



Coach Learning and Development: A Review of Literature

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Executive Summary**

Introduction

The purpose of this review was to provide an overview and analysis of the existing literature on coach learning. In this context, learning embraces all the processes and structures that enable coaches to construct and develop the knowledge required to engage effectively in their professional practice. The review focused on coach learning, but also explored relevant literature on related topics in education, health, business and professional learning fields.

Methodology

The review utilised a systematic methodology advocated by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Centre. (EPPI). Ensuring the review was systematic and transparent presented challenges, particularly in identifying robust and defensible inclusion/exclusion criteria. This resulted in a tension between inclusion and research that was useful, relevant, and having an impact on the field. For this reason, judgement of value was based on an aggregation of methodological quality, methodological relevance, and topic relevance.

The review had two phases. First a search and screening phase that produced a descriptive matrix of literature. The key words agreed and used for the search were: coach education, coach learning, coach education and learning, professional development and adult learning, with coach education/coach learning always used as linked terms. The search yielded over 1000 returns, with 147 papers read of which 46 met all of the criteria for inclusion in the primary matrix. The search identified additional topics that were used in a secondary search in the areas of medicine/health professions, education and business. This search resulted in 185 papers of which 28 met the criteria for inclusion in the secondary matrix.

The second phase of the review comprised of analysis and synthesis of the included papers to form a review narrative. The narrative writing phase allowed an interpretation of the literature against the initial criteria and overall research questions. To structure the discussions surrounding coach learning and provide a framework to integrate research from other relevant domains, Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) conceptual model of informal, non-formal and formal learning was used. The framework was a pragmatic conceptual tool to help organise a disparate body of literature.

Findings

Learning Theory

Learning is a broad and complex field. It is a contested construct informed by a range of theories drawn from three main approaches: behaviourism, cognitivism and social/constructivism. Therefore, there is no single all encompassing theory of learning upon which to base coach development. Despite having assumptions about learning and built in views of how people learn, approaches to coach learning remain largely and explicitly uninformed by learning theory. Most learning is undertaken within a cluster of ideas or experiences, or the result of the default view for the particular programme. Evidence of use, implementation and impact on practice from all approaches to learning is not yet available.

- There are significantly different ways of understanding learning.

- There is a relative absence of empirically informed research into coach learning.
- Theoretical eclecticism is preferable to 'the only' (perfect) way. But coach learning needs to be explicit about the assumptions informing it, and how these relate to an understanding of how people learn, and aligns with the objectives of a programme.

Coach learning is influenced by a complex mix of formal, non-formal, informal directed and self-directed learning experiences. However, this developmental mix for coaches is largely individualised and ad hoc. While the literature suggests the balance tends to be toward informal learning, the optimal mix of learning experiences needs to be addressed. In this respect, the research available on coach learning is limited by a tendency to focus on expert or elite coaching practitioners. This group of coaches has been shown to favour self-directed learning and therefore engage in activities to match.

- The research currently gives us little appreciation of the teaching and learning preferences, and needs, of coaches across coaching domains and within the developmental spectrum.

Informal Learning

Informal learning through coaching experience and engaging with other coaches is currently the dominant mode undertaken. This is due to the limitations of current formal provision, the lack of an overarching structure and issues around volunteerism, which combine to encourage a negotiated and individual learning curriculum. This curriculum is not unproblematic, often ignoring underlying power relations and promoting and reinforcing certain ideological interpretations of knowledge and practice.

Experiential learning is defined as being intentional and can be mediated or unmediated. It is different to learning from experience which is largely unintentional. The existing coaching literature does not clarify the extent to which coaches learning from doing is intentional or unintentional.

Reflection is identified consistently in the coaching and related literature as a means to support experiential learning. Reflection has research evidence from coaching and other domains of its efficacy, but not linking directly to coach effectiveness. The research suggests that time and space is required within a learning programme to develop reflective skills, otherwise these are likely to be superficial and uncritical.

Mentoring has been identified as offering both structured and unstructured support for coach learning. Mentoring is widely advocated within all of the domains reviewed. However, the research into mentoring falls short of robust evaluation, but a number of reviews have been undertaken that contain guidance for developing mentoring and mentoring relationships. The impact of mentoring on coach learning needs to be researched.

Situated learning and communities of practice have been identified in coaching and other domains as useful concepts to structure and understand learning. The literature suggests that the purposeful use of situated learning should recognise that the theory is incomplete. Without attention to power relationships and the learning aims, access to learning opportunities and the scale of learning taking place may be limited. In coaching, communities of practice have been implemented with mixed success. The literature highlights the need to engage a facilitator.

- Reflection, mentoring and situated learning can structure learning, but each of these is not without their own issues. They require time and effort to develop and become embedded into coach learning. They need research evidence linking them to changes in coaching practice.
- It is unclear to what degree coach experiential learning is intentional or unintentional, and a clearer understanding would inform what experiences could be incorporated into planned learning episodes.

Non-formal Learning

The literature reports behavioural coach education interventions and there is a body of evidence supporting the idea that coach behaviour can be manipulated and changed. The evidence of the efficacy of these interventions could be enhanced by research designs that include random assignment to intervention groups, pre-post assessments of coaching behaviour and adequate sample sizes.

Significant research into non-formal learning has been conducted in other domains, most notably investigating continuing professional development (CPD). The review identified several challenges in implementing CPD in coach learning: to design CPD that takes cognisance of the complexity of learning, to ensure professional learning and the professional practice of teaching (coaching) are conceptualised as a single activity, to find better ways of understanding and evaluating the links between different forms of professional development and learning and to understand how best to structure different types of professional development opportunities to meet learning needs.

Formal Learning

External evaluation of formal coach learning is critical, yet to date only one study has considered the impact of formal learning on developing coaches' knowledge and understanding, the impact on coaches' practice, or if the programme matched the expectations of the learner. Formal coach education remains unevaluated. However, research highlighting coaches' experiences and perceptions of formal provision has been highly critical: courses often give little more than a basic understanding; coaches already know about and put into practice much of what is covered; some of the theoretical material covered is considered too abstract from everyday practice to be considered worthwhile; courses can be guilty of trying to cram too much information into a relatively short period of time; and coaches, later in their careers, have come to question much of the information acquired during initial courses. As a result of such experiences, some coaches have admitted to attending later awards only because they are compulsory. It is hoped that the UK Coaching Certificate will address some of these issues.

There is a body of research criticising formal learning for taking an atheoretical approach and not aligning delivery with a view of how people learn. Additionally, this literature has questioned the conceptual boundaries of coaching, the definitions of what a coach is and the lack of alignment between these and formal learning provision, suggesting that formal coach learning is, in fact, training or even indoctrination rather than education. In response to these criticisms, alternative approaches have been proposed that draw on principles from adult learning. These include reflection and mentoring, and approaches such as problem based learning (PBL). There are no empirical studies in coach learning to show if these approaches would be more effective. In other domains, the evidence is

equivocal. The research recommends variety in formal learning but argues there are no prescriptions or ultimate mix of approaches. Noteworthy from the research is that approaches such as PBL and reflection take time to develop and it is questionable if the current duration of formal provision is sufficient to facilitate this approach to learning.

- There has been scant systematic research on the effects of coach learning on improvements in coaching practice or on athlete outcomes. Coach learning needs effective evaluation without which it is impossible to determine what works, why and for whom.
- Coaching needs to engage critically with the central tenets behind the theories and alternative approaches to learning to specifically develop coach learning theory. As with a number of domains, there is a tendency to look at second order research that has taken ideas from first order research. Uncritically recycling theory and learning approaches into coaching runs the risk of compounding limited thinking.

Learning Styles and Expertise

From the large scale reviews of the existing literature and research in a number of domains, the evidence base for learning styles can be considered fragile and often contested. There seems a need to evaluate the theoretical robustness of the research findings and the applicability of these to a coach learning agenda. Indeed, it is important that the assumptions about learning styles should not become axiomatic, but rather an element of learning to be scrutinised as social constructions in an area of developing work. While waiting for this research, an approach of balance and variety seems warranted, with learning styles used as a tool to open up a dialogue about personal development, rather than one of pedagogical impact.

Like the broader expertise literature, the majority of studies considering coaching have centred on the general properties and characteristics of expertise and knowledge. There is less of a focus on the detail of acquisition, development and/or construction of expertise. Consequently, it is difficult to extrapolate meaningful guidance for coach learning. The learning process identified in developing expertise does, however, suggest practical experience and mentoring as mediating factors, and a need to master the relevant knowledge and skills of the domain. The research also suggests the domain specificity of superior performance. The interesting challenge for coaching is the question of whether coaching domains are defined clearly enough to identify the relevant knowledge and requisite skills. This is not currently evident in the coaching literature.

- The expertise literature suggests there is a need for more robust definitions of domains, so that knowledge and skills can clearly be identified to inform curricula. The findings from the coach learning literature can not realistically be stretched to fit across all domains and points in coach development.
- There is currently insufficient evidence to warrant learning styles as a key tenet of coach learning.

Learning Motives and Deterrents

The literature from a range of domains suggests engagement with learning is driven by a desire to acquire knowledge to enhance practical competencies. A lack of this inner drive will contribute towards non-participation, as will issues around time and money. There

remains a lack of literature looking specifically at learning motives and deterrents for coach learning.

Coach Learning Research

Although coach learning is developing as a legitimate area of enquiry, the research base informing it has so far largely developed along serendipitous lines. Research has been more influenced by personal and methodological interests of scholars rather than attempting to develop a conceptually orientated and consensual research agenda. There is a dearth of research evaluating the structure, content and provision of coach learning, plus how this directly impacts upon the coaching practitioner. In this respect, there is a need for rigorous examination of content, delivery, assessment and impact upon coaches' professional knowledge and practice.

- The literature investigating learning in coaching and other domains is highly variable in terms of quality and scope. More longitudinal research is required to provide evidence of implementation and impact.

Recommendations

- There are significantly different ways of conceptualising and understanding learning.
- There is a relative absence of empirically informed research into coach learning.
- Theoretical eclecticism is preferable to the only (perfect) way but coach learning needs to be explicit about the assumptions informing it and how these relate to an understanding of how people learn and aligning with the objectives of a programme.
- The research currently gives us little appreciation of the teaching and learning preferences and needs of coaches across coaching domains and within the developmental spectrum.
- Reflection, mentoring and situated learning can structure learning, but each of these is not without their own issues. They require time and effort to develop and become embedded into coach learning. They need research evidence linking them to changes in coaching practice.
- Mentoring plays a key role in informal and formal learning. It can be experienced both positively and negatively and needs more research evidence to identify its impact on practice. The role of mentor's content knowledge on the process and impact of mentoring remains unknown.
- It is unclear to what degree coach experiential learning is intentional or unintentional, and a clearer understanding would inform what experiences could be incorporated into planned learning episodes.

Inferences about coach learning include:

- Learners come with a range of experiences. Experience has a subjective nature, and only has meaning when it is given meaning. Coaches need to understand and build on their existing knowledge and experience.

- Domains need robust definitions with knowledge and skills identified to inform curricula.
- Learning needs to be facilitated in an appropriate environment. Knowledge needs to be contextualised and the mode of learning and the environment should align; for example, reflection and PBL are developed in short superficial learning episodes.
- Coaches need to engage in practice, which needs to be supported. This type of learning, as well as other experiences, need to allow meaningful reflection.
- Learning is largely an individual experience; however, there is currently insufficient evidence to warrant learning styles as a key tenet of coach learning.
- There has been scant systematic research on the effects of coach learning on improvements in coaching practice or on athlete outcomes. Coach learning needs effective longitudinal evaluation without which it is impossible to determine what works, why and for whom.
- Coaching needs to critically engage with the central tenets behind the theories and alternative approaches to learning to specifically develop coach learning theory. As with a number of domains, there is a tendency to look at second order research that has taken ideas from first order research. Uncritically recycling theory and learning approaches into coaching runs the risk of compounding limited thinking.
- The literature investigating learning in the coaching and other domains is highly variable in terms of quality and scope. More longitudinal research is required that provides evidence of implementation and impact.