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LEARNING ORIENTED ASSESSMENT IN COACH EDUCATION

Abstract

As sports coaching continues to professionalise, the demand for and importance placed upon high-quality education and development programmes for sports coaches is increasing. As a result, the landscape of provision is changing and there is now a recognition of the key role that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) play in the education, development and assessment of sports coaches. In this insights paper, we argue that since there is a scarcity of research focused solely on assessment as a feature of coach education programmes, there is something to be gained from examining how HEIs assess sports coaches. This represents an important contribution to the research literature, given that assessment is a feature of nearly all coach education programmes and the attainment of a specific award communicates to stakeholders (e.g., employers, athletes, parents) that a precise standard of practice has been met. As such, we identify how some HEIs are addressing the issue of assessment with sports coaches and highlight a series of assessment principles, alongside practical examples from the literature, which intend to stimulate conversation in what we argue is an important area of study.

Keywords: assessment strategies, coach assessment, coach learning, higher education, social-constructivism

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The Research Context

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While sports coaching is societally important, concerns about the quality of coaching practice have grown in recent years (North, 2017). Quality of practice, it is suggested, is connected to the development of sports coaching as a profession (Lyle, 2002; Lyle & Cushion, 2016) and coach education undoubtedly plays a role. Increasingly, this has been recognised by the sports coaching community and coach education is receiving a significant amount of attention (Hay, Dickens, Crudginton, & Engstrom, 2012). As a result, the demand for and importance placed upon coach education has increased. Indeed, Hay et al. (2012) suggest that “acceptance of this reality has been reflected in the investment by sports and sporting organisations in formal and non-formal coach education programs such as coaching workshops, coaching accreditation schemes and tertiary/university-based courses” (p. 188). It is argued, therefore, that coach education programmes are a key feature of a coach’s professional development (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2012). In fact, in many instances, the ability to undertake their role as a coach depends upon it (i.e., coach licensing).

Against this backdrop, there has been notable growth in the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world designing and delivering sport coaching bachelor degree programmes (Kjær, 2019; Lara-Bercial et al., 2016; Trudel, Milestetd, & Culver, 2020). Typically, these programmes involve three to four years of study and prepare students for employment as a sports coach. It could even be argued that the HEI sector is now the largest formal coach education provider, facilitating diverse routes into paid coaching roles (Milistetd, Trudel, Rynne, Mesquita, & do Nascimento, 2018). Indeed, Gano-Overway and Diffenbach (2019) recently identified 308 HEIs in the USA that offer courses with sports coaching in the

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title, while 67,000 students in the UK were enrolled in sport related programs in 2016/17 (HESA, 2020). This has not always been the case, however, as traditionally coach education has been the exclusive domain of specific sporting NGBs and federations. As one of the many diverse functions of an NGB (Piggott, 2012), coach education serves as a way to train and certify coaches in a specific sport, with the intended outcome of growing a coaching workforce able to meet participant demand. Although these sport-specific and NGB-led coach education programmes still play a dominant role in a coach's professional development, supplementary qualifications and accreditation are becoming more widely accepted and play a role in a sports coach's increasingly blended learning and development journey.

The purpose of the present article is to highlight HEIs as a significant contributor to coach education, while exploring what can be learned from the ways in which they carry out this work. In the following sections, we “zoom in” on the ways in which NGBs and HEIs undertake assessment with sports coaches and identify some potential issues and opportunities. Then, we outline three assessment principles that we believe could enhance the assessment experience and outcomes for sports coaches, followed by examples of the practical application of each principle in a HEI context. We recognise that other best practice principles exist (cf. Abraham, Muir, & Morgan, 2010) and the three we present are by no means the only ones, yet it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider them all and as such, we have made choices based upon those which we believe might be most readily adopted and could provide the greatest initial return.

Coach Education, Higher Education and Assessment: Issues and Opportunities

Although the field of research concerned with coach education is a maturing one, the literature to date has predominantly focussed on NGB-led provision. Indeed, a recent review by Trudel et al. (2020) discovered that just 38 peer-reviewed articles exploring sport coach

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education programmes in higher education (HE) have been published since 2000, with 61% of these articles published much more recently (i.e., between 2015 and 2018). With regard to NGB-led provision, the research literature has typically taken a disparaging view and is largely pessimistic about the impact of coach education on coaching practice and the contribution it can make to coach learning (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Piggott, 2012). The research often highlights how coaches can find coach education to be far removed from the realities of coaching practice (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003) suggesting that there exists only a loose fit between coaching practice and coach education. As such, general criticisms of coach education have led contemporary scholars to suggest a range of different pedagogical approaches that may remedy some of the concerns expressed within the research; for example, experiential learning (Cronin & Lowes, 2016) and heutagogical approaches (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2017). Yet, with such a heavy focus on teaching and learning strategies, very little attention has been paid to how coaches are assessed, how assessment contributes to coach learning and the extent to which teaching, learning and assessment strategies are congruent. To our knowledge, only the work of Hay et al. (2012) considers the matter in any detail, and they suggest that:

Contemporary discussions of learning and pedagogy in formal coach education settings have underestimated the potential contribution of assessment to the field. We believe that this is a significant oversight that both fails to recognise key aspects of pedagogy and learning, and overlooks opportunities for optimising coach and athlete development (p. 189).

At the time of writing, coaches enrolled on NGB-led coach education programmes are most often (with some exceptions) assessed against a set of predetermined observable

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competencies (Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruickshank, 2015) in endpoint, performative, ‘high stakes’ scenarios (Harrison, Könings, Schuwirth, Wass, & van der Vleuten, 2017). Indeed, NGBs (specifically their administrative function) typically seek to ensure that coaches meet or exceed a specific standard and that those standards are recognised across the wider sector. Situating assessment within this paradigm suggests a certain a level of confidence that there is objectivity and rigour in the process, and a strong belief (by both coach, coach educator and awarding organisation) in the validity of the ‘grade’ awarded, with the feedback provided helping the student to pass future, similar, assessments (Harrison et al., 2017). However, research focused specifically on assessment as a feature of coach education is (at the time of writing) relatively scarce. As a result, little work has been done to move the field beyond the assessment approach described above. For example, exploring how alternative approaches to assessment might place greater emphasis on coach learning alongside certification. One of the few pieces of academic literature which does shine a light on assessment, suggests that “learning-oriented, authentic, valid and socially just assessment practices have much to offer both coach accreditation and continuing professional development.” (Hay et al., 2012, p. 196). Nevertheless, it would seem that conversations about coach education programmes typically overlook issues of assessment, and instead focus attention on how coaches learn (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle & Rynne, 2009; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) and experience coach education (Piggott, 2012). Of course, this gap in the scholarly literature may be attributable to the fact that NGBs don’t often study their assessment practices on coach education programmes; however, the apparent absence of much critical thought given to assessment practices does suggest that the recent growth in (and focus on) HEI-led provision represents an opportunity to stimulate greater discussion and collaboration between the two contexts.

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In the following section, we briefly outline a number of assessment principles that we believe could enhance the assessment experience and outcomes for sports coaches. We present these from a social-constructivist perspective, since it would appear that many NGBs in particular are increasingly drawing from this theory of learning to inform their programme design and delivery (Callary, Culver, Werthner, & Bales, 2014; Chapman, Richardson, Cope, & Cronin, 2019; Paquette, Hussain, Trudel, & Camiré, 2014; Paquette & Trudel, 2018). Yet, we must be clear that it is not our intention to advocate any one singular approach, indeed we do recognise that limited evaluation work has been undertaken to understand the efficacy of not just coach education underpinned by social-constructivism, but coach education more broadly (Dohme, Rankin-Wright & Lara-Bercial, 2019; Gilbert & Trudel, 1999 and Cassidy, Potrac & McKenzie, 2006). Finally, we provide examples of the practical application of each principle in a HEI context. Consequently, we hope to encourage more carefully considered approaches to the assessment of sports coaches on coach education programmes broadly, while encouraging debate within an important but sparse area of coach education research.

Assessment as a Feature of Coach Education Programmes: Principles and Examples

Assessment is commonly considered as the practice of making a singular observable judgment against a piece of work (e.g., a practical performance) at the end of a programme of study, in a simulated set of circumstances and against well-rehearsed problems (Gervais, 2016). More recently, however, attitudes toward assessment practices have shifted in some cases and examples of different approaches to assessment in coach education are beginning to emerge. Although the assessment of observable competencies still dominates, in some instances this is supplemented by, and value is now placed upon, coaches' capacity to solve context-specific problems, develop metacognitive skills such as self-monitoring (Blumenfeld et al., 1991),

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collaborate with peers (Adams, 2006; Shepard, 2000), and ultimately value and work toward expertise (Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruickshank, 2015). The ‘drama’ of ‘high stakes’ endpoint assessment (Harrison, et al., 2017) has, on occasion, made way for an approach to assessment that is divergent in nature, ongoing and often embedded or at least smoothed out (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Many of these examples are located in a HEI context and as a result, we will focus on three principles which we believe have been largely overlooked elsewhere but could have wider application. It is important to note here that we accept the unique context that HEIs, NGBs and other organisations responsible for coach education exist within and the range of affordances they each have. For example, constraining features of these contexts are often resource-based (i.e., cost and time) (Maclean & Lorimer, 2016). For this reason, we have been careful to offer practical strategies that we believe can help mitigate these issues.

Principle 1: Assessment that is ongoing and embedded

While assessment most typically takes place at the end of coach education programmes, we argue that a series of ongoing no or low risk assessments embedded within the programme may bring about desirable outcomes. This principle of assessment practice is not new (cf. Sadler, 1989) but has come to prominence more recently as a rebalancing of the educational debate from performance to learning has taken place (Adams, 2006). According to Carless (2007), assessment tasks should “aim to spread attention across a period of study, not lead to short-term bursts of sustained study” (p. 59). By smoothing out the journey in this way and promoting the even distribution of effort, there is the potential for a greater connection between the learner and that which is being learned (Carless, 2007). Adams (2006) argues that not only does this require a reorientation of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment, but indeed the latter should be embedded deeply within the former.

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On a Physical Education bachelor's degree programme at a Brazilian University, Milistetd et al. (2019) worked with 32 student-coaches over a course of 18 weeks with the goal of preparing "students to plan and conduct training sessions in team sports" (p. 296). A wide variety of tools were used to assess the student-coaches, including individual reflective portfolios, group activities, presentations, the planning and delivery of coaching practice, reflections (based on video review of one's own practice) and the observation of others. Student-coaches reported positive experiences of engaging with the assessment, noting that the 'ongoing' nature provided an opportunity to continually assimilate new knowledge and understanding each week. The authors of the study also noted how ongoing and embedded assessment afforded student-coaches the opportunity to appreciate the evolution of their own ideas. As such, we would encourage those tasked with designing and delivering coach education programmes to consider how, for example, project-based assessment (Bell, 2010; English & Kitsantas, 2013) might be used to afford coaches the opportunity to curate evidence of learning across the duration of an entire programme of study. Indeed, this offers coaches the opportunity to seek regular feedback from a coach educator, self-assess and share their work with others for further guidance – all prior to the awarding of any 'grade'.

Principle 2: Assessment that is collaborative in nature

If assessment is ongoing and embedded throughout a programme of study, it then becomes possible to invite others in as part of the process. Social-constructivism, as a theory of learning, regards stakeholders beyond the traditional teacher-learner dyad as integral to the learning process. While Black and Wiliam (2009) suggest that peers are a useful instructional resource, Lave and Wenger (1991) draw attention to the rich and diverse field of actors that play roles within the learning process. We argue that as teaching, learning and assessment become

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integrated this can be true of assessment too. This is consistent with the work of Adams (2006), who suggests that there is a need to “involve pupils in self and peer assessment through the use of discursive and collaborative learning and teaching strategies” (p. 253). Further, Woodburn (2017) suggests that a wide set of stakeholders can play an important role in drawing learners’ attention to feedback they otherwise may have missed, which may be even more relevant for novice coaches, yet we can all find self-insight a significant challenge (Dunning, 2005).

In recent years, examples of this type of collaborative assessment practice have begun to emerge in HEIs. For example, in a study involving student-coaches from two UK HEIs, Stoszowski, McCarthy and Fonseca (2017) used online collaborative group blogs (www.wordpress.com) to capture and assesses learning during a year-long applied sports coaching module. Over the course of their study, the student-coaches shared their practical coaching experiences with peers and discussed coaching issues that they faced in the field, helping each other to resolve the issues as they arose. Alongside this, student-coaches had access to an online video platform (www.coach-logic.com), whereby they could upload video content from their practice for others to view and comment on in a dialogic review process. The student-coaches were then graded against a clear and transparent set of success criteria, which encouraged them to contribute regularly to both platforms in a sufficiently critical manner. In a follow up study, McCarthy and Stoszowski (2018) concluded that this type of approach to assessment is particularly efficacious for coaches who are motivated and have prior experience of being self-determined in their learning. For these reasons, we contend that collaborative online opportunities using existing Web 2.0 technologies, which often involve no upfront cost to coach or organisation, would be particularly relevant, especially for experienced coaches (i.e., those with applied experiences to draw upon) on NGB coach education programmes.

Principle 3: Assessment that meets the needs of a wide variety of motivations and goals

As formal coach education is most commonly criticised for failing to recognise and meet the needs of individual coaches (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2018; Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Piggott, 2012), undertaking assessment using a wider variety of assessment tools might be beneficial. According to Shepard (2000), a “broader range of assessment tools is needed to capture important learning goals,” and it is recommended that those tasked with assessment design “devise more open-ended performance tasks to ensure that students are able to reason critically, to solve complex problems, and to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts” (p. 8). For example, projects and e-portfolios (Bright, 2016) are suggested as just two of many tools which can be used to assess learners in a way which is consistent with this guidance.

Within HEIs, a wide range of contemporary tools are being used to assess sports coaches which consider the variance in motivations and goals of student-coaches, some of which have begun to appear in the academic literature. Most recently, Stoszkowski, Hodgkinson and Collins (2020) explored the use of Flipgrid, a video-based online communication tool that enables face to face, short verbal interactions, as a means to improve collaborative online learning and critical reflection. A cohort of final year undergraduate student-coaches in the UK used the smartphone-based app over the course of a 15-week semester to debate coaching topics in relation to their own coaching contexts and professional practice. Results showed good support for the approach, with participants exhibiting more frequent and more critical interactions compared to written response and interaction formats. Stoszkowski, Hodgkinson and Collins (2020) posit that the short, sharp and electronically enabled communication that mobile based apps such as Flipgrid offer are more in line with Generation Z individual’s daily experience, therefore providing

familiarity and a more natural (or at least student-palatable) means of engaging in reflective thinking with their peers.

Conclusion: What is There to Learn by Exploring these Strategies?

In this insights article we suggest that despite assessment being a feature of nearly all coach education programmes, approaches to assessment have been largely overlooked and/or given insufficient consideration (Hay et al., 2012). Secondly, we recognise that there has been a significant recent growth in HEI-led coach education provision and argue that by directing our attention towards how assessment is being designed and delivered in this setting, it becomes possible to move the field forward. Driven by the three principles of assessment that we shine a light on within this article, we provide practical examples of what we believe to be authentic, learning-oriented assessment, which might be useful for organisations responsible for coach education to consider when designing and delivering assessment as part of their programmes.

More specifically, we believe it may be fruitful for the coach education community (by the broadest possible definition) to explore the use of a wider variety of assessment tools and, in doing so, it may be possible to better meet coaches' diverse range of learning goals and motivations through more open-ended activities (Shepard, 2000). Furthermore, with a wider variety of more open-ended assessment methods and activities, it becomes possible to embed assessment into a coach education programme over a longer period of time, which we argue might replace the high stakes, endpoint, summative assessments that typify coach education courses. We believe assessment can be intertwined with and not simply adjunct to, teaching and learning activities (Adams, 2006). While this not only provides coaches with the opportunity to assimilate and apply new knowledge on an ongoing basis (Milistetd et al., 2019), it also ensures that learning and performance insight is generated frequently and, as a result, feedback can be

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provided more often to the coach. Finally, if a wider variety of assessment modes are used in an ongoing and embedded basis, we invite programme designers and deliverers to consider how assessment could be collaborative in nature. That is to say, assessment where learners achieve goals through interacting, collaboration and sharing with others (Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

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