

The sea kayaker's trident

what experience counts?
what qualification means more?
who should coach others to paddle?



I often meet paddlers in a club or centre setting who are restricted from running worthwhile coaching sessions, being limited in their input to courses or chastised for offering their wealth of experience to others on the basis of a lack of a relevant BCU qualification. Does the fact that their endorsement to coach relates to 'experience of X number of years' mean any less than someone who has spent a few days learning the black art of coaching paddlesport?

Experience is a qualification recognised by many, but often rejected by the few that do not themselves have the knowledge or skills to make informed judgements on the expertise of others. Who is it that actually restricts the unqualified coach being given the job of assisting less experienced paddlers? Is it the experienced coach, experienced outdoor centre manager or experienced local authority official, no I think not, those that restrict activity in our

clubs, schools and outdoor centres are those coaches, managers and officials with little knowledge of the activity and the people involved, who may have folded to a stereotyped interpretation of the perceived risk of these activities. Some authorities use so called experts with suitably narrow views to validate their own naive philosophies in order to control activities for what they probably believe to be good reasons; but how good can the reasons be if they stop people both young and old from enjoying the benefits of our sport? It is also, sadly, not only a lack of experience that restricts activity but sometimes a lack of flexibility to embrace new ideas and concepts, a failure to be in possession of an open mind.

Some of the best coaches I have been lucky enough to observe are the ones with no or few formal qualifications working in a club environment, session after coaching session, who have been given a free

reign by an experienced person who's judgement is in itself based on wider knowledge and many years of paddling; often these are the clubs that succeed, the ones with new members pouring in, the ones with people who want to get out and do things, the ones with paddlers who want to gain experience, who are encouraged to pass on their knowledge regardless of their accrued pieces of paper.

I would without doubt attribute the early development of a great deal of my skills and knowledge to a few 'seasoned' individuals in my past who have valued experience above ticks. While I wouldn't argue to negate the importance of qualifications and awards, I think we could all do with considering how much value they have without the appropriate experience to back them up and looking at the logic of ignoring someone's skills purely on the basis of a lack of a certificate.

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Owen Burson has taken part in and led expeditions worldwide and runs Isle of Wight Sea Kayaking; IWSK run sea kayak, white water and open canoe courses and expeditions for novice to advanced paddlers and sell equipment from all the leading manufacturers.
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