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The Assessment of Swimming and Survival Skills:
Is Your Programme Fit for These Purposes?
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Many swimming and lifesaving programmes, although well-structured on paper, lack proper skills assessment and verification, which in turn might lead to poor skills acquisition and development, to a false sense of safety and over confidence in the water that can be extremely dangerous. For example: a swimming teacher is moving up some swimmers based on the criteria outlined in the syllabus of the programme in use in their facility, but to what extent have the swimmers met the criteria? Have they actually met the criteria or are there any flaws in the assessment process? Are they consistent and comfortable in their performance and would they be in difficulty under stress? Are the criteria fit for purpose?

Normally there are two types of assessment in swimming:

- a) Continuous (a.k.a., formative) assessment
- b) Summative assessment (typically at the end of a term)

The latter tends to give us only a snapshot of what the swimmer was somehow able to perform at a particular moment in time, but the single performance outcome measure does not allow us to know if motor learning really has occurred. Continuous (or formative) assessment, on the other hand, might be misleading in that we see or we think we have seen a swimmer achieve certain outcomes, perhaps only once, and we might make assumptions on their motor learning without monitoring the capability to repeat that skill and/or to retain it over a period of time.

In assessing as well as in teaching we tend to use a number of descriptors that tell us and the swimmer how the skill should look as opposed to how it should feel (e.g., tracing a “figure of 8” for sculling as opposed to feeling the constant pressure of the water on the palm of the hand). This is a big limitation as feel for the water and proprioception are of paramount importance in aquatic activities.

On the other hand, we tend to overlook some visual indicators that would tell us a lot about the level of skill acquisition achieved (e.g., how easy it looks, if the movement looks effortless, if there aren't any non-required movements, if the swimmer can focus on other tasks whilst performing the skill itself).

To make things even more complicated, many teachers seem to have limited understanding of those underpinning principles of movement in the water (e.g., Bernoulli's principle of hydrodynamics in relation to sculling) which would greatly increase their capacity to assess their pupils.

For the purpose of our study, we focused on two core aquatic skills:

- a) Sculling
- b) Eggbeater kick

These two core aquatic skills hold fundamental importance for anyone who wants to part take in a range of aquatic disciplines (e.g., swimming, synchronised swimming, water polo) and to enjoy them to the full. They also can be extremely important survival skills in the water. They also are very often overlooked, partly because many teachers/lifesaving instructors find it very difficult to understand them and therefore to teach them.

The same applies to the training and assessment of lifeguards. How are these lifeguards/swimmers assessed? What are the criteria and the relevant organisations' guidelines? Have the instructors/assessors got the right set of observational, theoretical and practical skills to assess effectively? Do they see what is happening or are they imagining things?

For example, most programmes I have come across and that are currently in use here in Ireland and in other countries expect swimmers/lifeguards to be able to tread water for a number of seconds or minutes regardless of the way this is achieved. So the outcome and the performance (i.e., length of time) at that moment in time is given priority whilst there is no assessment of effective and efficient treading technique. This is extremely dangerous as that swimmer/lifeguard might not be able to repeat that performance even after a short period of time and/or under different circumstances and stress factors. They might be able to reach the 60 seconds of water treading required to pass their qualification today (after having trained hard for a number of weeks) but would fail only two weeks later after a period of inactivity, whilst someone with sound eggbeater technique would be able to perform the skill almost indefinitely regardless of their level of fitness.

So, what should be involved in the assessment process? As well as having a sound understanding of the principles of movement in the water, based on motor learning and motor development studies, we should look for performance improvement, consistency or stability, persistence, level of effort, attention, and adaptability.



Paolo Di Paola has a degree in Art History but has been involved in swimming for over 40 years, as a swimmer first and then as a swimming teacher and coach of both adults and children. He holds a Level 3 Coaching qualification both in Italy and in Ireland, as well as a Level 4 qualification with the American Swimming Coaches Association and a Level 2 Swim Ireland/ASA Teaching qualification. As a coach he has an extensive experience in

the field of swimming skills acquisition, in developing Age Group Swimmers, and has been Performance Manager and assistant coach of the Irish National Youth Squad in 2012/2013. Paolo has also worked in Swim Ireland, the National Governing Body for Irish Swimming, between 2011 and 2014, as Education and Child Learn to Swim Programme Officer first and then as Education Manager.