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PRACTICE PAPER

Development of a Mentoring System within Coaching Practice

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Abstract

This study compares the views of one cohort of students regarding their placement experience with another group of similar students. The research was carried out over a period of two years, using groups of sports coaching students with a minimum of 75 hours logged coaching experience and a level two qualification in their particular sport. The aim of this study was to provide an appropriate environment for the student coaches to develop their coaching skills with the input of a mentor coach, using questionnaires within a controlled university environment. The coaches within this study demonstrated a commitment to the enhancement of their coaching effectiveness as a result of the mentoring provided. This points to the need for structured mentoring programmes within coach education provision.

Keywords: mentoring; coach; coaching practice; coach education programmes; coaching behaviour

Introduction

Providing coaches with an environment in which they feel comfortable and confident to practice and develop their coaching skills has been an aim of many coaching courses run both by coach education organisations and by academic institutions (Bloom et al., 1998). The manner in which coaches have been supported throughout this learning phase has been left, for the most part, to the particular organisation responsible for the education programme. This leaves little possibility for a planned, co-ordinated approach that could benefit coaches at all levels in a variety of sports (Newby and Heide, 1992). The purpose of the present study is to develop the best possible structure for facilitating coaches in the development of their practical skills within a higher education environment.

Development of mentoring

Mentoring is acknowledged to be a dynamic, reciprocal relationship within a working environment, generally involving an individual with more experience in a specific field (the mentor) and a less experienced individual, often a beginner in that field (Weaver and Chelladurai, 1999; Wright and Smith, 2000). The relationship between the two individuals should be one based on mutual trust and respect and should allow both to develop their respective skills while the mentoring arrangement exists

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(Bloom et al., 1998). Initially, however, the mentor has the relevant experience and generally more power, or influence, within the organisation. The success of any mentoring relationship relies on the mentor allowing the beginner to extend their knowledge and play a more dominant role than at the outset. In some organisations and mentoring situations, the idea of the mentor relinquishing authority, especially to a beginner, is a difficult concept to introduce.

Many businesses and organisations introduced mentoring programmes in the 1980s with the view of enhancing the quality and productivity of their employees (Healy and Welchert, 1990). More recently, academic institutions have followed their lead and it is now accepted that becoming a mentor can enhance career development (Scandura, 1992). Many have mentor-training programmes in house that allow potential mentors to network across the institution. This interaction can benefit the mentors as it allows them to widen their circle of influence and be recognised as contributing to the organisation as a whole. It has also been demonstrated that successful mentoring programmes have a positive effect on the participants; specifically, those involved tend to be more loyal to the organisation, experience more job satisfaction and become higher achievers than those not involved in such schemes (Fagenson, 1992; Newby and Heide, 1992).

Mentoring within sport coaching

Although it has been demonstrated that attendance at coach education courses increases the knowledge base of the coach, research suggests that merely attending such a course will rarely improve the overall effectiveness of the coach (Abraham and Collins, 1998). Coaching involves a practical element and in order for the coach to become more effective, they must be able to apply the knowledge gained from courses specific to their coaching environment (Dodge et al., 1994). Many organisations in different countries have identified that the most appropriate method of developing effective coaches is through some form of apprenticeship or mentoring programme (Bloom et al., 1998; Tinning, 1996; Thomson, 1998).

Mentoring is a process that covers many different types of environments and relationships, ranging between formal and informal (Galvin, 1998). A formal approach may involve developing effectiveness within a structured programme; this tends to be more widely used within the business environment (Wright and Smith, 2000). Informal mentoring may consist of a more casual relationship. Regardless of the type of approach, it is important to regard mentoring as a process, as this reflects the ongoing nature of the relationship, irrespective of the environment (Newby and Heide, 1992; Schweitzer, 1993).

Many countries are further developed than the UK in that they already have mentoring programmes fully integrated into their coach education process. The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) recognises three approaches to mentoring: supervisory, informal and facilitated. Supervisory mentoring implies that the mentor also has some authority over the beginner, often in a manager/worker type of relationship, while informal mentoring suggests that the mentor is often a friend or acquaintance. Facilitated mentoring is a formal relationship based within an organised structure and extensive utilisation within their programmes has led the CAC to believe that facilitated mentoring is the most effective approach for the Canadian coaches (Thomson, 1998). The German coach education system, after unification, has encouraged and facilitated mentorship opportunities from participant to elite levels (Kozel, 1997). Coach education level one, two and three courses are administered by the DFB (German Sports Council) and offer the opportunity for both formal and informal mentoring (Campbell, 1993).

The UK Sport Council's plan to develop coaches also considers the close link between mentoring and apprenticeship by exploring opportunities to link mentoring schemes to coaching degrees or diplomas (UK Sport Council, 2001). So far, this type of programme has not been introduced in any organised fashion within the coach education structures, although some local authorities and national governing bodies have attempted to introduce the concept of mentoring. Examples of this include a programme administered by South Lanarkshire Council, targeting a small number of coaches in specified sports (South Lanarkshire, 1999) and another larger scale project in Manchester.

Coaches must continually strive to become more effective and an essential element of improving coaching practice is the process of self-reflection. Self-reflection can be utilised when solutions to professional problems are not immediately obvious, requiring the capacity to reflect on the best possible solution to individual situations (Schon, 1987). Within the practical coaching situation, it can be used as a tool for the coach, enabling them to learn by relating theory to actual coaching environments (Crisfield, 1998). The mentor can be instrumental in helping to develop the skills of self-reflection.

Coaching practice study

Participants: students

This study was carried out over a period of two years, using two different cohorts of students. There were 115 students, ranging in age from 19 to 39, with the average age being 22. The study included both males and females, although due to the nature of the course there were significantly more males (83 per cent). The students were all in their third year of a sport coaching degree and completing coaching practice as an integral module of their course. Each student had attained at least a level two, or equivalent, qualification in the sport of their choice, and had previously completed a minimum of 75 hours supervised coaching practice as part of their course. Prior to engaging in this coaching practice, the university also required that each student coach possess a valid first aid certificate, have the necessary statutory checks and have attended the SportCoachUK (formerly NCF) courses, 'Good Practice and Child Protection' and 'Coaching and the Law'.

Participants: mentors

The mentors were currently coaching in a variety of sports at different levels within different organisational structures and were selected using differing methods in subsequent years. The criteria that remained constant over the two years of this study were a minimum of a level three coaching qualification and five years coaching experience. The age of the mentor was not considered by this study and interestingly, there were more female mentors than female coaches. There were some mentors who continued with the programme in both years (n=14). During year one, the students were asked to identify a mentor with the above qualifications. During year two, the coaching situations and suitable mentors were selected by the university.

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires were considered to be the most appropriate research instrument for this type of survey. The data collected tends to be more reliable, valid and representative due to the ability to target a larger sample size of the population. The development of the questionnaires was carried out in two stages. During the initial stage a number of statements were generated from relevant literature on mentoring. These were believed to reflect views on current mentoring practice from both the viewpoint of the mentor and the protégée. The second stage was a pilot study, where a sample (n=12) of coaches, students and academics were asked about their views on the clarity and relevance of the questionnaires.

The students in both years of this study were given final questionnaires to complete before and after their coaching placement. The questions were a mixture of open and closed, designed to elicit specific information and to give the students the opportunity to fully express their views. The mentors were also given questionnaires to complete before and after their involvement with the student coaches. Again, these were a mixture of open and closed questions, designed to ascertain their coaching background, mentoring experience and training. The rationale for this type of questionnaire design was to encourage the participants to respond freely on a number of important issues. Many of the closed questions required specific information, for example, how many hours coaching experience had the student coaches accumulated? Other questions required yes/no answers. A number of the yes/no questions also requested further information e.g. "do you feel that a mentoring programme is helpful to coaches at all stages of their development?" and was followed up by asking the respondent to explain their answer. Those that were on a scale e.g. "do you feel this mentoring programme benefited your

coaching?” were on a seven-point scale, anchored from ‘not at all’ to ‘very much’ (see Appendix 1 for a sample questionnaire).

Participants were also asked to give their views on the effectiveness of the mentoring arrangements, perceptions of the usefulness of the programme and any future improvements. Additional background data was provided by the students as part of the modular information, application forms, and required information for enrolment onto this coaching practice. The completed questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 8.0).

Findings

Perceptions of Groups	Year 1 of Study		Year 2 of Study	
	Students	Mentors	Students	Mentors
Years in Coaching	1.5	6.3	1.6	7.2
Coaching Qualifications	Level 2	Level 3	Level 2	Level 3/4
Previous Experience of Mentoring	0%	4%	2.3%	17%
Usefulness of Mentor Training	N/A	N/A	N/A	Useful
Clarity of Role of Mentor	Very Unclear	Unclear	Clear	Very Clear
Effectiveness of Mentoring Programme	Very Ineffective	Ineffective	Effective	Effective
Benefit of this Mentoring Programme to Personal Coaching	Not at All	Not at All	Useful	Useful
Usefulness of Student Coaches in Placement Organisation	Useful	Useful	Very Useful	Very Useful
Process of Self Reflection	Difficult	N/A	Difficult	N/A
Change in Coaching Behaviour	68%	N/A	100%	N/A

Table 1: Results of the student and mentor questionnaires

Year 1

During the first year of this study, the students were asked to identify a suitable coaching practice, in a location that suited them. They were also asked to identify a person, within their coaching environment, with a higher level of sport-specific qualification and a minimum of five years coaching experience, to act as mentor. It is important to note at this point that many of the student coaches identified mentor coaches who were impossible to utilise within the parameters of this situation, for example, Sir Alex Ferguson, perhaps reflecting their lack of understanding of the particular parameters available. The students were expected to complete a minimum number of coaching hours and evaluate the placement by self-reflection. Once the suitability of the coaching placement had been confirmed, the university established the parameters and expectations of the placement by letter. At the end of the 36-hour placement, questionnaires were administered to both the student coaches (n=58) and their identified mentors (n=56). The purpose of this questionnaire was to elicit views on the effectiveness of this coaching practice in terms of developing the coaches, the usefulness of the coaches within the

organisations throughout the process and the practicalities of building a sustainable model for mentoring within coaching practice.

Analysis of the questionnaires revealed that both the student coach and the mentor coach were unsure of their roles; perceptions differed as to the role of the mentor within this context. These differences in perception demonstrated a lack of understanding of the purpose of mentoring on both sides, which led to a fundamental misunderstanding and ultimately the ineffectiveness of the mentor coach/student coach relationship. The student coaches felt that the mentor coaches could have a role within their academic assessment so were unwilling to utilise them to their full potential. The mentor coaches felt that the student coaches demanded a significant amount of their time and that the time spent was of little or no benefit to the mentor coaches or the athletes concerned. The majority of both mentors and student coaches (97 per cent) had never participated in any type of mentoring scheme prior to this placement.

As a result of the feedback, several fundamental changes needed to be made to enable the student coaches to experience a positive and worthwhile coaching placement and to allow them to become more reflective about their coaching. These changes would also allow the mentor coaches to feel more involved in the process and the development of the student coaches.

Year 2

Feedback received from the students had included the following criticisms of the coaching practice:

- They were not assessed on their practical ability
- The experience gained varied considerably
- Time constraints
- Lack of understanding of the role of the mentor
- Uncertainty regarding assessment criteria

Feedback from the mentors had included the following:

- Uncertainty regarding the expectations of both the student and the university
- Lack of clarity regarding their role
- Lack of training/education in mentoring

Changes implemented in the second year of this study were designed to address the issues identified above. The most significant changes addressed the concerns of both groups. The university staff identified coaching placements within the local area that would provide the appropriate experience for the students, with coaches available who had previous mentoring experience or were willing to become involved. The students were given a list of available placements and asked to rank their top five choices. This limited the student's choice, but ensured that the placement chosen would fulfil the necessary criteria to satisfy the university's assessment criteria.

Those who had been identified as suitable mentors within these coaching programmes were selected according to two criteria; they had either attended the SportCoachUK (formerly NCF) course 'Mentoring for Sport Coaches', or they were willing to attend a two-hour university-run course to receive information/training regarding their role within the coaching practice. The coaching environments identified covered a wide range of sports, age groups and levels of ability in order to give as much choice as possible. The placements included local authority coaching schemes, school sport, voluntary organisations, and community sport supported by professional organisations.

At the end of the 36-hour placement, both the mentors (n=54) and student coaches (n=57) completed a questionnaire, identical to the one distributed in year one. In addition, those mentors (n=34) who had participated in both years of this study were asked their views concerning the effects of the changes made to the organisation and implementation of the study in year two. The student coaches were

assessed in their practical coaching environment as well as logging the minimum amount of hours and evaluating their practice through self-reflection.

Overall

The top five qualities that a mentor should possess, according to both cohorts of student coaches and mentors (n=225), are, in rank order:

1. Effective Communication Skills
2. Knowledge of their Sport
3. Experience
4. Approachability
5. Enthusiasm

Although not being ranked in the top five, it must be noted that the qualifications of the mentor and their success in the sport were highly rated. Interestingly, the top three qualities identified by the student coaches were effective communication skills, approachability and enthusiasm whereas the mentors ranked different skills in their top five: knowledge of their sport, experience, organisation and leadership.

During the second year of the coaching practice the students were asked to rank the ways in which their mentor assisted them during the placement, as determined by similar studies (Kieran, 1999; Canapini, 1999; Galvin, 1998). The rank order is as follows:

1. Being a resource
2. Building confidence
3. Developing knowledge and skills
4. Being challenging and questioning
5. Being a role model

Both groups of students (n = 115) acknowledged that they were better able to utilise their theoretical knowledge within a practical situation as a result of this coaching practice although during the second year of this study the results were more convincing (84 per cent) than the first year (63 per cent). It is hoped that the significant difference between the groups of students reflects the training of the mentors prior to the second year of this study.

The students were asked if they considered that this coaching practice had changed their coaching behaviour. After the first year the majority of the students (68 per cent) indicated that they had changed their behaviour but attributed this to their desire to pass the assessment. The remaining 32 per cent of students felt that there was no change in their coaching behaviour as a result of their coaching practice. Results from the second year of the study showed that the student coaches still wanted to pass the assessment but credited the input of the mentors with changes in their coaching behaviours (72 per cent). A smaller percentage of these students, 38 per cent felt that their coaching behaviour had changed permanently as a result of their coaching practice, although whether this perception was borne out in practice is unknown.

Throughout both years of this study the student coaches found the process of self-reflection difficult. None of the coaches had ever been involved in this type of process prior to the coaching practice, either in a formal or informal situation. A majority of student coaches over the two years of this study (87 per cent) felt that they had learned from this coaching practice. However, the results from year one showed that only 28 per cent of the students felt that they were more self-reflective, whereas in the second year 74 per cent of the cohort felt that they were self-reflective. The reasons given for the increase in self-reflection were the input of the mentors and the tighter assessment criteria provided by the university.

Discussion

The first year of this coaching placement highlighted the considerable difference in the definition of a mentor between the mentors and the mentees. A number of mentors perceived their role to be 'overseeing' and 'correcting' with no mention of any type of developmental relationship as suggested by previous studies (Healy and Welchert, 1990; Newby and Heide, 1992). This could be as a result of the timescale involved, as the student coaches only had to complete 36 hours of coaching over a period of fifteen weeks to fulfil the requirements of the course. This is also shown in previous coaching practice undertaken by both cohorts of students, where each student has a minimum of 75 logged coaching hours, accumulated over an average of one and a half years. The majority of the students confirmed that the 75 hours was actually accumulated in much smaller, concentrated blocks of time, 40 hours in one year and another 36 hours the following year. Although they were encouraged to gain as much experience as possible, many of the student coaches only satisfied the basic requirements of the course. Other student coaches saw the benefits associated with gaining more experience, for example, enhancing their CV, becoming involved in a coaching environment and making important contacts. This encouraged them to make a more long-term commitment to their placement, but the numbers were low (n=8). It has to be accepted that the specific context of this coaching placement did not allow for the establishment or development of a mentoring relationship in the majority of cases.

Perhaps this viewpoint could also be explained by examining the power relationship between all involved in this study. Students generally consider that the university has power and authority and that this was devolved to the mentors during the coaching practice. At no point during this study did the mentors have any input into the assessment of the student coaches or the final grades, however this was not the perception of the students. This was especially true during the first year of the study, which is difficult to explain as these student coaches chose their own mentors whereas in year two, the mentors were chosen for the students by the university. The selection and subsequent training of the mentors in year two could account for this difference in perception, as the mentors understood their role more fully and were able to make the relationship between themselves and the student coaches more equal.

The type of mentoring relationship formed within this coaching situation would generally be an informal relationship between mentor and student. One of the targets for the second year of this study was to develop the role of the mentor to enable them to become more involved within this process. This type of relationship would, in the most part, remain informal. However, it was hoped that the relationship between the mentor and the student coach would become more involved and move towards a formal rather than informal relationship.

Mentoring is designed to develop coaches at all levels, however the UK Vision for Coaching (UK Sports Council, 2001) implies that only beginner coaches, as the majority of coaches in this study would be classified, will be involved in a scheme. There could be a number of reasons to explain this. Firstly, are there sufficient suitably qualified coaches to act as mentors? This could suggest that there are already established criteria as to what constitutes a suitably qualified mentor. Indeed many organisations utilise mentors at present, but another potentially more serious problem is that there is no overarching body that can or has suggested a formal qualification process that would be necessary to mentor coaches. Secondly, if there is nobody in control of this proposed scheme, how does this affect the enforcement, administration and financing of this proposal on a UK-wide basis?

It should be noted that many beginner-level coach education courses within the UK are sport-specific and based upon attendance only. This differs from other countries, for example Australia and Canada, where the awards involve sport-specific information, coaching theory, and include a practical element in their coach education programmes, which contains mentoring (Thomson, 1998; Schembri, 1998). There is an ongoing debate concerning the validity of a coaching qualification which is attendance-only, but that is beyond the scope of this particular study.

Many organisations want the input from the student coaches, as some view this as a method of delivering programmes at little or no cost. Unfortunately, this perception is not always accurate as these student coaches can require a great deal of support. Many of the student coaches had been

coaching for considerably more hours than the minimum of 75 required by the university at this level, but only a small percentage (6 per cent) had been involved in a structured environment, where there was an attempt to develop their coaching skills. On average, the students had accumulated 127 hours of coaching practice in their respective sports, however the benefits have to be questioned due to the lack of structured, focused coaching practice.

The process of self-reflection proved to be a difficult concept for both cohorts of the student coaches to grasp. Perhaps this allowed the student coaches more latitude than they were accustomed to, given their level of coach education and practical coaching experience. However, if this process can be introduced to sport coaches early in their coaching career, it can be practised and become an evaluative tool that is used in a systematic manner to develop coaching effectiveness.

Conclusion

Coaches, at every level of development, should display a commitment to the improvement of their coaching effectiveness. The majority of coaches within this study displayed this commitment but the question remains as to whether this was a short-term measure, designed to pass the assessment as part of their course of study. It was hoped that these coaches, particularly in year two of the study, would demonstrate a longer-term view of their coaching development.

Within the parameters of this study it was easier to control the coaching environment to suit the demands of the students and the requirements of the course. This would be an issue for other organisations, for example National Governing Bodies and coach education organisations. The identification and subsequent training of the mentor coaches to support this programme is also simplified, given the geographical restraints placed upon the students. These factors make this system more straightforward to implement, as the mentor coaches gain assistance on their programmes and the student coaches access an environment that fulfils their criteria. This study has provided guidance as to how a structure for the development of coaching skills could be implemented within the context of higher education. There are benefits in such a structure for both the mentors and the student coaches; the mentors feel that the coaches are useful within their organisations and the coaches feel that they have the opportunity to learn within this type of environment.

There are obvious implications for policy development in the area of coach education within this country; for example, should coaches be permitted to coach without participating in a mentored coaching practice? The difficulties that would exist with this type of development are the responsibility for organisation and administration. Would this mentoring become part of existing coach education programmes and if so, at what level should they be introduced? This would also lead to a re-examination of existing coach education provision and implications for continuing professional development.

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