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Nirvana or Never-Never Land: Does Heutagogy have a place in Coach Development?

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Abstract

Heutagogic learning is characterized by the notion of human agency. Power and autonomy are placed firmly in the hands of the learner, who takes responsibility for, and control of, what they will learn, when it will be learnt and how it will be learnt. As a result, if sufficiently reflexive, heutagogic learners are said to acquire both competencies (knowledge and skills) and capabilities (the capacity to appropriately and effectively apply one's competence in novel and unanticipated situations). The complex and dynamic environment of sports coaching, coupled with coaches' apparent preference for informal self-directed learning methods (as opposed to more formalised educational settings), would therefore seem perfect for its application. In this insights paper, we aim to stimulate debate by providing a critical overview of the heutagogic method and consider it against the nature of coaching skill. In tandem, we identify some essential pre-conditions that coaches might need to develop before heutagogic approaches might be deployed effectively in coach education.

Keywords: coach learning; coach education; self-determined learning;

Nirvana or Never-Never Land: Does Heutagogy have a place in Coach Development?

Since its inception as an extension of andragogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2000), heutagogy, or the study of self-determined learning (“heut” is derived from the Greek word for “self”), has attracted increasing attention in wide a variety of education contexts including clinical nursing practice (Bhoyrub, Hurley, Neilson, Ramsay, & Smith, 2010), teacher education (Ashton & Newman, 2006), higher education (Canning, 2010), workplace e-Learning (Canter, 2012) and engineering (Gazi, 2014). At face value, there is a lot to like. The heutagogic learning process is characterised by highly autonomous learners taking personal responsibility for, and control of, what will be learnt, when it will be learnt and how it will be learnt. This continuous process occurs in real-time as the learner (if sufficiently reflexive) becomes aware of deficits in their current skills, knowledge and/or capabilities through interactions with their environment, and devises their own strategies for bridging the gap (Hase & Kenyon, 2001; Hase, 2009). Heutagogic learners acquire not just competencies (knowledge and skills) but capabilities (the capacity to appropriately and effectively apply one’s competence in novel and unanticipated situations). As such, the complex and dynamic environment of coaching (e.g., Collins & Collins, 2014) would seem perfect for its application. When considered in tandem with the apparent preference of coaches to learn through informal self-directed methods rather than more formalized educational settings (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015), the approach of learner determining the learning path and being “the major agent in their own learning” (Hase & Kenyon, 2007, p. 112) seems to offer a perfect solution. The reportedly successful use of heutagogy in teacher education (Ashton & Newman, 2006; Ashton & Elliott, 2007), clearly an extremely close parallel, seems to clinch it. This is the approach coach education has been waiting for!

Before we rush to cancel coach education courses however, there may be some issues which need consideration. Heutagogic enthusiasts justifiably state the need for a level of maturity and independence in the learner; characteristics which are also central to the application of andragogic approaches (Knowles, 1975). It seems to us that some level of base knowledge, together with an openness and commitment to self-reflection would also be essential prerequisites. Accordingly, and in full acknowledgement of the very attractive features which a heutagogic approach can offer, we wanted to provide a critical consideration of the method. Therefore, we present an evaluative reflection in four sections. Firstly, we offer more detail on the heutagogic approach as a continuum of andragogy. Secondly, we consider literature which has looked at the essential pre-conditions which coaches need to develop. Thirdly, we consider the nature of coaching skill, to see whether, or at what stage, heutagogic approaches may be usefully deployed. Finally, our concluding section proposes some structures which may already use the approach to good effect.

Heutagogy: A Rough Guide

Heutagogy has its roots in a broad range of humanistic theories and learning approaches including phenomenology (Rogers, 1969), action learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998), connectivism (Dron & Anderson, 2014), systems thinking (Akoff & Emery, 1972), complexity theory (Waldrop, 1992), double loop learning, (Argyris & Schön, 1978) and transformational learning (Mezirow, 1994). It is also underpinned by the ideas of constructivist theorists (e.g., Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1972; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978), who purport that learners construct meaning from their own experiences. Hase and Kenyon (2000), who first coined the term, envisaged heutagogy as a natural extension of the earlier “-gogies” of pedagogy (i.e., the art or science of educating children, Hinchey, 2004) and andragogy (i.e., the art and science of helping adult learners, Knowles, 1975). Typically, the former acknowledges teachers’ power and perceives them as a

knowledge “transmitter” (see Table 1), with learners framed as passive recipients of this knowledge in compulsory learning environments, whilst the latter, although still tutor-managed, assumes greater learner competence and independence and encompasses more self-directed and problem-based learning (Anderson, 2013; Knowles, 1975). Although pedagogy and andragogy both emphasize the acquisition of knowledge and skills (competencies), heutagogy is said to go one step further by taking into account the complexity of learning and emphasizing the associated importance of developing the capabilities of the learner in addition to competencies (Hase & Kenyon, 2000; Hase, 2009).

A key tenet of the heutagogic paradigm is a belief in the notion of human agency, with power and autonomy placed firmly in the hands of the learner (Ashton & Newman, 2006). As in an andragogic approach, the role of the educator is positioned as that of a “learning facilitator” who guides the development of ideas and learners’ learning capabilities, as opposed to transmitting the wisdom of others (Ashton & Elliot, 2007; Ashton & Newman, 2006); however, they fully surrender ownership of the learning path and process to the learner (Blaschke, 2012). Heutagogy is said to recognize that “people learn when they are ready and that this is most likely to occur quite randomly, chaotically and in the face of ambiguity and need” (Hase & Kenyon, 2003, p. 3-4). As such, heutagogic learning is said to be fundamentally emergent, dynamic and non-linear, with each learner’s path potentially unique (Gazi, 2014; Hase, 2009). Moreover, according to Hase and Kenyon (2001), heutagogy recognizes the need for flexibility in learner-generated contexts and content, as “the teacher provides resources but the learner designs the actual course he or she might take by negotiating the learning.” Heutagogy, therefore, promotes the processes and strategies that learners engage with to further their understanding, not only of the subject or topic they are studying, but also of themselves as learners. Importantly then, it is more than “just” self-

directed skills and knowledge acquisition, but an understanding of the stimuli learners need in order to learn effectively (Canning & Callan, 2010; Gazi, 2014).

Learners educated within a heutagogic framework are said to benefit by becoming better critical thinkers and problem solvers, they develop confidence in their perceptions and learn to question their beliefs, values, assumptions and interpretations of reality from their position of competence (Ashton & Newman, 2006); they are able to create their own flexible curriculum and negotiate and plan their own assessment tasks (Hase & Kenyon, 2001; 2007); they are motivated to research their own interests independently, are able to apply their multidisciplinary learning to practice and to their personal philosophy, and embrace collaborative learning and knowledge sharing (Canning, 2010); and they become self-aware and able to articulate feelings, experiences and ideas (Canning & Callan, 2010). Based on these characteristics, heutagogy has been positioned in the literature as being ideally suited to the highly complex, often ambiguous, unpredictable and information rich world in which learning now takes place (Hase, 2009). Similarly, it is purported to be more suitable than “traditional” educational methods for recognizing and developing the complex array of skills and characteristics professionals need for the modern workplace (Hase & Kenyon, 2000); indeed, Hase and Kenyon (2000) suggest that the modern workplace is “no place for the inflexible, the unprepared, and the ostrich with its head in the sand” (p. 5). Nevertheless, we believe there are some important caveats and pre-conditions that coaches will require if they if they are to garner optimum benefit from a heutagogic approach to their development, which we turn to in the following section.

Characteristics of Self-Driven Development

Reflecting statements made earlier in the paper, we suggest that a strong case exists for an essential set of precursory skills, attitudes or characteristics (cf. the idea of capabilities highlighted earlier) which are essential if the desirable benefits of heutagogy are to be

realised. We would intuitively suggest that there are several such precursors, some of which seem to us to be sometimes explicit but always clearly implicit within the writings of heutagogic theorists and/or supporters. For our purposes here, however, we will focus on two: firstly, the important attribute of emotional maturity and secondly, the adult learner's perceptions of knowledge and the learning process itself.

Emotional maturity or EM relates to how an individual perceives him or herself. Defined as a "higher state of consciousness, guided by what one senses, feels, and intuit, and one's heart" (Vajda, 2013, p.37), EM also relates to how well one is able to respond to situations, control emotions, and behave in an "adult" manner. Accordingly, this attribute has been suggested as essential for self-directed learners, giving them the capacity to respond positively and reflect in a less ego-involved fashion when new and challenging perspectives are apparent. For our present purpose, EM could perhaps be seen as a way to operationalise open-mindedness in the face of views which contradict one's own. In any case, there are some interesting if preliminary findings for the construct, with recent work highlighting the positive correlations between EM and adult learning scores (Bhagat, Haque, Bakar, Husain, & Khairi, 2016). Other data show more positive performance outcomes for students higher in EM (Singh, Kaur, & Dureja, 2012). In summary, EM would seem to offer a good representation of the attributes and attitude needed for someone to engage effectively in heutagogy.

Our second exemplar precursor comes from the well-established work of Entwistle and colleagues. In a seminal paper, Entwistle and Peterson (2004) examined how perceptions of knowledge and learning acted to influence behaviour in adult learners; in their case, higher education students. At one end of their developmental continuum, dualistic views of knowledge were associated with a perception of learning as the storage of facts. At the other, a transition only completed by a subset of students, a relativistic view of knowledge led

students to “seeing things in a different way” (p. 409) as the outcome of learning. Such differences in perception have already been shown to impact on coach behaviour. For example, Collins, Abraham and Collins (2012) demonstrated that experienced coaches at the dualistic end were much less likely to source coach education opportunities than those at the relativist end of the continuum. It also seemed an important factor in the coach’s drive to seek out, or even willingness to consider, new ideas. As such, a coach’s placement on this continuum would seem to be another important mediator for involvement in and impact of heutagogic behavior.

Stages of Evolution in Coaching Skill

So, given that individual characteristics may impact of the efficacy or even likelihood of heutagogy, would the coach’s level and/or nature of development also act as a mediating influence? Research has already highlighted how the training and accreditation methods employed may influence attitude towards innovation (Collins, Martindale, Burke & Cruickshank, 2015). Of particular relevance, the use of an expertise-focused approach, employing the ideas of Professional Judgement and Decision Making (PJDM – Abraham & Collins, 2011; Collins & Collins, 2014) would seem to explicitly encourage a heutagogic approach due to its emphasis on reflection, innovation and considering alternatives.

Such benefits should accrue for coaches at all levels, were such an approach to be employed. Given the current predominance of competency-based assessment, however, it may be that appropriate reflection and seeking for innovation will only “kick in” at higher levels of qualification. As a consequence, heutagogic approaches may be more impactful with more senior coaches. We would hope not, of course. Certainly, if all reflective coaches are seen as experimenters (Schön, 1983) then heutagogy will work with all.

There is further evidence of the self-directed development approach implicit within the work of Collins, Collins and Carson (2016) on intuition. Their examination of high level

coaches in adventure sports and rugby demonstrated the use of Type 1 and Type 2 thinking (Kahneman, 2011) when quick-fire decisions were taken. As a matter of course, the coaches in this study tended to reflect back on quick decisions, an action often leading them to seek out new areas of knowledge to ensure both current and future decisions were optimised. Taken with earlier ideas, this suggests that the self-driven search for new knowledge which characterises heutagogy may be a characteristic of higher level coaches, or at least (reflecting the previous section) those with the right precursive attributes as well. Whether this is as a result of individual tendency, experience or training awaits investigation.

Conclusion

We hope to have offered a reasoned argument that heutagogy could be a useful part of the coach development diet but, perhaps, only for certain individuals who have acquired a level of maturity, attitude and approach which equips them for it. There is certainly evidence for what such a level would comprise of. For example, the importance of metacognition to coaching has already been shown, especially in hyper-dynamic environments such as adventure sports (Collins, Carson & Collins, 2016). It would seem that the challenges inherent in adventure sports coaching may “encourage” or even require coaches to take a more heutagogic approach than their peers in more traditional sporting paradigms.

There is also evidence that better preparatory education may facilitate heutagogy. Work on the use of online blogs as a tool in coach development has shown that, whilst some benefits can be gained by using the approach with student coaches, these benefits are greater and more impactful once certain educational inputs have been completed (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015b; Stoszkowski, Collins & Olsson, 2015).

Finally, there are already programmes of study which incorporate many elements of the heutagogic approach. The Professional Doctorate in Elite Performance (UCLan, 2016) offers coaches and others an opportunity to self-initiate study in a chosen area of vocational

interest, albeit that subsequent outputs must be externally structured to meet the requirements of the degree. We would suggest that a totally heutagogic programme leading to an academic award is some way off. However, it is good to report the successes associated with this first application of its principles.

In concluding our critical overview of heutagogy, we should reiterate some pragmatic points. Firstly, whilst there will always be some individuals who will employ this approach, we would suggest that only some will optimally benefit from it. We do feel that changes to the educational and accreditation processes employed may generate some extremely beneficial enhancement of individual openness and curiosity (Collins et al., 2015) and that this, in turn, would lead to a more heutagogic environment. That is, however, a more multifaceted argument than is appropriate here. Secondly, we would argue that there will always be a need for some tutorial or leadership role, making the exercise closer to andragogy than heutagogy in its purest sense. After all, there are so many urban myths and confusions which permeate even the most learned of professions: a situation which led Kirschner and van Merriënboer (2013) to observe of the education profession whether “learners really know best” (p. 169). Of relevance to our present purpose, this paper was somewhat critical of the learner as self-educator approach. Perhaps we are best closing with a recent quote from an author writing on heutagogy: “learners will require ongoing instructor guidance and support throughout the learning process if they are to develop the capability of self-direction” (Blaschke, 2012, p. 66). So, in summary, although not an unachievable never-never land, it would seem that nirvana may still be someway off!

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Table 1

The Pedagogy-Andragogy-Heutagogy Continuum

Aspect	Pedagogy	Andragogy	Heutagogy
Locus of control	Teacher directs what, how and when anything is learned	Self-directed	Self-determined
Level of cognition	Cognitive	Meta-cognitive	Epistemic
Developmental emphasis	Acquisition	Competency	Capability
Role of teacher	Designs the learning process, imposes material	Enabler or facilitator	Develop the learner's capability
Focus of learning	Subject centred, prescribed curriculum and planned sequences	Task or problem centred	Pro-active context shaping
Reasons for learning	Learn in order to advance to next stage	Learn when they experience a need to know	Learning is non-linear and based on identification of the potential to learn in novel situations
Learner's experience	Little worth	Important	Greatly important

Adapted from Blaschke (2012), Ekoto and Gaikwad (2015) and McKeown (2011)