, search for the Great Coaching Podcast on the UK Coaching website ukcoaching.org.