

Reflection in Coach Education: The Case of the National Governing Body Coaching Certificate

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Research frequently demonstrates that coaches learn by reflecting on practical coaching experience (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001), hence both reflection and experience have been identified as essential elements of coach education (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). The case being studied was a United Kingdom (UK) National Governing Body (NGB) in the process of developing a coach education program. The purpose of this study was to empirically explore the use of reflection as a conceptual underpinning to connect and understand coach education, theory, and practice. Findings suggest that the curriculum could promote reflective practice, albeit in a largely decontextualized learning environment. Future research should attempt to directly measure, *in situ*, the impact of such courses on coaching knowledge and coaching practice.

The educational development of sport coaches is a complex process, which requires the pursuit of individualized and in many cases ad-hoc learning pathways (Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Nevill, 2001). Central to this process are national governing body (NGB) coaching awards. These courses have tended to occur in short blocks of time, usually several months and often years apart (Knowles et al., 2001), with minimum follow-up and few opportunities to facilitate the integration of new knowledge into coaching practice. This ad-hoc approach has meant that few "models" of coach education exist, most are atheoretical patchwork models created to meet the needs of a sport governing body to certify its coaches (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2004). With these issues in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that a large proportion of coaching knowledge and practice has not come from coach education, but from personal interpretations of previous experiences (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Gilbert & Trudel 2001; Gould, Giannini, Krane, & Hodge, 1990).

Some of the shortcomings of coach education perhaps owe as much to a lack of concern for how coaches learn as to other factors. Therefore, the development of a model for coach education would clearly benefit from an explicit theoretical framework. A potential framework in this respect is reflective practice, a process

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found at the heart of all experience-based learning theories (e.g., Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983, 1987). Reflection would appear particularly useful for coach education as it could provide a bridge linking knowledge gained from professional experience, observations, coaching theory, and education. Although conceptualized as a theory of learning from experience, it could also be used to consider knowledge generation and dissemination within a practice field (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). By adopting reflection in this way, it was hoped that the current study would stimulate discussion about new ways of connecting research, coach education, and practice, with a view to transforming traditional methods of coach education and development.

In part, this process has begun with Gilbert and Trudel (2001), who recently discovered that exemplary youth sport coaches learned by engaging in three forms of reflective practice: reflection-in-action (i.e., during the action present), reflection-on-action (i.e., within the action-present but not in the midst of activity), and retrospective reflection-on-action (i.e., outside of the action present). Moreover, they (see Gilbert and Trudel, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2005) have presented a compelling argument that Schön's (1983, 1987) theory of reflective practice provides an effective framework for analyzing and explaining how these coaches framed their knowledge and learned from practical coaching experiences.

Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) model of experiential learning highlighted six distinct components within this process: coaching issues, role frames, issue setting, strategy generation, experimentation, and evaluation. According to the authors, coaching issues provided the impetus for reflection to occur. Reflection, however, was bound by the coaches' personal approach or philosophy to coaching, which the authors referred to as a role frame (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001, 2005). Role frames acted as filters that influenced which scenarios were and were not considered worthy of reflection (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001, 2005). The third component, issue setting, was recognized as the process of identifying why a situation was conceived as being a coaching issue. Upon identifying a troublesome situation (i.e., labeled as a coaching issue), a reflective conversation was triggered, which led to the practitioner drawing upon a pool of resources (i.e., coaching repertoire, creative thoughts, coaching materials, advice seeking, joint construction, and reflective transformation) in an attempt to generate a strategy that would address the coaching issue. The strategy was subsequently implemented and its effectiveness evaluated. If resolved, the strategy was perceived to be effective and the coach disengaged from the reflective conversation. However, if the issue remained unresolved, the strategy was labeled ineffective, and the coach returned to the strategy generation phase.

Coach education in the UK has been undergoing enormous change. The UK government created a Sports Strategy Coaching Task Force (CTF) and pledged £28 million (approximately \$50 million US) toward a raft of initiatives, including developing and implementing a national coaching certificate (CTF, 2002), the UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC). The introduction of the UKCC has presented a powerful impetus for change. However, if dynamic, imaginative, and thoughtful coaches are to be developed, those responsible must give careful consideration to content, structure, delivery, and desirable outcomes. Failing to do so could lead to a rebranded version of previous approaches to coach education (Cushion et al., 2003), a product that has been widely criticized by scholars and coaches alike

(Abraham & Collins, 1998; Jones, Armour, & Portrac, 2004). This study, by investigating a NGB in the process of developing a coach education program, aimed to empirically explore the use of reflection as a conceptual underpinning to connect and understand coach education, theory, and practice.

Method

The Case and Participants

Using an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 2000) a UK sporting NGB was purposively sampled, as they were in the process of assembling a coach education program in accordance with the UKCC guidelines. Two key NGB employees were charged with constructing the coach education program. Paul (pseudonym) was employed by the organization as Coaching Manager, responsible for devising strategies to enhance coaching practice, which included managing the coach education project. Paul had three years experience working in the NGB's world-class programs. Paul had an undergraduate degree in history and a post-graduate degree in sport and recreation management. Steve (pseudonym) was employed as Development Strategy Project Coordinator and had sole responsibility for constructing plus implementing the new coach education program. Steve was coaching on the world-class programs as the national under 13s coach, a role he continued to undertake throughout the coach education project. Steve held a degree in Sports Studies and a Post-graduate Certificate in Education, plus 20 years experience in education as a lecturer and examiner. All participants gave written informed consent before participating in the investigation.

Procedures

Data collection occurred over a seven-month period, using three research methods: interviews, observation, and documentation review. Utilizing multiple methods in this manner allowed for the triangulation of data, which can enhance trustworthiness of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). Data collection continued until data saturation was experienced, the point at which no new findings were elicited (Patton, 2002). Saturation occurred early, but may be attributed to the NGB's project being in its infancy.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted to elicit an in-depth understanding by exploring the how and the why of the phenomenon under investigation (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Three interviews were completed, all at the NGB's headquarters, two with Steve (each 90 min in duration) and one with Paul (60 min in duration). All interviews were semi-structured in nature, employing an interview guide to ensure that certain topics were covered (Patton, 2002), plus maintaining the flexibility to explore additional issues. Topics discussed during Steve's first interview included the following: participant demographics, construction process, program structures, and course design. Steve's second interview attempted to gather information specifically relating to course content, delivery methods, and tutors' role. After having obtained Paul's demographics, the interview continued to further explore the same issues that were discussed during Steve's second interview. Throughout this process, clarification and elaboration probes were employed where necessary to elicit

clear and comprehensive descriptions (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Each interview was audio-taped and immediately after the interview, transcribed verbatim.

Observation. A five-hour technical panel meeting was observed, during which detailed field notes were compiled (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) on issues relating to construction process, course design, course content, delivery methods, and tutor's role. The meeting was audio-taped, allowing transcribed verbatim. The meeting comprised of five NGB employees: Jack (Development Officer), Joanne (Development Officer), Paul (Coaching Manager), Steve (Development Strategy Project Coordinator), and Tim (National Coach). The observer was situated in a corner of the meeting room with 4 of the 5 attendees facing away from the researcher. It was hoped that this would minimize researcher interference, although contamination through the researchers' presence cannot be nullified.

Documentation Review. Modern organizations like sport governing bodies are dependent upon paperwork (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). Consequently, documentation review was regarded as a window through which to understand the construction of coach education (Watson, 1997). Artifacts reviewed included information provided directly (i.e., information given to the researchers by the organization, which included the NGB's coach education strategy and various draft course materials) and indirectly (i.e., information available on the NGB's web site) by the organization. When reviewing the documentation, information relating to the following was identified: construction process, course design, course content, delivery methods, and tutor's role.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this case cannot be depicted as a number of distinct phases within the research process (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). Instead, through abductive analysis, data collection and analysis were developed simultaneously as a dialectic process. This involved a continuous transition back and forth between data collection, reflection upon experience, and relating these to broader theoretical concepts. Abductive analysis can be conceptualized as a combination of deductive and inductive thinking (Denzin, 1978). Theory and practice are therefore perceived as informing one another, as data do not speak for themselves but instead must be interpreted through theory (Denzin, 1978).

Initially, an inductive approach allowed themes to emerge from the unstructured data before, during and after their collection. Three themes emerged from the unstructured data: coaching philosophy, curriculum, and delivery. As the research process evolved, a deductive approach to data analysis was embraced, after which data were categorized under the six components of Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) model of experiential learning (i.e., coaching issues, role frames, issue setting, strategy generation, experimentation, and evaluation). The abductive analysis process was considered particularly useful as it allowed the phenomenon to be interpreted from a theoretical frame of reference (Dey, 2004).

One of the strengths of abductive analysis is developing theory by placing and interpreting phenomenon from a new frame of reference (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 1997). In this case, reflection was given a new frame of reference to compare and evaluate the potential learning experiences offered by the

new coach education program. All of the interview, observation, and textual data were therefore subject to deductive analysis, grouping data under the six categories of Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) model of experiential learning. This enabled the researchers to evaluate the NGB's coach education program within a framework of reflective practice to develop an understanding of how the content and delivery of the awards could influence the coaches' development of knowledge and practice.

Results and Discussion

Role Frames

Coaching Philosophy. No coaching award should assume that coaches arrive as empty vessels waiting to be filled with coaching dogma (Cushion et al., 2003). The data from this study suggested that the NGB recognized that a coach's philosophy and past experiences would influence his or her practice. The NGB therefore proposed to increase role frame awareness by having the coaches explore the relationship between ethics, values, attitudes, and practice:

The aim of this section is to heighten your awareness of your own ethics, values and attitudes. By undertaking this exercise you can develop your own philosophy of coaching. Without it, the tendency will be to always adopt the prevalent philosophy, this being the "professional or elite sports model that emphasizes winning" Martens (1988). This may not be the appropriate philosophy for many children. (Draft level 1 material, 2004)

Role frames significantly impact upon the learning process, filtering what information is most salient for the coach (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999, 2004). Coach education should help practitioners develop an appreciation of their role frames (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004), as this is a critical element of personal and professional development (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985; Schön, 1983). An analysis of role frames allows the practitioner to "critically examine the underlying components that guide and influence his or her behaviors" (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004, p. 40), knowledge that is essential for constructing a coaching philosophy. By building this process into the award, the UKCC in this case could potentially increase awareness and understanding of role frames and philosophies. However, success will be dependent on how the topic is delivered. A brief analysis of beliefs, values, and philosophies is unlikely to be able to compete against the coaches' well established role frames and may therefore have limited impact on coaching practice (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004).

Coaching Issues, Issue Setting, Strategy Generation, Experimentation, and Evaluation

Curriculum. Coaching research suggests that reflection is initiated by critical incidents. It is by overcoming these practical dilemmas through constructing, implementing, and evaluating strategies that learning occurs (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). The NGB, however, utilized an outcome-based approach to developing their coaching curriculum:

... we (individuals involved in the project) have tried to address it from what are the needs of this coach and delivering at the level we are qualifying them to do. That's number one priority ... we are looking at it from what the person needs when they go out and operate. (Paul, 2004, Interview)

This could be considered in light of issue setting within reflective practice. Content will not be coach-centered, but instead shall focus on delivering a predefined set of learning outcomes. Further supporting this is the NGB's intention to present coaches with model sessions to demonstrate the implementation of pedagogical content knowledge. As the following indicates, the NGB hoped that these visual demonstrations would enhance the coaches' confidence in practical situations:

The key thing they (coach learners) have got out of it is applying NEDPECs (Name, Explain, Demonstrate, Practice, Evaluate, Correct, Summarize), not only thinking about it in theory but seeing it applied.... We (individuals involved in the project) feel that gives them (coach learners) a lot of confidence going into the afternoon. [Now] they have seen it done they can apply this same thing to their coaching of strokes to their partner. (Paul, 2004, Interview)

Abraham and Collins (1998) suggested that coaches are often presented with a "gold standard" (p. 71) of coaching behavior to mimic. It could be argued that presenting coaching in this fashion could trigger reflective conversations, requiring the coaches to recognize issues, deliberate over strategy, and try out solutions. Through engaging in reflection-in, reflection-on, and retrospective reflection-on action (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001), coaches could begin to evaluate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their strategy and the efficiency of its implementation. However, coaches would in fact be evaluating their coaching practice against the gold standard model. It could be suggested then that a standardized curriculum attempting to present distilled craft pedagogy, in the forms of tricks of the trade, is therefore unlikely to adequately produce reflective practitioners or prepare candidates for professional practice. Learning should in fact be located in the "swampy lowlands of practice" (Schön, 1987, p. 3), as only there can learning be tailored to address practical dilemmas associated with the complex reality of the practitioners' coaching process (Jones, 2000).

The data from the present study demonstrated that the UKCC, at the levels 1-3 at least, would focus on the provision of procedural information in the form of craft pedagogy. Although this would appear to fulfill a requirement of increasing coaches' knowledge base, the acquisition of procedural knowledge alone could lead to the practitioner being unable to adapt to novel situations (Anderson, 1982). Hence, by utilizing this approach, coaches attending these initial awards are unlikely to assemble an in-depth theoretical understanding behind coaching practice. Neither are they likely to acquire intellectual and practical competencies, namely independent and creative thinking skills (Jones, 2000) necessary for them to become what Schön (1983) described as an artful practitioner. Instead, candidates are likely to perceive coaching as a problem solving exercise that entails the application of theories and techniques to a set of general coaching issues (Schön, 1983, 1987). However, upon returning to their own coaching context, practitioners are likely to discover that "real-world practice does not often present well-defined problems" (Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yan, 1995, p. 48).

The NGB recognized the importance of practical coaching and intended to present its coach learners with the opportunity to conduct real-world experiments to test their coaching practice. It was envisaged that these incidents would comprise peer coaching, during which the coaches would attempt to implement theory through the practical coaching of fellow candidates:

We (individuals involved in the project) have got a lot of coaching practice in there (the course curriculum), but what we do is integrate the coaching theory . . . so there is loads of practice with a candidate coaching another candidate key skills. (Paul, 2004, Interview)

This design was implemented as the NGB felt that their previous program, which focused on presenting theory in a classroom, failed to provide candidates with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to practice in a coaching environment:

The common thing that comes back from the people (coach learners) . . . is they are frightened of actually putting that (theory) into practice because the course does not give them the opportunity to put that (theory) into practice. . . . What they actually need is some of that experience in the course. (Steve, 2004, Interview two)

People find it difficult to relate generic theory content to practical application. So we (individuals involved in the project) are trying to give them (coach learners) the generic theory. But then how do you apply this to our sport? [We] give them some ideas, give them some examples, so they can feel confident going out and doing that themselves. (Paul, 2004, Interview)

Both respondents were keen to stress the importance of practical coaching, providing inexperienced coaches the opportunity to coach children as opposed to their adult peers:

When going over to Denmark . . . I told them we (the NGB) didn't have guinea pig players on our courses, [they said] is that not like trying to learn to drive without being in a car? . . . Previously coaches have only had contact with players under assessment conditions. We (individuals involved in the project) feel that there should be the opportunity for them (coach learners) to work with players, but with the tutor helping them, rather than just under assessment conditions, because that is real life practice with players. (Paul, 2004, Interview)

What we (individuals involved in the project) don't want is just the candidates coaching each other. What we would like, as part of their (coaches) learning process, is that we have actually got kids coming in here . . . because that is what they are going to have to do [in the field]. (Steve, 2004, Technical panel meeting)

The data have shown that candidates would be presented with the opportunity to coach course peers and potentially "guinea pig" athletes, thus allowing the trainee to test strategies through real-world experimentations (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Although this approach could impact upon coaching knowledge and practice, this "methods-and-materials orientation" (Lawson, 1993, p. 155) presents coaching as

a mechanistic process that can be delivered, acquired, and implemented in a standardized manner. An inherent problem associated with this approach is the decontextualized nature of learning. When acknowledging the complex, idiosyncratic nature of the coaching process (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2004; Cushion, 2001; Lyle, 2002), it becomes apparent that a standardized curriculum, promoting a “one size fits all” pedagogy, is unlikely to adequately prepare candidates for the diversity of coaching practice. Indeed, it has been argued that “without the contextual frame of reference the learning has little relevance” (Cassidy et al., 2004, p. 34).

Delivery. The NGB wanted to develop a more interactive delivery style for its courses, and move away from more traditional didactic teacher lead delivery, as the following demonstrate:

The delivery style we (individuals involved in the project) want is an interactive delivery style to make candidates think. . . . It can't be delivered chalk and talk, telling people how to do things. (Paul, 2004, Interview)

It (the relationship between the tutor and the candidate) should not be one way traffic, a good tutor facilitates. (Jack, 2004, Technical panel meeting)

Such a delivery style would seem favorable to the development of reflection, particularly strategy generation and evaluation, as the use of a facilitative style could be seen to promote reflective practice and critical thinking. By conceiving the tutor as a facilitator (Lyle, 2002), who utilizes “why?” and “what if?” questions, the NGB could present the learner with the opportunity to critically reflect upon their practice. However, the outcome of fixed issues and coaching practice in decontextualized coaching scenarios is likely to be degrees of reflection within a given group. Instead of evaluating the contextual factors that influenced implementation, coaches might be more inclined to reflect on their delivery in comparison to the model demonstration presented by the tutor.

Summary

The present study suggests that reflection can be a useful concept against which coach education can be considered. In so doing, it has been argued that the NGB's new program could facilitate reflection-in, reflection-on, and retrospective reflection-on action as it has elements of reviewing role frames, highlighting coaching issues, presenting coaching strategies, and provides opportunities for experimentation and evaluation. However, the prescriptive decontextualized nature of the awards is unlikely to develop Schön's (1983) notion of “professional artistry.” Instead, the NGB's coach education program is likely to develop two-dimensional, mechanistic, coaches who are ill prepared for the diversity associated with indeterminate zones of practice (Schön, 1983, 1987). Given that the NGB was in the early stages of the developmental process, it was not possible to directly evaluate its delivery, plus impact upon coaching practitioners. Further research is required before establishing a detailed appreciation of the UKCC's impact upon coaching knowledge, practice, and the athletes' experience.

It has been demonstrated throughout this study that reflection offers a conceptual framework to connect and understand coach education, theory, and practice.

Those responsible for the provision of coach education should be urged to shape learning around practical, contextualized coaching experience and have practitioners reflect upon it. This orientation would allow the learner to construct, implement, and evaluate strategies that attempt to overcome dilemmas specific to their coaching process and practice. This process could be assisted, for example, by the formation of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), lead by coach educators promoting peer assessment, and facilitating the sharing of information, experiences, and resources. Moreover, mentors could facilitate engagement in the reflective cycle through supervised field experience. By having practitioners critically reflect upon coaching experiences, mentors could help the trainees become increasing aware of the dynamics specific to their coaching context, current level of coaching knowledge, and individual coaching philosophy, plus how these directly relate to coaching practice. Indeed, it is through this process that coaches become conscious of their behaviors and develop a rationale behind these actions (Cushion et al., 2003). Through adopting these approaches, it is therefore envisaged that trainees would be presented with a supportive learning environment that attempts to maximize learning from practical coaching experiences.

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