

Teaching to Roll, or Rolling to Teach? Minimizing Stress in Paddling Classes

Posted on December 12, 2011 by Rusty Cooper



Photo courtesy Larry Ausley

One of the common debates across the spectrum of kayak instruction is: What is important? Teaching participants the roll first, second, or completely separately? Is there even time for teaching rolling in introductory classes?

While each paddling school or instructor chooses their own sequence and what non-essential instructional items to include based upon their own business model, mission or participant demographics, there are a few items important to be mindful of when planning an instructional progression for your class and how some non-essential items can influence them.

Participant Safety

When we discuss safety, so often in paddlesports we focus on properly setting up for that rapid with a nasty strainer or sieve, checking the weather to ensure proper outfitting or making sure that hazards and perils of our venue are mitigated. These things are extremely important to keep in mind, but for the new instructor, or even those of us that have been doing it a while, sometimes we can forget another imperative aspect of safety: emotional risk.

Participants' emotional safety is something that is much more difficult to quantify, but possibly as important as their physical safety. If a participant's perception of risk level is higher than the real level or they have irrational fears of being trapped or are even concerned with what other students might think, then their ability to learn in the first place may be inhibited. This is where learning the roll and devoting more time to wet exits, t-rescues and hand-of-god can help minimize the learner's fears and facilitate a positive learning environment.

The Journal of Paddlesport Education



I have worked in multiple paddling school venues and teaching environments: everything from kids camps to recreational boating to advanced whitewater instruction.

One “AHA!” moment of kayak instruction has, time and again presented itself; People feel safer when more time is devoted to these topics from the beginning. This time spent translates into confidence and positive outlook of the learner which translates to better participant attention and retention of the material presented.

Participant Enthusiasm

One of our long term goals as instructors is to promote paddlesports and get people involved in the sport. We have all had those students who “just wanted to try it” who subsequently got hooked on the sport. Some of us have had those who “just want to try it” and never touch the water again. We all strive for our participants to walk away with a positive experience. We want them to at very least encourage others to try it and at best, become the next Dane Jackson or Nikki Kelly (or insert your personal kayaking hero here). This is another way that devoting that initial time to the t-rescues, hand-of-god, and the roll can help us achieve our goals.

When participants are afforded the time and attention in these areas they become more confident and less fearful of their moving water experiences. The resulting increase in participant confidence leads to reduced physiological and psychological tension, leading to successful experiences on the river, and finally leading to a more positive overall experience. A positive overall experience is most times the deciding factor for a person to make kayaking a life-long pursuit.

Conclusion

This moment of clarity came to me one day when kayaking with my wife (then girlfriend). We were out for a day of what I expected to be a fun day on the wonderful Nantahala River. Unfortunately, I took her word that she knew how to roll a kayak and I had seen her wet exit, maybe once. Instead of ensuring that we spent some time making sure that she was comfortable in the kayak, we just went straight to the put-in and set off. As we paddled through Patton’s Run and down farther, I realized that something was horribly wrong. I eddied out and waved my wife over, discovering that she was completely gripped. Not a single word I had said at the beginning of the trip had been heard and half way down the river, she was in survival mode. We took some time to get out of our boats, relax and reflect upon what had happened. After some time debriefing the experience, we finished the run and she didn’t have to roll or wet exit. I haven’t been able to coax her back into a kayak yet, but there is always tomorrow.

Naturally, each student is different with their individual needs regarding time and direct attention. Each instructor and/or paddling school must thoughtfully weigh the positive and negative aspects of devoting greater amounts of time to these parts of kayak instruction. Hopefully, though, we can all have a good discussion based upon our experiences to continually discover new methods or old progressions that do help as instructors to facilitate the best experience possible.

The Journal of Paddlesport Education



This article is not intended to be prescriptive in nature regarding the kayak roll or other aspects of kayak instruction. Each instructor must weigh their own experiences, level of training, and participant needs. All instructors should abide by ACA standards and policies.

Rusty Cooper, M. Ed. is an ACA Level 4 River Kayak Instructor Trainer, Level 5 River Kayak Instructor and Outdoor Pursuits Coordinator with Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

Teaching to Roll, or Rolling to Teach? Minimizing Stress in Paddling Classes by Rusty Cooper is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.