

Reengaging Athletes During Learning

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This study examines the concentration and attention span of young athletes and players, with a particular focus on engagement during meetings. It delves into the generational gap between young athletes and coaches and how technological advancements are shaping attitudes, concentration, and stimulation. It looks at how teachers are addressing the issue in classrooms and how coaches can adapt to teachers' reengagement strategies to suit their young athletes' learning needs. It draws on studies and research from regarded and respected educators as well as marketers who are dealing with the problem of attention spans during television commercials. Finally, it provides examples of how professional sporting organizations are structuring meetings to support athletes' attention spans and learning needs.

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The next generation is starting to take prominence across the sporting landscape and akin to previous generational shifts, and this group is culturally unique. They have different needs, beliefs, and understandings to their predecessors. They think differently and are growing up in a different world. They are entering a sporting arena that is more business and entertainment-oriented, alongside their coaches who are facing the challenge of understanding and meeting their needs. This generation is widely known as the next group of millennials.

Millennials are classified as "those born in or after 1982" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 4). The obvious and most prominent divide between young millennials and previous generations is the thirst and demand for technology and stimulation. For millennials, having the world constantly at their fingertips is a way of life. They have been surrounded by technology for their entire lives and were never part of the pre-Internet days. The rapid growth and accessibility in mobile phone technology typifies this where information, news, social media, music, videos, e-mail, games, and weather updates are available anytime and anywhere. The benefits are palpable but there are unintended consequences, such as concentration and attention spans.

Millennial's beliefs and experiences surrounding stimulation, concentration, and attention are often vastly different when compared with other generations. A prime example is watching television. The days of sitting through advertisements waiting for the show to return are disappearing and have been for some time. For example, Teixeira found in the early 1990s, 97% of television advertisements were watched at high attention levels, while that dropped to 20% by 2012. Teixeira attributes the significant changes to the expansion of remote controls and the ability to freely change channels, the invention of DVD devices or "just mentally tuning out by the act of multitasking" (Teixeira, 2014, p. 5).

Fast forward to today and the development of technology, particularly mobile phones, means the options are plentiful. A common replacement for those few minutes of watching television advertisements is phone surfing. Once the advertisements

commence viewers' attention quickly shifts from the television to their phone and reengagement in the television program is often only completed once the advertisements are finalized. Even this is quickly being replaced with subscription, online and streaming services with minimal to no advertisements at all. Although this habit is not confined to millennials, the difference is that young millennials have never experienced it by any other way. So how does this affect sports coaching?

The recent study by Gould, Nalepa, and Mignano (2019) is a valuable summary of this topic. Youth tennis coaches reported an "overwhelming" belief that emerging players exhibit shorter attention spans compared with previous generations. Coaches reported that young players found it challenging to focus for long periods and were easily distracted during learning. Furthermore, coaches openly expressed their struggles in capturing athlete attention for "more than a few minutes" (p. 9).

This remainder of the current study will focus on the evolution of reengagement techniques and coaches can use these to assist athlete learning.

Reengagement Techniques

Reengagement techniques are short activities or actions that are designed to refocus and reengage learners. They can be preplanned or implemented ad hoc, and the reengagement duration depends on how long it takes to get learners back on track.

Teachers around the world have developed a wide array of strategies to engage and reengage millennials. There is explicit teaching where teachers directly show and/or explain exactly what to do and how to do it. They have incorporated learning intentions in their programs, which means they inform students the lesson objective prior to teaching. Teachers also differentiate learning by layering lessons so it meets the individual needs of students at different levels and they utilize exemplars to clearly show students what they should be aspiring to. Teachers also use mnemonics as learning aids and assimilate different methods, such as gradual release models, jigsaw techniques, and convergent or divergent learning.

Like teachers, quality coaches are constantly developing methods through various formats to prime athletes for learning.

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Just like preparing them to play and train, coaches understand the importance of preparing athletes to learn and grow in meeting rooms. International sports coach, Goldsmith (n.d.), details the importance of engaging players during meetings in his article *Running Better Meetings in Football: Too Long, Too Much, Too Similar*. He outlines players' wants and likes during meetings such as a variety of presentation tools, a reduction in time, and a preference for the player involvement. Goldsmith identifies possible pitfalls for coaches, such as talking too long, providing too much information, and the monotony of meeting structures and venues. Goldsmith also touches on the detrimental effects of these pitfalls have on player learning.

Former Adelaide Football Club senior coach, Neil Craig, took on numerous coaching mentor roles in the Australian Football League postcoaching including general manager of performance at the Essendon Football Club and director of coaching at the Carlton Football Club, and is currently a coaching consultant for the English rugby union national side. Craig puts tremendous value on coaches' abilities to engage and teach athletes. However, in his opinion, sustaining athlete engagement is a gap for many professional coaches (N. Craig, personal communication, November 10, 2016).

One example of reengaging young athletes during meetings is the insertion of "technology breaks." For example Butler (2015), former director of player development with the Chicago Bears of the National Football League in the United States, oversaw the introduction of "technology breaks." These are short intermissions where after 40 min the meeting is paused and athletes are allowed to check-in with their mobile devices to check social media, catch up on the latest videos, or play a quick game. "Technology breaks" are designed to reduce the amount of information athletes receive at one time and work with their attention spans instead of against them. Once athletes have had their "technology break," the meeting recommences.

With the next group of elite sporting millennials transitioning from classrooms to locker rooms, keeping them engaged in meetings and optimizing learning is imperative. To assist coaches adapting to their young and future athletes' learning needs, six reengagement techniques that successful teachers use to reconnect with learners once their minds start wandering are shared.

Put on a Show

Teachers are not only educators but also part-time performers, because sometimes they need to capture and recapture their unwilling audience. Examples of teachers employing a bit of theatre are using expression when reading, putting on an accent when teaching geography, or drawing diagrams for further explanations. Individual teachers have specific strengths in this area, while some have no performing talent at all. Being extremely talented or untalented is equally effective when engaging with students, because they are engrossed by majestic displays or train wrecks.

Coaches can break the monotony and at times tediousness for athletes by inserting a joke, anecdote, quote, video, puzzle, impersonation, song lyrics, pop quiz, prop, demonstration, or diagram into meetings. The most effective methods are either delivered extremely well or poorly and the intention is reengaging learners, not protecting the coach's pride. For example, a timely joke about an unforeseen injury, a bellowing quote from Winston Churchill, or a distinctive prop representing field position can reengage an audience. Some sporting organizations have gone a step further and are employing acting coaches to improve coaches' deliverance skills.

Play to Their Desires

The opportunity to escape reality and dream about the highly improbable possibilities is another technique that teachers use when they feel students' attention starting to drift. Teachers pose a topical yet tantalizing question and give students open air to bask in their thoughts. For example, "What would you do if you won a million dollars?" The simple question can change the atmosphere and get students quickly reengaged. Once the group is completely reengaged teachers cease proceedings, because they are now rehooked and primed to learn again. Teachers then redirect students by reintegrating the teaching topic (e.g., clarifying the chances of winning the lotto before continuing with the math lesson).

Coaches can engage athletes by reinforcing a common focus with a different approach. For example, an American football coach wants to deliver a strong message regarding tackling. The core of the message remains the same; however, a slight tweak in deliverance can stimulate players. The coach poses the question, "If you could tackle anyone in the world who would it be?" Watch imaginations run free, and the bevy of interesting answers informs the coach that they are reengaged.

Speak Their Language

Pop culture and the English language are forever evolving, and the generational gap between students and teachers is sometimes most prevalent when modern day words or fads are being explored. The technological age contributes to this divide with students' and teachers' online preferences are often very different. Teachers use this to reengage learners by occasionally dabbling in the modern vernacular or current pop culture. They might uncharacteristically use words like "totes" or "amazebonk" or even branch into the Kardashians to regather their young audience. The more uncharacteristic it is, the more effective it is, and the pinnacle is if the teacher uses it incorrectly because it reinforces student bias that teachers are no longer "cool" or "hip."

If needed, coaches can find an external source like a niece or nephew to gauge the modern lingo or pop culture. This can sit in the coach's trick bag and appear during the opportune time such as meetings or presentations.

The Stuck Phonograph Needle

This strategy is used when the teacher senses learners' attention drifting. The teacher asks a student a straightforward question related to the topic, such as "What planets are either side of Earth?" The teacher then asks another student the exact same question. The teacher continues asking the exact same question and students keep replaying the exact same answer. Students quickly become perplexed about the motives. Their assumptions are irrelevant, because they are reengaging due to the unexpectedness. Once the teacher is convinced the group's attention has recommenced they then throw in a random question (e.g., "What is the eleventh letter in the alphabet?") just to make sure they are paying attention. This technique is also used when teachers are emphasizing points (e.g., "How many degrees in a triangle How many degrees in a triangle? How many degrees in a triangle? Name me a prime number. How many degrees in a triangle?").

Coaches can repeat the same question throughout a session to reengage athletes or emphasize an important message. Undesired signals such as restless, uncertainty, or questioning may occur; however, when implementing this technique they are positive signs

as they generally indicate athlete reengagement. For example, a tennis coach believes that the forthcoming opponent is weaker on the backhand and plans to target it: “Where are you going to hit it? Where are you going to hit it? Where are you going to hit it? What’s your view on drop shots? Where are you going to hit it?”

Act Unintelligent

Teachers can check student engagement by deliberately giving incorrect answers, pretending that they do not know or feeding students wrong information. When a student corrects the mistake, the teacher halts the teaching process to deal with the discrepancy. The unexpected break draws the class in and the teacher can pronounce the issue if they feel reengagement is not complete by ferociously defending their “accidental” error.

If coaches feel their athletes are losing concentrations they can make an obvious mistake such as the wrong score, captain, opposition, player, or venue. The aim is an athlete interrupts proceedings to query or correct the coach. If no one addresses the mistake the coach can continue promoting the error until someone corrects it. This short unexpected break changes the repetitiveness and aims to recapture a drifting audience. Some defiance or disbelief from the coach will ensure those that were not completely reengaged now.

Make an Analogy

Comparing classroom teaching with real-life situations makes the content purposeful, relatable, interesting, and/or entertaining. Forrest Gump famously shared that “Life was like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get” (Finerman, Tisch, Starkey, & Zemeckis, 1994). How about “Spelling is like building a house, you start with the foundation before moving to the frame and the finishing touches” or “Writing an absorbing persuasive text is just like shopping, you want to smack the reader in the face with one eye-catching piece after another.”

Comparing items such as players, set plays, opponents, in-play scenarios, or venues with curious nonsporting situations promotes reengagement. Interesting, humorous, divisive, or odd connections are often the most engaging. For example, a cricket coach wants their bowlers to be patient and can spread this message by comparing them with Komodo dragons. Even though Komodo dragons are viewed as dangerous and aggressive, they are actually patient beasts, waiting in position for long periods of time. Once the unsuspecting prey reaches the danger zone, the Komodo dragon pounces and uses its strong body and sharp teeth to bring them down. The cricket coach can relate this to their bowlers by enforcing a plan of bowling patiently, consistently pitching the ball in the right areas for longer periods, and drawing the batters into making mistakes.

Final Thoughts

The topic of reengaging learners, particularly young millennials, is the latest example of the crossover between teaching and coaching (Mason, 2016). Mason outlines the important coaching skills and traits and emphasizes that “Coaches must also be competent teachers, and there are some important lessons they can learn from classroom teachers to get the best performance from their athletes” (p. 1). Within the study, Mason encapsulates his position of coaches adapting successful classroom practices through an example of spacing skill training over numerous practice sessions instead of one large session.

Mason labels the spaced practice approach as distributed practice and coaching in large practice blocks as massed practice. The spaced practice underpins the successful classroom approach of spaced learning, where teachers teach the content in shorter bursts over of an extended period of time rather than impressing large amounts of information at a time. For example, the same amount of information could be taught over three-spaced 40-min periods instead of a 2-hr session. Research shows there is a significant increase in performance when using spaced practice as opposed to massed practice (Donovan & Radosevich, 1999). Fuller (2012, p. 2) labels spaced or distributed practice as “spaced repetition.” Fuller (2012) supports the benefits of spaced learning by referencing a 2007 study that found students who received a spaced learning approach nearly doubled their retention rate compared with students who did not.

The benefits of spaced learning compared with massed learning are a prime example of how coaches can adapt a successful classroom teaching approach to the coaching world. One such sporting organization that is already implementing teacher designed reengagement techniques into team meetings is the English rugby union national side. An example of this is during their opposition meetings. Coaches create jigsaw puzzles of key opposition players and when the time comes to discuss each opponent, they slowly reveal one piece at a time. Players battle each other to guess the opponent which they are now focusing on. The game sparks engagement and players’ body language lifts. Banter and laughter quickly joins the fray and the competition is on to see who will guess the key opposition player first. Once the opponent has been correctly identified, the winner momentarily revels in victory and the rest of the group begrudgingly concede defeat. The simple act of turning a picture into a puzzle is a case of supporting players’ learning by getting the competitive juices flowing and the audience reengaged (N. Craig, personal communication, January 17, 2019).

Strategies such as Put on a Show, Play to their Desires, Speak their Language, The Stuck Phonograph Needle, Act Unintelligent, and Make an Analogy Support Player Learning. By upskilling themselves on reengagement techniques, coaches can make it part of their repertoire to use when athletes’ concentration and attention levels are low. A slight alternation in voice modulation, a joke or puzzle, a newfangled phrase, a repetitive slogan, an unfathomable mistake, or a witty analogy might be takes to reengage their athletes. Athletes live for the oval, pitch, court, track, pool or field, not the meeting room, and the next groups of aspiring athletes have the added hindrance of a generational gap. Reengagement techniques will keep athletes focused during the learning process, therefore, giving them more opportunities to learn and perform at their best.

Author Biography

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