

Establishing and representing the coaching process of the expert coach: A coach led approach

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Abstract

Background and Purpose

The coaching process of the sports coach has been debated for many years, this debate ranges from establishing what it is and how it fits together to who is the driving force behind it (coach, athlete, organization, culture or environment) and then how/if it can be modelled. Why do we spend so much time engaging in this debate and why is understanding the coaching process so important? A key reason is a genuine desire by the coaches to become better and continually improve. Unless we know how the process works, how can we possibly develop it in an optimal way and thus ensure quality coaching and valuable experiences for participants. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to learn from the coaches themselves by letting them explain their coaching process and from this create a 'realistic picture', thus supporting coaches and coach education with research that emanates from coaches for coaches.

What was done?

Participants: Six coaches who were all considered expert in their practice participated in the study. They all coach in the same coaching context/domain of canoeing, where they work with a range of non-compleitive and competitive learners including children and adults.

Process: The coaches' views on their coaching process were collected through: 1) analysis of the coaches' documented 'model' and description of the coaching process which was derived from their work related to the UKCC Level 4 programme; 2) semi-structured interviews where the developing themes and model of the coaching process were discussed and further developed.

Key findings

The six expert coaches identified and agreed on ten coaching process core principles:

- Learning focused
- Learning partnership
- Can be coach or learner led/initiated
- Individualized
- On-going continual/evolving process
- Plan – Do – Review Structure
- Orchestrating/facilitating approach
- Influenced by coaching environment and context
- A holistic and flexible process
- It needs to be adaptable and dynamic

The coaches then developed six components of the coaching process that describe the 'building blocks' of the process as it 'plays out' in practice. These component were:

- Underpinning factors: key factors that underpin and influence all aspects of the process such as coach's/learner's personal philosophy.
- Contextual constraints: include the natural environment or competition/training environment, the context of the people involved in the learning environment (team mates, parents, peers) or the constraints around the tasks being set which need monitoring.
- Learning environment: created/supported by coach and learner to nurture and develop the coaching process, including the motivational climate and the coach/learner relationship.
- Preparation phase (Plan): to achieve learning focused outcomes. Relies on reflecting on past knowledge and previous outcomes, the present situation and anticipatory reflection on the learning to happen.
- Performance phase (Do): The 'action' part of the coaching process that is clear to see.
- Review/Evaluation phase: Reflection and evaluation after a period of performance or 'doing'. Constantly considering the first three themes (underpinning factors, contextual constraints and learning environment) in order to support on-going preparation (planning).

Rather than stopping at words on the page, a pictorial representation, a model, of the coaching process was developed and discussed with the coaches. They felt a model was useful to bring to life the components of the process. As one coach indicated: "It lets me visualise the words attached to the process, I need a picture." Also the model was able to demonstrate "the interconnectivity between it all [which] is the key thing." The model adopted the metaphor of DNA. This metaphor was useful because just as DNA's double helix and building blocks are instantly recognisable, the expression is unique in every person and situation, a similar argument could be made for coaching.

Points of interest for coaches

For coaches to use this study they must first consider if they believe in the core principles that are its foundations. The model is based on an educational relationship between coach and learner and the core principles and components of the process reflect this. The component parts (underpinning factors, contextual constraints, learning environment, preparation phase, performance phase, review phase) show what these coaches believe need to be considered and used for monitoring and adapting coaching throughout the evolving process; ensuring it meets the contextual/domain coaching demands. It important to note that the coaches felt that the model provides a guide rather than a recipe for coaching, recognising that the process is complex. Thus allowing coaches (and others) to interpret the components in a flexible and adaptable way to meet their needs for the given occasion and context. The model should play an important part in developing coaches' critical thinking as well as providing a framework to support this, which would allow coaches to develop their own processual expert toolbox.

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