CANDIDATES' EXPERIENCES OF ELITE COACH EDUCATION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY ('TRACKING THE JOURNEY')

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the knowledge development and experiences of 20 coaches enrolled on an 18-month elite level professional preparation programme. The methods used within the study included individual video diaries and focus group interviews. In total, data from 18 focus group interviews and 19 video diaries were obtained from the candidate coaches and subject to a process of broad inductive analysis. Results centred around three principal themes; (1) a problematic perception of the utilised competency-based framework and a desire for greater peer learning opportunities; (2) an instrumental view and accompanying utilisation of course mentors; and, most significantly, (3) the use of the periodic course gatherings (the residentials) as a 'community of security' for the coaches to offset everyday feelings of workplace anxiety. The implications of such findings lie in the call for elite coach education programmes to help practitioners better accept and live with the complexity and anxiety-inducing uncertainty of their positions through giving them realistic ways of dealing with it.
Key Words: coach education, longitudinal, community of security, qualitative

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio fue explorar el desarrollo del conocimiento y las experiencias de 20 entrenadores inscritos en un programa de preparación para profesionales de élite, de 18 meses de duración. Los métodos usados en el estudio incluyeron diarios en vídeo individuales y entrevistas centradas en el grupo. En total, los datos de 18 entrevistas grupales y 19 diarios en vídeo fueron obtenidos de los candidatos a entrenadores y sometidos a un extenso proceso de análisis inductivo. Los resultados se centraron alrededor de tres temas principales; (1) una percepción problemática del marco de aprendizaje basado en las competencias y el deseo de mayores oportunidades de aprendizaje compartido; (2) una visión instrumental y una utilización del acompañamiento de los mentores del curso; y, lo más significativo, 3) el uso de las reuniones periódicas del curso (los residenciales) como una "comunidad de seguridad" para los entrenadores para compensar los sentimientos diarios de ansiedad en el trabajo. Las implicaciones de estos hallazgos se encuentran en la convocatoria de programas de formación de entrenadores de élite para ayudar a los profesionales a aceptar mejor y vivir con la complejidad y la ansiedad que induce a la incertidumbre de sus posiciones, dándoles formas realistas para manejarla.
Palabras clave: formación de entrenadores, estudio longitudinal, comunidad de seguridad, investigación cualitativa

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in both the provision of coach education programmes and their evaluation (e.g., Cassidy Potrac & McKenzie, 2006; Chesterfield, Potrac & Jones, 2010; Nelson, Cushion & Potrac, 2013). While this body of literature has provided scholars and practitioners with valuable knowledge about the role and nature of such programmes, little is known about how coaches experience them. This is not only in terms of their structure, content and assessment (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004; Taylor & Garratt, 2010), but also in relation to coaches' personal knowledge construction and how that knowledge is transferred into practice. The inadequacy of current coach education programmes to recognise such dynamics, particularly as related to issues of relevancy, was reiterated by Gilbert, Gallimore and Trudel (2009) and Piggott (2012) who contended that coaches, across all sporting contexts, continue to place greater value on experiential learning than on formal coach education. Such courses then, play only a minor role in the wider process of coach development and "are often treated in a rather instrumental fashion by coaches who rarely learn or implement any new ideas" (Piggott, 2012: 538); a point also echoed by Cushion and Nelson (2013). Hence, they are continuously considered to be 'fine in theory' but, and crucially, largely divorced from the messy realities of practice (Jones, Morgan & Harris, 2012).

Furthermore, a recent study by Nash et al. (2012) found that over 60% of the coaches questioned felt unsupported by their governing bodies (NGBs), with such organisations being cynically perceived as more interested in collecting money than sincere professional preparation and education. Additionally, there has been a paucity of critical inquiry into the latent and unintended learning that takes place on coach education courses; that is, learning which is not immediately apparent in behavior but which manifests later when suitable circumstances appear, and learning which has been unplanned and unforeseen. Highlighting such variability of outcome, Roy, Beaudoin and Spallanzani (2010) found that coaches' learning from a single certification module ranged from confusion, to an overload of information, to mere affirmation of existing practice. Subsequently, although we know that coaches increase their knowledge from formal coach education courses, little information exists on precisely what they learn, in addition to how their ways of knowing develop. This includes issues of how they learn what they learn, in addition to where and why they learn it (if at all). It is a knowledge gap exacerbated by the general absence of temporal research into coach education, and of the importance of considering the various processes that influence it (Cushion et al., 2010). This particularly relates to paying more attention to the practices, people, regimes of competence, communities and boundaries that

serve as the creators of who coaches become and who they think they are (Wenger, 2010).

Consequently, the general purpose of this study was to map the knowledge development of candidates enrolled on an 18-month elite level coach education course. This general aim was addressed through a number of mutually informing detailed objectives. These related to; exploring what the candidates learned from the course and how they learned it? What were the principal catalysts for change? What did the candidates consider to be the strengths and limitations of the course in terms of content, delivery, and assessment? And what role (if any) did the tutors play in these developments?

In terms of organisation, following this introduction, the structure of the coach education course undertaken by the candidates is summarized. The methods used within the study are outlined, together with the procedure and the process of data analysis. The results from the investigation are then cited and subsequently discussed. Finally, a reflective conclusion is presented, inclusive of possible implications for future coach education practice.

The course structure

The coach education course under study is recognised as the highest qualification obtainable within the sport in question. The syllabus was principally constructed by the sport's international federation, although national governing bodies possess a degree of agency and independence in how the recommended components are delivered. The programme was 18 months in duration, with candidates being primarily assessed against a competency framework. An overseas 'group visit' was also built into the course, which involved candidates' observations and deconstruction of both top-level coaching practice and sporting performances. Furthermore, each candidate was assigned a mentor (on a ratio of 1:3) whose primary role was to support the candidates through the programme.

The programme itself comprised four key content areas. These related to (1) communication; (2) leadership; (3) management; and (4) business and finance, and were, in turn, subsequently divided into seven modules spaced with planned frequency throughout the programme. Each module, excluding the group study, was delivered during three-day 'residential' workshops. The time between the residentials (and hence the modules) was intended to allow for reflection on received content, and for its practical application in context. The seventh and final module culminated with an expected 'graduation' from the course.

METHOD

The precise methods used within the study included those of video diaries and focus group interviews. Video diaries are often considered a way for participants to frame and represent their own lives. Their use in this project then, represented an effort to somewhat empower the candidate participants; enabling them to tell their own stories, and to represent their own situations in relation to their experiences of the coach education programme undertaken. While recognizing that no actual escape from the project's purpose or hierarchy was possible, what was hoped for from the use of such a research method were less 'mediated' representations of the candidates' selves (Pini, 2001).

Semi-structured group interviews were also conducted with the coaches. The purpose here was to explore the candidates' personal understandings of their course-related learning and development (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Hence, the interviews focused on instances which the candidates felt important in this regard (Morgan, 1988). Being semi-structured in nature, the interviews allowed responses within a framework of questions whilst also granting a degree of freedom for the candidates to talk about what was important for them. This offered the flexibility for gaining further information on issues deemed important, enabling both clarification and elaboration to take place (May, 1999).

Procedure

The procedure involved tracking a group of 20 candidates through their elite coach education experience. Each candidate was allocated an iPad for recording individual reflections and encouraged to do so as much as possible. Additionally, four sets of focus groups were carried out periodically with the candidates through their time on the course. The research design was progressive, in that, in addition to the study's stated aims, the episodic focus group interviews were loosely structured on issues raised from candidates' video diaries. In this way, the research was flexible in terms of following certain themes identified as important and meaningful by the candidates. In total, 18 focus group interviews were carried out with the candidate coaches, while 19 video diaries were also received. Once a video diary was received or focus group interview recorded, the data were transcribed verbatim before being subject to a process of analysis (described below).

Data analysis

Inductive procedures were broadly used to examine and categorise the data gathered from both the video diaries and the focus groups. The principal purpose here was to identify common themes as related to the aims of the study, whilst also paying heed to any unexpected features (Charmaz, 2006;

Seale & Kelly, 1998). Hence, a 'constant comparative method' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed to ascertain similarities and differences within the data. More specifically, and in line with Charmaz (2006), a process of focused coding was undertaken where earlier identified codes or signifiers were used to further examine the data, thus refining initial assumptions. These were then used to build more generalizable statements that transcended specific instances and times (Charmaz, 2006). This later phase also coincided with greater attempts to analyse what the data actually meant, emphasizing the interpretive nature of the research. The resultant categorizations provide the structure for the following (Results) section.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Perceived relevance of course content, and the need for security

Although, evidence existed that the candidates valued both the acquisition (i.e., the 'speakers' and 'taught content') as well as the participation (e.g., group discussion of the content [and other issues]) aspects of the course, there was a general feeling that the content exposed to lacked a degree of relevance. In this respect, although many of the content related sessions were deemed interesting in their own right, they lacked immediate applicability to the candidates' personal practice. Hence, there was a general call for the content to be better '*related to the jobs we are actually doing'.* This, in turn, had a considerable impact on levels of engagement; the following comments and their like were reflective of the common currency in this regard;

> *'I think a lot of time we speak about the elite stuff…probably too much and doesn't really cover nuts and bolts…it only covers the top end';*
> *'It's not relevant to where we're actually working'.*

Although the course existed as the pinnacle of coach education within the sport, with the coaches having been identified as suitable for its enrollment, the candidates nevertheless worked in vastly differing contexts. For example, some were employed by large very successful clubs/organizations with access to almost unlimited marketing and sport science support structures. Others meanwhile were much more restricted in terms of staff, budget and number of athletes. Consequently, despite the course being framed in terms of the need for candidates to 'read themselves into the content', many found this hard to do. Comments like the following were indicative of such a perception;

> *'We just sat there, and it was information overkill'*
> *'I've really not gained anything from today…I don't see the relevance of what we've done today'*

'The links can be quite tough to make…it's hard to make those links sometimes'; 'they're asking us to do stuff we're not going to use'.

Not all the content related elements, however, were considered as lacking relevance. In this respect, many of the coaches confirmed that they were able to '*to take things from various sessions'.* Such learning, however, appeared largely restricted to relatively minor practicalities as opposed to developing a new 'way of thinking' *('little bits that have been said, I can take back and it's broadened my horizons';* '*…the course does give you little things, no doubt'; '…you take bits from everything')*. Consequently, although the candidates were aware of the need to make sense of the information given within their own contexts, there remained a pre-occupation amongst them for very practical 'know how' material which they could, more or less, immediately apply. This included an explicit desire for more speakers '*who have done our job'*, '*who know what it's like, and done it'*, as opposed to people from other walks of life no matter how successful the latter were. The knowledge desired, therefore, was very viable, to a degree safe, and convenient, as opposed to being abstract or conceptually troublesome, in nature. In addition to information which they could easily relate to, this tendency towards the functional reflected a wish for a general re-affirmation of existing beliefs among the candidates, as opposed to any conceptual shift in thinking *('…not a change in my behavior…just a bit of confidence in what [I] actually do'*). Hence, they appeared to actively resist information which possibly opened out additional fields and frames of reference, preferring instead the less risky option of better developing what they already knew.

Supporting this thesis of the requirement for security (of operating within existing frames of reference), what the candidates valued most about the programme was the collective social experience *('a big part of it for me is getting away'*). Of considerable on-going importance here was the reassurance function of the course. In the words of some of the coaches:

'you come here and you speak, and everybody's in the same boat…it reassures you that you're not the only one'.
'you find a little bit of solace here'.
'it made me realise that the problems I've got, everybody else has got…I'm not on my own'.

This perception of the course as a haven or refuge of sorts assumed even greater magnitude as the course progressed. This was because, as the insecure nature of their work became ever more apparent, by the end of the course, many of the coaches had either lost or feared for their jobs *('you know each*

other now; and you're under stress, so it [the 'bond' between them] *is stronger now'*). This was often couched in the desire to learn from each other, to discover each other's experiences; *('you can learn an awful lot from the people who are here'; 'I've learned far more from people's actual experiences')*. Hence, echoing the above made point re. the coaches' wish for greater relevant (i.e., 'practical' or even 'anecdotal') content, the candidates valued very much hearing similar stories to their own insecure and stressful experiences; a form of affirmation that their working practices and ways of thinking were similar to that of others. In the words of two of them

> *'It's an affirmation that what you're doin' is the right thing, so it's not just a sharing of ideas'.*
> *'I feel better coming here today, coz people have the same problems you have'.*

The competency assessment structure and a desire for peer learning

The course was based around the coaches realizing a set of given competencies; a format which the candidates found problematic. Such difficulties were multi-faceted and comprised of: (1) being sometimes difficult to comprehend; (2) not fully understanding how they should be evidenced; (3) a perception of duplication between many of the competencies; in addition to (4) questioning their relevance for everyday coaching. The final issue was considered the most problematic due to the necessity to the competencies' often decontextualized nature. Consequently, the candidates held a very instrumental view of the competencies, only engaging with them at a largely superficial level. As a result, engagement with the competencies had very little effect on candidates' working practices.

The coaches also believed that an alternative structure of and for learning would have been increasingly beneficial for them; one more grounded in collaborative small group work. This is not to say that the candidates didn't value the new information given in the speaker-led sessions, just that they would have preferred more time spent in group work to better discuss how to make such content personally applicable ('I don't think we actually unpick things enough'; 'we're not following it through' 'we've just ticked a box and haven't followed it through'). Allied to this was the candidates' desire to be allowed to learn more from each other, thus formalizing some of the valued informal learning evident ('you can learn an awful lot from the people who are here'). Indeed, there was considerable evidence of peer learning taking place in the 'social' opportunities available, outside of the formal learning context; something again that emphasized their desire to hear each other's solutions'.

Candidate views of course mentors and mentoring

The candidates were equivocal when talking about their course mentors and the latter's role in their learning. Despite being in regular (usually text) contact, some of the coaches, due to their hectic schedules, found it hard to make time to be with their mentors *('I find that I've got so much to do, it's hard to keep real contact'*). There was also a perception that the mentors should be located physically closer to them ('*Geographically, it really should be better…they haven't done that very well'; 'it's great when he gets here, when he gets here…'*). On the other hand, there was a perception by some, that their mentors were not visible or active enough in setting up meeting times; the onus to do this was largely placed on the mentors. In this respect, the candidates appeared to accept little responsibility for the mentorship process; it being viewed as something they were subject to rather than actively engaged with or on. There was also a desire for more direction and leadership from the mentors, which led some to question if the mentors were really clear in their roles. In the words of the coaches;

> *'…if he doesn't know what we're meant to be doing, what chance have I got*?'
> *'I'm not sure whether the mentors are actually sure themselves…they were [just] as confused'*.

There was also unease that the candidates had not received a consistent level of mentoring; some had many visits and good support, others less so *('there's got to be one message'; 'there's been some crossed wires, for sure').* This situation was not helped by some candidates losing and gaining mentors mid-course.

Another area of concern for the candidates was the mentors' knowledge base in actually being able to help them with their practice *('have any of the tutors being a manager?'; 'A lot of them don't work in [our] environment…the tutors are too far removed from that specific area'*). This was not to question the mentors' sincerity, commitment or abilities, but just if they were adequately grounded in an understanding of the candidates' roles and realities. Consequently, the candidates viewed the mentors very instrumentally *('I just need to know what to do to pass this course'*), with the mentors' premier (in some cases only) role being to assist in the gathering and explaining of the competencies. There was also a belief that the mentors needed to be chosen a little more carefully in relation to candidates' individual needs *('if the course is bespoke, then maybe the mentors can be too'*); something that came increasingly clear as the course progressed with some relationships flourishing while others proved problematic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Echoing the findings of much previous work (e.g., Cushion et al., 2010) the results from this study highlighted the importance and considerable influence of informal experience upon coach learning. Although no doubt the coach candidates in this study valued some of the speaker-led sessions embedded in the course, greater usefulness and meaning was placed upon the interactions with fellow coaches during unofficial (social) times. Indeed, there was a desire for far greater official opportunities from the candidate coaches for such discussion-type activities to further develop their learning. Allied to, or a part of, this desire was a wish to hear from other practitioners or coaches (in addition to each other) who had '*been there and done it*'; a request couched under the stated desire for more 'relevant' content. Although the question of relevancy (or the perception of relevancy) has previously been cited and discussed as crucial for candidates' engagement on coach education courses (e.g., Jones, Morgan & Harris, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013), the call here appeared more complex than on initial reflection. On one level, it could be viewed as a rather straightforward request for applicability of subject content; for '*tools*' and '*tips*' (or '*war stories*') immediately useable in practice. From such an interpretation, the course could be judged to have failed to move or alter the coaches' fundamental ideas and frames of reference about coaching and how to go about it. What they wanted were just other (perhaps better) ways and means to do what they already did. The work here supports the conclusions of Cushion et al (2010: i) who stated that "most learning is undertaken within a cluster of ideas or experiences, or the result of a 'default' view" of coaching. As other research has also postulated (e.g., Christensen, 2013), influencing such biographical developed views-of-the-world among coaches is a very complex, time-consuming task. Perhaps one that requires considerably more than a single or even a set of isolated professional preparation programmes.

From another perspective, however, this desire for 'relevancy' (and the importance attached to the interactions incidental to the course) could somewhat be explained by a need for security. That elite coaching is an insecure profession is not in doubt, which makes the issue's conceptual and empirical neglect by researchers all the more surprising. Although Olusoga and colleagues (e.g., Olusoga, Maynard, Hays & Butt, 2012) examined some of the 'stressors' experienced by elite coaches, their psychological theorizing and recommended coping mechanisms presented a very functional, emotionally devoid account of heartfelt feelings. In a recent symposium, however, building on the work of Jones and Wallace (2005, 2006), the issue of coaches' ambiguous work was recently taken up by Ronglan (2013), Mesquita (2013) and Jones (2013) from a social and relational perspective. Here, coaching was directly theorized in terms of its insecure nature; an insecurity which ranged from the

opaqueness of athlete learning, through the vagaries of temporality, to the unpredictable and relative unmanageability of game-related contexts. Such ambiguity and pathos create great insecurity and instability for coaches, inevitably generating a working context characterised by constant negotiation, struggle, micro-politics and 'plays of power' (Jones & Wallace, 2006). The candidates' desire for a perceived relevancy of content then, could be perceived as a need to hear like-minded messages they could immediately relate to. In this respect, the course was considered a kind of sanctuary for the candidates; a safe, supportive place where they could sometimes retreat to away from the everyday pressures of the job. A place where they could feel they were not unique and distinct in facing the stressful problems of practice which often stretched far beyond sport performance issues. Indeed, in many ways, we consider this the most interesting finding of the work, in that the course seemed to provide a latent function related to providing a 'community of security' for the coaches; something they valued over and above every other aspect of their educational experience.

A second finding of note was dissatisfaction among the candidate coaches regarding the competency framework used as the principal means of course assessment. The perceived decontexualisation of practice resulted in the evidencing of such competencies taking on purely instrumental characteristics; that is, they were merely engaged with by the coaches to 'pass the test'. The generalization of practice engendered through the approach, appeared to provide the coaches' criticisms of the course as lacking a degree relevance greater credence. Even though the candidates could be perceived as doing similar jobs, the differences in individual work places, which, in turn, impacted on precise roles, precluded any 'general fit'.

In many ways then, the notion of given competencies holding good across coaching organisations and clubs of different size, operating at different levels with different histories and objectives, tended to contradict the candidates' personal experiences. Hence, the candidate coaches' engagement was only evident at a rather superficial level. The discontent regarding the framework also stretched to confusion surrounding issues of 'competence identification' and related assessment.

A final principal finding of interest relates to the candidates' perceptions of the course mentors; a supportive facility or role which have been heavily advocated for coach learning (Cushion et al., 2010: Nelson et al., 2013). In terms of structure, although each candidate had access to a particular mentor, the learning relationships established were not altogether unproblematic. For example, despite a general perception of improvement and knowledge development, the coaches' experiences as mentees were varied in nature. The primary problem here related to a perception of the mentors, and hence of

themselves as mentees, as being unsure of their particular roles. This is an issue prevalent in many elite coach education programmes; that is, an under-theorisation and general lack of understanding of the mentoring relationship. Consequently, although the idea and language of mentorship has increasingly become prevalent in the coaching literature (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013), with some exceptions, the concept appears to have remained at the assumed or even abstract level of rhetoric. Clearly then, this is an aspect which needs considerable attention.

The purpose of this brief paper was to explore and highlight the experiences of coaches exposed to an 18 month elite coach education programme. The results both support and build upon existing work. In relation to the latter (with which this paper is naturally more concerned), the most relevant finding concerns the value of the programme as a 'community of security' for practitioners who operate in a very insecure world. The obvious subsequent implication for coach education lies in the need to both recognize this insecurity and to better engage with it. This, of course, is not a straightforward demand for such courses to include 'anti-stress' or 'stress-coping' sessions or the like, even though there may be an argument for greater coach care to take place. Rather, it's a call for such professional preparation programmes to help coaches better accept and live with the complexity of their positions, through giving them realistic ways of dealing with it (Jones & Wallace, 2005). This was the purpose behind Jones and colleagues (Jones & Wallace, 2005: Jones & Wallace, 2006; Jones, Bailey & Thompson, 2013) reconceptualization of coaching as orchestration; an effort to provide more practical guidance for coaches to make the most of what they are able to do (and how they can do it), without expecting to achieve unrealistic directive control as they navigate the turbulent waters of their working lives. Doing so, harbors better potential to understand and engage with the some of the more gritty realities of coaching, which coach education programmes have thus far failed to adequately address.

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