



After an extensive tendering process FA Learning appointed Alite Ltd as our educational consultants. The founder of Alite, Alistair Smith, has been able to devise a Learning philosophy and subsequent Generic Tutor Training programme to meet the needs of all tutors and students on FA courses.

Alistair is held in high regard by Educational authorities and institutions in the UK. He has provided presentations for the FA's UEFA Pro Licence course as well as the FA's Football Development Conference. Alistair will be providing FA Learning News with new learning hints and tips every month.

HAVE YOU GOT A PROBLEM?

Football is all about posing problems for your opposition and solving the problems they pose you. At the top levels this process takes place at high speed, for long periods of time and with a high level of technical ability. It is at the core of outstanding performance in football. To quote Arsene Wenger, 'you play they way you practice'. Preparation for football should involve problem solving.

If players do not have the mental flexibility to be problem solving as they play, then their ability levels are very tightly defined. They will reach a ceiling quickly. Young players from the outset should be coached to be problem solvers and thus more mentally agile for success in the sport.

Sadly there is a breed of coaches for whom problem solving itself is a problem. They want to sit on all the answers. They never ask a question. Never consider an alternative. Ego gets in the way. For such coaches, problem solving is what the coach does - the players simply go out and execute the coach's answers. This is dependency, playing to a script, close order drill! To develop world class players, playing in world class teams, encourage them to be posing and solving problems as part of their everyday play from the earliest.

Mental agility for football is, I believe, partly inherent and partly learned. The coach of a young player doesn't have much control over the inherited factors – physical attributes, general cognitive ability, development patterns – nor indeed, can the coach control the environmental factors – emotional security, lifestyle choices, home and school circumstances. The coach can, from the earliest, develop some aspects of mental agility for football in young players. They do so by the coaching behaviours they model.

The problem solving coach:

- o plans their coaching around problem solving
- o has an understanding of the intellectual development stages of young people
- o knows what sorts of problems to pose in each development stage
- o is motivated by an interest in the player's growth
- o appreciates that a base level of technical and physical ability is needed before certain problems can be posed
- o when watching players observes for solutions and not just errors

- o uses lots of 'what if' scenarios in their everyday coaching
- o encourages players to try it for themselves
- o uses the language of problem solving in their coaching
- o debriefs coaching sessions by asking questions rather than going over his answers

My own problem solving mentor was a manager of a small club in the Perthshire Amateur League. I was a lad in my early teens 'playing with the men'. We used to travel in various cars all over Perthshire throughout the winter months. Occasionally we would lose a few players because of blocked roads and snowdrifts. One afternoon the captain had to phone back to the coach for advice because we were away to a remote fixture and only had eight men. As we sat in the car we watched the captain stumbled out of the telephone box clutching his sides. He had asked for advice, there had been a pause at the other end of the line before the reply, 'go up there but play it tight at the back...'

Next month – practical guidance for the problem solving coach