

# Make Learning a More Active Process

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At the U.S. Youth Soccer Association Convention in San Jose, Calif., I met with Dr. Dan Freigang, aka "Dr. Dan the Mental Man," who gave an intriguing lecture on different learning styles and empowering players to be active learners.

Dr. Dan works with youth, adults, individuals, groups in many different aspects of sport psychology. He provided a number of tips about how coaches could make the learning process more active for their players.

I asked Dr. Dan how a beginner youth soccer coach should consider different learning styles when trying to coach their team.

He first answered with a question: "What makes Ken Burns a good historian?"

I bumbled through my own answer -- something about how Burns' films reach out to different types of people: history buffs and amateurs, lawyers and artists and candlestick makers.

Only after our conversation, which veered off in a few tangential directions, did I start to think about the implications of Dr. Dan's question. Most concisely, I decided, Burns makes a good historian because he is a good communicator. He makes his films accessible to a variety of different learning types or styles.

In his presentation, Dr. Dan outlined the four main types of learners. He suggested that each type is motivated, abstractly, by a different question.

There are the *I*fs ("discoverers" who learn by doing), the *W*hys (who learn by finding meaning within the self and by connecting with other people), the *W*hats ("analytics" who seek facts, theories and

concepts), and the *Hows* ("experimenters" who look to understand how things work, to integrate theory into practice).

These are not exclusive categories, but they provide a basic framework for understanding how different people learn. This framework informs how teachers can vary their styles to make learners more active, and therefore more invested, in the learning process.

In his films, Burns can't possibly adapt his communication to every type of learner; it's hard to help the "discoverers" do much with a one-way media. But this type of learner probably wouldn't sit through one of his movies anyway, never mind 10 of them. Burns does a good job reaching the rest. He seems to approach films from the perspective of his audience, like someone who is learning the material for the first time.

Burns explains. In simple and clear language he gives a logical narrative to complicated and daunting historical events. He also shows, through visuals and sounds that bring his points to life, allowing us to experience history by seeing and feeling it.

Lastly, he doesn't make all the connections for us. He gives us the dots, some facts and some colorful anecdotes and a variety of viewpoints on the same event or person, leaving it up to us to connect these things, to create a story out of them that makes sense to us.

For example, Burns doesn't just give one perspective of Abraham Lincoln. He gives many perspectives, from historians and primary source documents, to give us a rich picture of Lincoln the man, the shrewd politician, the complicated moralist.

So if Burns were a soccer coach, he wouldn't instruct in only one way. He wouldn't simply lecture about good passing technique. He would show, visually, by demonstrating a good pass or finding a player who can. For those who want to understand why or how, he would explain a concept from a few different perspectives.

He would use analogies that players could understand: "kicking the ball with the inside of your foot is like using a putter in golf; It's more accurate than the other clubs." For the bug-chasers who can't sit still, he would put them in a position to do, to experiment, to figure out concepts and techniques for themselves: "Try kicking the ball with different parts of your feet. See which one is more accurate."

At the end of the interview, Dr. Dan gave a few quick tips about how a coach can start to make learning a more active and empowering process for their players. So for those "Analytical Learners" who want info and want it now, this serves as a good place to start:

1. **"Get good feedback."** Getting feedback helps you learn and improve in any task you want to improve upon. Freigang suggests coaches get feedback on communication style and ability. When you know your strengths and weaknesses as a communicator you know what, and how, you can improve. And there is always something you can improve.

Freigang offers this nugget of advice: "Good feedback plus repetitions equals learning." That is, teaching and learning are reciprocal process. Coaches should try to learn about their own communicative style as much as they should try to learn about their players' learning styles.

2. **"Give merit where merit is do."** In his presentation, Freigang suggested that coaches "praise behavior not the child." For example, saying, "Tommy, you're great!" has a less positive affect than praising exactly what it is that Tommy is doing well.

Calling attention to a specific skill or behavior helps a child or athlete internalize this behavior. They remember what they did well and understand why they did it well. This gives the player's behavior merit instead of simply padding the player's ego.

Also, praising specific behavior lets other players benefit, and learn from, your appraisal. Your players can focus on improving a

specific action and they can watch Tommy for a visual example of how to do it well.

3. **"Talk less."** "A person who talks a lot might not say anything," Freigang said. Make your point as clearly and concisely as possible.
4. **"Tell the truth."** Honesty is one of the most important aspects of coaching and teaching. Giving players honest praise and honest criticism helps them understand what and how they need to improve. Being honest with players can be a tricky task, as you need to consider how to criticize and praise, but doing so tactfully can do wonders for a players' sense of self and their respect for you.
5. **"Stay task-oriented."** Help players stay focused on a task. The feedback you give players should concern the way they perform specific tasks. What are they doing well? What can they do better? Tell them. Show them. Explain.

Dr. Dan noted that these tips are only just that, the tips of subjects that reach much deeper. But they provide a good starting point.

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