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## The craftsman's road to expertise: Ross Stacey, a chef's story

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*This article is an abridged version in which the author explores what we can learn from how sous chef Ross Stacey, from The River Café (London), developed. John Alder takes up the story.*

My first insight into developing expertise in the professional kitchen was that for Ross to develop expertise it was not a set of simple linear steps: it was complex. Four key themes appear to underpin the development of his expertise in the professional kitchen:

- Situated Learning,
- The Apprenticeship,
- The Craftman's Journey,
- Tribal Learning.

I will address each in turn using quotes of my interview with Ross to illustrate points.

### Situated learning and becoming a chef

Ross commented on how he learnt his practice: "... of course you can learn a lot at cooking schools, but it's being in there and doing it, and the time actually in the establishment is key". Through dedicated time learning in-situ, and in the course of their everyday work, chefs acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that improve their professional capabilities. Ross reflected, "Through cooking you can work, test, do, and work through it, ... every moment you can learn from, that's how you get better as a chef."

With such emphasis on deliberate practice and the situated nature of learning in the kitchen (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the development of professional competence is not viewed as the passive acquisition of knowledge but as a contextual and social process that involves cognition (Bound & Lin, 2013). At the heart of it is the acknowledgement that being a chef involves practices that use all five senses and knowledge that cannot be put into words (tacit knowledge).

"...we can all have identical amounts of flour, dough, but it's all about the hands and the feel ... [for mayonnaise] you can actually listen to the oil and the eggs combining ...it's a huge part of it".

Such situated views of learning have been shown to lead to high-levels of intuition and creativity: the craft of a professional chef (Stierand, 2015). Through learning in the kitchen both practice and identity develop in tandem toward 'becoming a chef': "I used to never really call myself a chef, ... Now I'd say I'm a chef at The River Café." For Ross there was a growing sense of belonging to the profession and an attaching oneself to the behaviours, values and social norms of the chef community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, what might appear as ad hoc or organic learning, is in fact heavily driven by a cognitively styled apprenticeship (James, 2006).

### The Apprenticeship

Turning time on workplace tasks into professional practice is mediated primarily by master–apprentice relationships (Bound and Lin, 2013; Stierand, 2015), in which junior chefs (apprentices) develop highly complex and creative connections under the guidance of very skilled chefs

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(masters). Rooted in early trade education it centres on social views of learning, the teaching through a mentored process and communities creating a common language and way of thinking.

While the kitchen hierarchy naturally creates a master–apprentice relationship these relationships lack rigid formality. Stierand (2015) concluded the apprentice–master relationship brings about assimilation into the kitchen and high-level knowledge of the craft as apprentices navigate practice in a supported environment.

Ross fondly referenced several people who have guided, influenced, inspired, and developed his craft at various stages of his journey, *“...I always thought, by being around these expert craftspeople and artisans, there was something exciting happening”*.

Cognitive apprenticeship (Dennen & Burner, 2008) offers a way of understanding this development process via six teaching methods. These are; modelling, coaching, scaffolding (making tasks increasingly difficult but achievable), articulation (helping learners talk through practice), reflection, and exploration (Dennen & Burner, 2008). These features were ever present in Ross's reflections.

### A craftsman's journey

In the history of the trades, before one could be called a master, it was deemed essential to undertake several years of travel to work under different masters and in different settings (i.e. a 'journeyman'). Ross's development in London, Taunton, Wales, and Ireland also make him a modern-day journeyman.

Diverse experiences are a central condition for developing expertise. Stierand (2015) found it essential for chefs to develop their personal creativity by being exposed to different practices, master chefs, contexts, and cultures. The final key theme in the development of expertise as a chef, tribal learning, draws together the previous themes.

### Tribal learning

The highly social, connected nature of the professional kitchen means learning is always undertaken in the company of others, where oral narratives and practices pass on the customs, habits, and tribal language of the profession (James, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is through the tempo, rituals, hierarchy, routine, and community of the kitchen that many of the opportunities reside for chefs to develop their expertise (James, 2006). Gradually chefs developing the capacities to make their own decisions, understand what and why they are doing things. For example,

*“The split second decisions, the change, and manoeuvring, especially in a service situation, ... but it's how you react. ... 40 times a night whilst you're also doing scallops, sea bass, and something else, replicating but still doing it consistently.”*

Ross acknowledged that he still learns from all colleagues at The River Café whilst continually sharing his experience with co-workers to facilitate their progress.

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"I'll think about [the dish], , ... then I'll send a picture to a mate, and we'll think about it. We're linked on WhatsApp and all speak to each other ... I'm always sharing thoughts, feedback and questions"

"[I get feedback from the] Head chef every day, from peers, and from clientele."

Consistent, collaborative, informal learning with peers and regular multi-directional feedback were central to Ross's view on how professional kitchens facilitate expertise.

### Summary

Ross's reflections offer a rich insight into how the professional kitchen supports and accelerates the practice and development of the professional chef. It is clear developing expertise as a chef draws together aspects of art, design, nutrition, scent, taste, and memory. For me, the ideas of:

- situating learning in the everyday,
- use of all five senses in practice,
- senior practitioners guidance and supportive relationships,
- becoming a journeyman of the craft,
- compiling varied experiences, and
- tribal learning in communities,

hold significant utility for coach, practitioner, and even athlete development.

The question we are left with is 'to what extent is current coach and practitioner development reflective of these principles and ideas? And should learning environments in sport resemble aspects of the professional kitchen? Our challenge is perhaps to develop a community of craftspeople that develop the discipline.

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