Rugby Union - Transfer and learning of skills into game performance

1.0 Introduction
As a Rugby coach, we are ultimately assessed on how we achieve success for our team, or achieve success in developing a rugby program within a school or club organisation. As coaches, the people who most affect the outcome of our success are the players, and therefore players are our most valuable commodity. But in order for players to achieve success, we as coaches, need to be able to develop their skills, and develop them in such a way, that they learn, and then execute these skills successfully in a game.

Skills can be defined as an athlete's ability to choose and perform the right techniques at the right time, successfully, regularly and with a minimum of effort (Brainmac.co.uk 2015). So in Rugby, it’s the players ability to perform skills such as passing, catching, tackling, plus position specific skills over and over again at a consistently high level. Skills can be categorized into numerous classifications such as cognitive, perceptual, motor, simple, complex, etc, however, for the purpose of this assessment; I will be categorizing them into 3 categories of Closed, Mixed and Open.

2.0 Context
As a coach of a Premier Grade Rugby side, and also as a Director of Rugby at a GPS School, I am constantly critiquing how I go about teaching the core skills to my players. No matter the age or skill of my players, I must be able to successfully teach them the core skills of rugby, and have them execute these skills in a game.

There has been much research into training methods such as Games for Understanding, and Games Sense in which the learner essentially plays ‘games’ to learn and understand the skills and strategy’s within the game. This method has had success, however I believe that within a Rugby context, skills must still be taught along the Open and Closed Continuum (Galligan, 2000). This continuum is concerned with the effects of the environment on skills, and Knapp (1967) suggests that all skills learnt can fit within this continuum.

I believe there this a place for Game Sense training, however that should only occur during the ‘Open’ section of the training, and that core skills must initially be taught in a closed environment, to ensure success and confidence from the learner.

3.0 Types of skills

Closed skills
These skills take place in a stable, predictable environment and the performer knows exactly what to do and when. Skills are not affected by the environment, and movements follow set patterns and have a clear beginning and end. (Knapp, 1967)

In Rugby we can train skills in a closed environment, as we can isolate core skills such as passing, tackling, lineout throwing, kicking, and the players can learn these key skills in an environment with no opposition.

We can also teach playing patterns in Attack and Defence in this environment, and an un-opposed team run, or lineouts against no opposition is a good example of how you can teach the basic team strategy and movement.

As there is no opposition, the players and the team should experience success.
Mixed Skills

Environment is semi-predictable. There is opposition or a changing environment, however the 'setting' is fixed, and the coach is able to manipulate how much outside influence there is. (science.smith.edu)

Within a Rugby environment, an example of this would be doing Attack drills such as a 3 v 2, or doing Breakdown work, where you dictate how many attackers and defenders are participating in the drill, and the 'context' within this drill.

Another example is opposed Unit work. Although the 'contest' is within the maximal range, ultimately if you are training your A vs' B team, you still know what the other side is doing, and the coach may also indicate what play is to be run, so the opposition will know what is coming.

Open skills

The environment is constantly changing and so movements and decision making have to be continually adapted. (Knapp, 1967)

Rugby is a game where there is opposition, so therefore Rugby is always played in an Open Environment.

Within this Open skill, now you can start to create ‘Game Sense’ scenarios, where one team is given a target/goal to achieve, and they must then achieve that target using the skills and patterns that have been taught to them.

4.0 Characteristics that affect Skill Acquisition

Before a coach can start teaching skills to their players, it is important that they understand the characteristics that affect the teaching of skills to the players. As all players are unique, it should be obvious that all players learn at different rates. Research done by Charles Sturt University has identified that the speed at which an individual learns is dependent upon the combination of many personal characteristics, and within this assignment, I will dissect each of these characteristics, and relate them to my own coaching.

For Rugby players, there are countless variables at play in skill acquisition. They include inherited physical, social and emotional factors.

The below table, illustrates the different characteristics that affect a coaches ability to successfully coach key skills to their players.

Prior experience

It is generally considered easier to learn a new skill, if similar skills have been learnt already in other sports or activities. This prior experience can help the player in accelerating the learning process.

Source: Charles Sturt University
Schmidt (Motor Learning and Performance, 2008) states that when learning movement elements, if a great number of similar elements are present, then skills will transfer from one sport into another. When these similar elements are present, players can capitalize on this previous task experience and transfer it successfully into learning a new skill. An easy example of this would be when a Rugby League player changes to Rugby Union, and the action of performing a ‘clean out’, is quite similar to that of a tackler, and similarly catching a cricket ball will help you catch a Rugby Ball. Another example though, might be the correlation between the action of throwing a Water Polo Ball, and that of lineout throwing. Former Test Hooker Tai McIsaac is proof that such Prior Experience is valuable in learning a new skill.

Therefore as a coach, it is important to know your players ‘past’ experiences, as this may help you associate the player with a past skill that does have similar elements to the skill that you are teaching.

Confidence

As an individual begins to learn skills and experiences success, they begin to develop a sense of self-belief in their ability to perform. By learning and performing skills from an initial simple setting (closed environment), then into a more complex and every changing environment (open), confidence will rise as the individual is achieving success, and they will be able to ‘trust’ their skill set in a game environment. By trusting in the skills they have learnt, the player will then be more willing to experiment and try other skills/methods, as they believe they have the foundation to do so.

If, however, they are given tasks too early in their development and they experience frequent failure, their confidence will be low, and therefore they are more likely to fail, and less likely to try new skills or methods that the coach is trying to teach them. This can then potentially impact on you as the coach, as the player will not experience success, not perform, and then potentially question your ability as a coach.

Therefore as a coach, you must carefully plan your skill progression for a player from simple (closed) skills to controlled (mixed) skills to more complex (open) skills.

Ability

Ability is the ease in which the player is able to perform a skill or execute a pattern. Ability can also be seen in the way in which an individual is able to learn process and perform new skills. Ability incorporates a range of factors, such as sense of acuity, perception, reaction time and intelligence. (CSU,2015)

As a coach we can’t directly affect the ability of our players, but we have to be aware of how much ability our players have, and then cater our training sessions to match this ability. As stated above, you should always start your skills development within the closed environment, however if the players’ ability does not match what you are trying to achieve within this and they are not achieving success, then you have to evaluate what you are coaching them, or consider - are you coaching the right thing? Similarly, if a player does possess good ability, you should move them quickly through the skill continuum (if possible) and challenge them with more complex scenarios.

Personality

This refers to an individual’s characteristic way of behaving and develops as a result of infinite social interactions and learning experiences throughout life. Learners whose personality reflects positive ways of behaving are more receptive to instruction and advice, more cooperative in performing set tasks and more helpful in creating a productive learning environment. (CSU, 2015)

The most impact we can have on personality as a coach is within the recruiting process. This is not always possible, as parents and players will choose to play for a club or attend a school, however in a position as a Coach and Rugby Director you do need to recruit for your program. Therefore, when recruiting players, you need to not only assess their rugby skill set, but always assess their personality and identify whether the individual is coachable or not, and whether the individual will have a good impact on those around him. As stated above, good learners create a good environment, which will then help you coach other players as you won’t be battling against a player that believes they don’t need to be coached.
Genetics

Refers to genetic characteristics inherited from our parents. These are unchangeable and limit the dimensions of our potential. Specific hereditary characteristics influence the potential for success in specific sports/skills. (CSU, 2015)

As a coach in Australia, you have no control over the genetics of your playing group.

5.0 Application of Findings

After reviewing the above information, I believe that training sessions should be modelled in the following way, and I have classified the sections of the skill acquisition into the following categories.

Skill Learning

Is the initial learning of a skill or movement/pattern. These activities should be done in a controlled environment (Closed).

Within this area of skill learning, it is crucial that the coach is ‘explicit’ in what instructions they are giving the players, and any specified detail must be demonstrated by the players. For example, if the players are doing a catch and pass drill, and players are explicitly told to catch with their ‘hands up’, and for their hands to ‘finish at the target’ after a pass, then these elements must be demonstrated by the players. If players can’t execute simple skills with no opposition, then the chances that they will execute these skills under pressure are minimal.

Examples of drills would be
- Catch and pass with no defenders
- Tackling a stationary bag
- Unopposed Team Runs

Skill Performance

Is the extension of the skill learning. Players can now perform the skill in a controlled setting (Mixed). The coach would have control over the numbers within the activity, and also control over the rules and context within these activities.

When coaching within the ‘skill performance’ section, it is important that the coach has a clear idea of who he wants to ‘win’ the contest. For example, if it is a breakdown drill focussing on the ball carrier presenting the ball back properly, utilising a skill taught within the skill learning (like a crunch/long place), then the drill needs to reflect this, and have more attackers than defenders, or defenders arriving later than the primary support player. This will enable the player to execute the skill properly, and will enable them to gain confidence in achieving the skill, which will help them learn other more complex skills, and give the player confidence to implement the skill within a game setting.

Examples of drills would be
- 4 v 3 Attack Drills
- 3 v 2 Breakdown Drills
- Opposed unit work

Game Performance

Within this area, players can execute the skills, movements, strategies in a game situation repetitively with accuracy. The coach will simulate game situations or targets, which the players must achieve, using the skills and strategies learnt in Skill Learning and Skill Performance. The use of Game Sense would be utilised within this area.

Coaches would use this Game Performance training to evaluate the strategies taught to the players, and test them in ‘match’ conditions. Should the strategies or skills be performed successfully, they can then be implemented in the competitive game on the weekend. Testing the game strategies in this type of environment would give both the
players and coach confidence that the strategies and skills learnt are successful, and this would allow the players to play with confidence and trust the game plan on the weekend.

* An example training session template could look like

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warm Up (skills/movement)</th>
<th>Warm Up (with ball)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skill Learning</td>
<td>Catch and Pass no Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breakdown Technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill Performance</td>
<td>3 v 2, 4 v 3 Attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breakdown Drills 4 AT vs 2 DF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposed Unit Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Performance</td>
<td>Game Sense/Simulated Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team A vs Team B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.0 Conclusion

Teaching skills and strategies successfully is the common goal of all coaches. Improving our players’ ability to execute skills under pressure in a game situation is crucial, as if players are able to do this consistently, then the chance of having success on the field and winning games of rugby improve dramatically.

By successfully implementing a vertically structured training program where the skills are learnt using the closed to open skill continuum, players will have an improved chance of performing skills and patterns successfully. This success will give the players the confidence they need to try other new skills, and to perform these skills in a game.
7.0 Reference List


Websites

http://aru.elearning-development.net

http://www.brianmac.co.uk/continuum.htm

http://hsc.csu.edu.au

http://www.science.smith.edu