

FRAMING and PRIMING

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Through experience we are able to predict with reasonable certainty the problematic areas we are most likely to encounter during lessons long before they happen. Narrow control ranges, excess force, over rotation, body tension for example.

Fishing, for many anglers, is more than just casting motion or a catch, kill, eat instinct. There is often a high personal and emotional investment in being good at it. Our clients commonly arrive with what they believe is a catalogue of casting faults and, even for the most open-minded client approaching a lesson, they know that their performance is likely to be critically appraised.

Any CI assessment candidate will have experienced critical appraisal, your self-esteem is under threat, the pressure increases and performance levels drop. When a client arrives for a first lesson, the anticipation of this kind of low-level stress can generate a faint suspicion that they may be about to undergo the casting equivalent of a dental appointment. Whilst this is plainly irrational and probably not the sort of level of concern that you may have if confronted by a charging bull moose, or discover a rip in your paraglider wing when leaping off an alp, it is still unsettling.

In this delicate condition, criticism, however constructive and however much it may have been sought out, is not always well-received. This unease is enough to provoke a mildly defensive psychological posture which, whilst probably barely observable to you the instructor, is often sufficient to produce a surprising resistance to change in your client. Why? Because your client, whether they are aware of it or not, has already begun to employ subconscious coping mechanisms to tune out any esteem-damaging, critical noise..."LA, LA, LA...quick...distract...think about weird stuff".

Under relatively mild pressure, we tend to stick to tried and trusted routines, protected by familiarity, cocooned and safe. Weirdly, we may do this and yet believe we have done something radically different, when all that has really occurred is that a light shot of stressy adrenaline has made the same thing happen but with some extra oomph. When tension manifests itself physically in over grip, high body rigidity and too much wallop, something must be done.

We know that almost everyone responds better if there is a lean towards a positive focus rather than a negative focus. This alone should guide your lesson away from fault identification and correction because it necessarily involves that critical appraisal.

Before the roar is raised in defence of the Six Steps, this does not mean that the system is any less useful as a mechanism for identifying where you may concentrate your efforts or order your work. Simply that your client doesn't need to know the horrors you have seen. In fact the six steps is just as valuable in identifying what a client does right as it is for identifying what a client does wrong. As a result, it is a vital mechanism for placing your client on the learning continuum.

If we take this assessment of prior learning of a client as a base we can use it to build and expand rather than view it as collection of errors requiring a remedy.

By doing this we are using a technique using "Framing".

"Framing" is when the behaviours we choose to employ are influenced by the way in which information is presented to us. It is used as a fundamental motivational aid by professional coaches across many sports and is much beloved by marketing and advertising execs to make us more likely to buy their products. It is only words of course, but there is a subtle motivational difference between telling someone that you are going to "fix your inappropriate application of force" or "help expand control over your casting stroke". These motivational effects compound and frame a lesson in the students mind as mechanism for development rather than correction.

In this respect an instructor's preamble is more than just about investigating experience and expectations or setting objectives. This early introductory period is an opportunity to prepare the ground and make our proposals for change a little more persuasive and easier for a caster to execute later in the lesson.

Closely related to Framing is "Priming".

"The term priming is used to describe the influence a stimulus has on subsequent performance...."

There is a great deal of psychobabble surrounding this concept but there is more than sufficient research, and evidence, to show how effective it can be when it is properly directed. Priming with words and numbers, creating associative links, anchoring, is common in sales negotiations and various nefarious socio-economic and political contexts.

It works to everyone's advantage in skills instruction, too. If we know that we want to achieve relaxed, smooth, low-force casting we can use words and mental images throughout a lesson associated with these issues.

Similarly, we are also able to identify, and therefore avoid, words that have the opposite effect. Some of the terms we use on a regular basis, "load" or "acceleration" for example are frequently associated with "more force", or "faster", things which we may want to discourage rather than promote. It is fascinating and revelatory to attempt to conduct a lesson without them.

Less obvious perhaps is priming with sensory cues. This is a mechanism that stimulates desirable behaviours *before* we have to directly address undesirable ones later in the programme. If we get this right, it reduces the chances that we may have to later resort to instruction with an internal focus to remedy a particular problem. We achieve this by using a cue which establishes a sensory benchmark for future reference *before* a caster works rod in hand.

A sensory reference here is critical. Some techniques involve asking a caster to imagine something similar to whatever it is we are trying to achieve. Analogies are a type of external cue in their own right, "Imagine holding a small bird" to reduce over-grip for example, or, "imagine running your rod along a shelf" to encourage a long casting stroke or a straighter hand path. Even though they have an external focus, in this form, they are abstract and distant with no sensory feedback.

Mundane cues that generate an actual sensory response, "please hold this tomato" , "please pass me the water glass", are more effective in pre-establishing control parameters because they are real and recent. By doing this, you already have your caster *doing* something they can use to learn. Once created they can be used as analogy later in the lesson. As a general rule of thumb, if you have an option of real over imaginary, go real. This is because, while your caster may never be quite sure whether they have crushed the life

out of an imaginary chaffinch, they'll definitely know if they've got an actual fistful of squished tomato.

This is not to say that remote analogies don't work, unless you have a ready supply of tomatoes, a show demo without an imaginative and entertaining analogy isn't going to be much good. It adds colour in one-to-one instruction too; I love them, and they too can be a form of priming with words.

Whether priming or directly cueing, we can exploit autonomic skills that a caster can already do, motions that are part of their prior knowledge. These motions may be similar or even the same as those needed for learning, or improving, a casting cycle and there's no point wasting time trying to teach someone to do something they already do in their normal daily lives.

For wrist management, for example, we can be sure that, if asked, a caster will pass a full coffee cup or water bottle to you with complete control over their wrist. This kind of control is more than adequate for the management of a fly rod. Despite this, once rod is in hand, their wrist will be moved as if they were waving their kids off on the Titanic because that is what they "believe" they must do to make it work.

Without any prior priming, focus on the wrist from an instructor will usually make matters worse. You've delicately pointed out that they don't want to do it ... but they're doing it anyway. Why ? because desirable behaviour and entrenched belief are in conflict. Now the caster enters a state of dissonance in an explicit learning process, internal focus increases, tension rises, small imaginary birds die, the caster can think only of wrists and everything grinds to a halt.

Priming with your cup or bottle demonstrates, in advance, that control is possible. You have also set a control cue. During a casting cycle you can now use analogy to your advantage by back referencing the recent priming cue, "when you cast, move it like the cup" or "hold it like the tomato".

These techniques create real sensory reference points, an influential baseline for the meat and potatoes of our lesson with rod in hand and I wouldn't be without them for a minute.

Priming can be used for more than just sensory benchmarking. It can be both amusing and intriguing. It encourages early engagement and acts as an icebreaker for nervous or tense students.

There is vastly more to it than that as we shall see in other articles, but, although selective use of priming is not a guarantee of instructional success, it definitely raises the probability of it.

There is another emotional benefit arising from the smell and warmth of a coffee cup too. You can google that up for yourself ... or just guess.