Reflective conversations as a basis for sport coaches' learning: a theory-informed pedagogic design for educating reflective practitioners

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Abstract

There is a clear need to design more effective professional learning environments, particularly in sport coaching as a developing educational profession. The purpose of this study was to investigate the interplay between theory-informed pedagogic design, the role of the coach developer, and sport coaches' perceived learning in a Higher Education online undergraduate module on reflective practice. The project involved designing a module based on domain-specific theories of coaches' learning, and implementing multiple 'reflective conversations' with 21 professional association football coaches to structure their learning. Thematic analysis of data from 24 reflective conversations, five follow up semi-structured interviews and four focus group interviews, as well as a coach developer interview, determined perceptions of design, delivery and development. Findings demonstrated that theory-informed design and the aligned skill-set of the coach developer was significant in developing depth of participant coaches' understanding, and connecting theory to authentic reflective practice. The findings provide evidence to support the need for developing underpinning pedagogic design in the effectiveness of professional learning environments for developing reflective practitioners in educative professions such as sport coaching.

Keywords: reflective conversations, reflective practice, sport coaching, higher education

Introduction

The drive to advance and professionalise sport coaching as an educational endeavour has led to the development of extensive formal programmes for coaches' learning (North, Piggott, Lara-Bercial, Abraham & Muir, 2018). Despite an increasing emphasis on the processes and structures through which coaches learn and develop their knowledge, the evidence base on which to develop optimal learning opportunities is limited (Williams, Alder and Bush, 2016; Culver, Werthner & Trudel, 2019) and formal coach education remains a contested and territorialised space. This is exacerbated by a fragmented coach development landscape in which there is no coherent and centralised agenda for coach education outside of sport specific domains. In the United Kingdom (UK), formal coach education and continuing professional development (CPD) has traditionally been delivered by Sport Governing Bodies (SGBs) who are responsible for their own 'technical' (i.e. sport-specific) curriculum. At the same time, some SGBs look to wider generic coaching frameworks such as the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC)[1] or International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE, 2016) accreditation standards for the endorsement of their educational provision.

Historically, coach education has been criticised for its failure to impact on coaches' professional learning (see Jones and Wallace, 2005; Nelson, Cushion & Potrac, 2012; Stodter and Cushion, 2019a, *inter alia*). However, standardised, content-driven instruction based on rather simplistic views of learning has made way for shifts towards more participatory, 'learner centred' perspectives (Dempsey, Cope, Richardson, Littlewood and Cronin, 2021), embracing a variety of strategies in the development of coaches and coaching (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). As a response to academic critique and practitioner dissatisfaction, contemporary formal coach education has begun to incorporate approaches such as problem based learning (PBL; e.g. Jones & Turner, 2006), communities of practice (e.g. Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014), mentoring (e.g.

Sawuik & Groom, 2017), reflection (e.g. Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie & Nevill, 2001; Kuklick, Gearity & Thompson, 2015) and experiential in-situ practice (e.g. Cronin & Lowes, 2016). For example, the two largest SGBs in the UK, the English Football Association and the Rugby Football Union, have embedded in-context visits into their formal qualifications, with educators supporting coaches in their environments with their athletes.

This evolution towards more interactive and reflective teaching strategies responds to a growing appreciation of the social and cultural aspects of coaches' learning (Ciampolini, Milistetd, Rynne, Brasil & do Nascimento, 2019), and represents an attempt to help learners construct new knowledge around individualised issues in context, rather than predetermined topics they fail to relate to (Mallett & Dickens, 2009). Outwardly 'learner centred' approaches to professional development are said to better align with the realities of practice in sport coaching and the complex needs of coaches as professionals (Dempsey et al. 2021), although any evidence of increased impact on learning, knowledge or practice is not yet clear (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). With 'learner centred' discourses proliferating, it is crucial to shift critical attention to the structures designed to support coaches' learning, and in particular the increasing recognition of the importance of those facilitating learning. Indeed, the need to develop, support and challenge coach learners rather than simply transmit knowledge is reflected in recent moves to define the wide-ranging role of 'coach developers' (Callary and Gearity, 2020).

While research exploring the role of the coach developer is receiving more attention, there are questions remaining on the concepts and tools they draw upon to inform their development of coaches' learning, thinking and practice (Stodter & Cushion, 2019b). Nonetheless, SGBs are investing significant sums of money into this workforce. For example, some SGBs and UK Sport, the UK's high performance sports agency, employ staff whose sole responsibility is to support coach developers working in the Olympic and Paralympic

performance pathways, illustrating the value attached to continual learning. Therefore, research that seeks to better understand how coach developers can work effectively to bring about positive outcomes for coaches would seem useful in helping to support organisations with the programmes they offer, as well as helping coach developers consider how they position themselves with coaches. Key research within education, similar to sport coaching, suggests there is a need for more detailed, evidence-informed and context-specific theoretical frameworks to underpin and guide effective practice by educators/developers (Neelen & Kirschner, 2020).

The aims of this paper are to contribute to an ongoing dialogue on coach education that, similar to education more broadly, seeks to move past 'informed guesswork' and bridge empirically supported research and theoretically robust practice (cf. Neelam & Kirschner, 2020). This is important given the propensity for intuitively appealing – yet fundamentally inaccurate – 'neuromyths' to gain traction in education (e.g., Bailey, Madigan, Cope & Nicholls, 2018; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). There is a need to develop models or frameworks for coach education with specific relevance to the complexity of coaches' practice and learning (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2006). Doing so, alongside greater critical engagement with the central tenets behind learning theories, can provide a frame of reference for examining and thus guiding how coaches learn.

Theory

Drawing upon theory can help to clarify terminology that is inconsistently employed in coach development (Cushion, 2006). Stodter and Cushion (2017) focused on *learning* as a term to bring together research into youth association football (soccer) coaches in understanding the broader learning of coaches. This research used the principles of grounded theory, drawing upon several in-depth layers of longitudinal, practice-linked qualitative data to explain and

represent a ‘filter’ process of learning whereby coaches adopted, adapted and rejected concepts relevant to their professional activity based on individual biography and practice context. The grounded theory additionally demonstrates how coaches actively constructed and ‘tried out’ knowledge for use in socially situated coaching practice through ‘reflective conversations’. This parallels Schön’s (1983, 1987) theoretical term for the repeating spiral of appreciation (problem setting), action (generating strategies, experimenting, and evaluating) and reappreciation through which practitioners in a number of domains including teaching and coaching learn from their experiences (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Kuklick et al. 2015; Schön, 1991). The concept of reflective conversations appeared in Schön’s original work in design education (Schön, 1983) and its application to coaching places it as a process central to reflection, which mediates experience and knowledge. Gilbert and Trudel (2001) found that model youth coaches’ reflection was characterised by reflective conversations triggered by coaching issues in context and shaped by the coach’s personal goals and role frame. Coaches often cycled through a ‘subloop’ of strategy generation, experimentation, and evaluation many times, using real or simulated virtual-world experiments to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies alone or with others.

Underpinning the reflective conversation metaphor is recognition of the construction of meaning and coherence between practitioner and the materials, people and contexts with which they work. The ‘reflective’ aspect denotes a ‘talking back’ of situations, resulting in reflection-in-action on the construction, framing and solving of the problem (Schön, 1983) as a basis for further action. It is based on an epistemology of dialogic or ‘conversational learning’ (Bamberger and Schön, 1983), which means that knowledge is relative and reasoned perspectives may be reached by engaging in dialogue to evaluate and make sense of alternatives (Jones & Hemmestad, 2019). The concept of dialogue helps to explain how two or more parties engage each other in a process of reasoning through discussing ideas to open themselves to

new ways of thinking (Wegerif, 2008). It seems that this reflective conversation process is largely tacit and taken-for-granted by coaches (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Stodter and Cushion (2017). Yet for coaches, having the knowledge and skills to engage in processes of deliberate reflective practice is a key vehicle for encouraging, rather than suppressing, individual subjectivities and addressing issues pertinent to learners' realities and practical needs (Piggott, 2012).

Evidence suggests that the ability to reflect on practice, particularly individually, is a challenging endeavour for coaches (e.g., Hall & Gray, 2016), and – for coach developers – is a difficult concept to enact in 'learner centred' ways (Downham and Cushion, 2020). People are constrained by their beliefs, biases, and knowledge (Pajares, 1992), and have difficulty bringing to the surface what is not conscious to them (Hall & Gray, 2016). Despite recommendations that educators should consider how reflective skill development can be initiated, supported and sustained, and that they should provide some structure to reflection (Knowles et al., 2001; Knowles and Saxton, 2010), there is limited guiding evidence. Generic models of reflection developed for use in education (i.e., Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984), Gibbs' Reflective Model (1998)) are often borrowed to guide reflective practice in sport coaching (e.g., Rodrigue & Trudel, 2018; Stirling, 2013), yet it is unclear whether this is relevant or helpful in supporting learning within this context. Thus, given the suggested importance of reflection to coaching and its establishment in the vocabulary of coach learning (cf. Cushion, 2016), there is a notable lack of research outlining how coaches learn to be reflective practitioners and the associated processes and outcomes.

At the core of any learning process are the learner's perceptions of teacher characteristics, instructional strategies and course designs, and the interactions between them (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). This study investigates the utility of applying evidence-informed,

domain-specific theories of coaches' learning to structure the design and delivery of a formalised coach education module focused on reflective practice. It aimed to answer the research question: 'what is the interplay between theory-informed pedagogic design, the role of the coach developer, and sport coaches' perceptions and understanding of reflective practice?' Namely, Stodter and Cushion's (2017) 'filter' process of coach learning and Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) representation of Schön's reflective conversation served as conceptual tools to inform pedagogy. While neither framework was initially developed for coach developers to base their practice on, each provides a way to think about how developers could work with coaches to support learning. As such, this study extends existing research by offering and investigating an evidence-informed pedagogical framework upon which educators could inform their practice to more effectively support professional learning.

Methods

Context

The setting was a module in the first year of a three-year online distance learning undergraduate degree programme specific to football coaching. Recent advances in coach education point to a trend towards online delivery as a means of supporting professional learning and development (Cushion and Townsend, 2019), and blended delivery in partnership with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Jones, 2019). Despite an increase in the use of technology (e.g., Driska, 2018), such modes of delivery are undertheorised within coaching and education. Therefore, there is a pressing need for evidence that considers the interaction of learners, pedagogy and pedagogic design in this particular setting (Cushion and Townsend, 2019).

The programme was directed at experienced football coaches who were required to hold a current contract with an Academy club[2] in the UK, a Collegiate club in North America, an

equivalent, or any levels above. Students were coaching regularly alongside their studies, often on a professional, paid basis, and were predominantly located across the UK and North America. The module, titled *Reflective Practice and Applied Pedagogy in Football*, was a compulsory introductory course intended to enable students to address the principles of learning and reflective practice and incorporate these into the coaching process, as well as developing reflective skills relevant to applying pedagogical strategies. The first two authors embedded a contemporary grounded theory of coaches' learning (Stodter & Cushion, 2017), as discussed in the previous section, into the pedagogical design, delivery and assessment of a module, to align with and 'model' the module topic and content (see Table 1). This was intended to structure students' learning through the stages of the theoretical framework across the 12-week module delivery period.

A central pedagogical feature was student coaches' participation in 'reflective conversations' with the coach developer to complement and make sense of their learning. The coach developer had eight years' experience of teaching sport coaching in higher education institutions, and at the time of study, was working for a large SGB in a coach education curriculum development role, alongside being an active researcher of sport coaches' learning and development. He perceived learning as being a collaborative, dialogic process between coach developer and coach, with the way dialogue playing out being based on an assessment of the coach's current knowledge and understanding of their practice. Therefore, 'dialogue' through reflective conversations looked different based on the coach and the circumstances under which they were being supported (i.e., time and resource available). They were however framed using the specified theories of coaches' learning (see Table 1). Taking place over Skype™, the starting point was coaches' practical experiences in context with the coach developer helping coaches understand why their practice was unfolding as described. The coach developer first listened to the coaches' identification of an issue before offering his own

thoughts based on what he had heard and seen through coaches' sharing video of their practice. This was an attempt to prevent immediate rejection when coaches could not see how new ideas (concepts) fitted with their biography or could be applied in their context, instead supporting coaches in thinking about how to implement these in practice. Following the theoretical frameworks, the developer also helped coaches to evaluate 'what worked' and explored how they knew it had worked. Suggesting resources or ideas to 'try out' or experiment with based on the module content and learning activities, also facilitated evaluation and adaptation of practice. The reflective conversation framework was an integral support mechanism by which to systematically assist students, who were summatively assessed through a written reflective portfolio.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Participants

Participants were 21 professional football coaches and one coach developer purposively sampled from two module cohorts consisting of 44 students in total. Participants were in their first year of undergraduate study and were qualified at UKCC Level 2[1] (or equivalent) as a minimum, with on average 9.6 years' coaching experience (S.D. = 5.8; see Table 2). Each participant was employed as a coach in settings ranging from youth Academies to adult women's football, with some heading club youth development pathways or owning private coaching companies. Each took part in the research voluntarily with no repercussions for their engagement in the module or assessment.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee and all participants completed informed consent forms before taking part in the research. Data were collected using a combination of recorded reflective conversations, semi-structured follow up individual and focus group interviews, and a semi-structured coach developer interview.

Over the course of the module, 24 reflective conversations with 11 participants lasting an average of 36 minutes were recorded (range = 14 to 50 minutes). Reflective conversations took place with the coach developer over Skype™ and were a key delivery mechanism for the module, designed to promote reflection and learning through a theoretically informed structure (See Table 1). Following the stages of Stodter and Cushion (2017) and Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) theories, multiple conversations covered coaching context, goals and role framing, issue setting, strategy generation through applying pedagogical concepts, practical experimentation and longer-term implementation. Coaches sharing video recordings of their practice often served as a stimulus for reflective conversations with the coach developer. While these conversations were not stimulated recall interviews, they did share characteristics of this approach, namely bringing coaches closer to their practice by basing discussion on what they actually did, rather than what they thought (Dempsey, 2010) The one-to-one conversations attempted to engage student coaches in dialogue regarding their coaching. Features of dialogic conversation included listening to and caring for learners, and a recognition that learning and development is a joint and shared responsibility (Bamberger and Schön, 1983) between coach developer and coach.

Five months following the completion of the module, timed to coincide with a face-to-face residential phase of the degree course, five individual semi-structured interviews and four focus group interviews were conducted, lasting an average of 31 minutes (range = 22 to 44 minutes). While all 21 participants took part in reflective conversations through the module,

three of the 11 who had these recorded and transcribed took part in follow up interviews and focus groups. Three more participants were interviewed individually, and seven took part in focus groups only (see Table 2). Participants were allocated to individual and/or focus group interviews depending on their availability, with each taking place in person in a university classroom. Focus groups consisted of two to three participants and were an expedient method to allow participants to be reminded of, comment on and question their own and each other's experiences, thus enabling insight into their perceptions of how the module stimulated learning and development (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015). Based on the research question, a semi-structured guide was developed for individual and focus group interviews which prompted participants to consider both the module and their wider coaching and learning in their responses. Questions centred on individual biography, use of reflection, perceptions of module delivery, learning and the reflective conversation process (e.g., Where did you develop your reflective skills? What did you learn from the module? What did you think about the structure of the reflective conversations?). At the time of the follow up data collection, student coaches had already received their confirmed module grades and were assured that they could speak freely and anonymously without negative consequences. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted by the first author who was the module leader, as well as two research assistants; none of whom had been involved in teaching the module.

The coach developer, who delivered all teaching and reflective conversations on the module, was also interviewed following a semi-structured guide focusing on biography, pedagogical understanding and processes relevant to the module, and reflections on outcomes, success and limitations. This interview lasted 45 minutes, contributing to an overall total of 1017 minutes of collected audio data that was transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Reflective conversations, individual and focus group interview data were analysed according to the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). Guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase model (Braun et al. 2016), following familiarisation that began with reading the reflective conversation transcripts, then individual and focus group interview transcripts, the entire data set was coded. An example code or meaning unit identified at this stage was 'thinking / review', linked to the raw participant quotation, 'I think that when you're not doing a reflection you're kind of just coaching and just doing it, whereas, thinking about how it went and why it went well helps'. The codes were arranged into candidate themes by clustering them around central organising concepts. For example, excerpts linked to 'thinking / review' codes were combined with 'misconceptions of concept of reflection'. At this point, potential themes and sub-themes were refined and reviewed through revisiting the data, generating possible definitions, and a series of discussions between all three authors. This process involved the introduction of theoretical concepts to provide a level of abstraction to the data. Here, the central organising concept 'conceptualising reflective practice and reflection: misunderstandings' whereby participants displayed mixed or confused understandings of reflective practice, was considered alongside theoretical concepts of reflection and grouped alongside sub-themes relating to 'systematic and cyclical process' and 'written reflection'. The resulting theme 'conceptions of reflective practice' was one of three that were clarified through developing definitions and discussion between the first and second author to build depth and detail into the analysis. The three themes were finally refined through the analytic process of writing up within the overall report (Braun et al. 2016).

Results

In this paper we explore the theoretically informed pedagogical design of an online tertiary coach education programme and its influence on coaches' perceptions and understanding of

reflective practice. The following section provides a discussion of the three themes that encapsulated coaches' perceptions of their learning, course design, coach developer characteristics, and the interactions between these factors. These were 1) conceptions of reflective practice, 2) learning to reflect, and 3) supporting reflective practice. Raw data extracts are used to illustrate each theme, labelled by participant number as detailed in table 2.

Conceptions of reflective practice

The first theme related to participants' conceptions of reflective practice. Participants on the whole saw the value of reflective practice as 'an important thing to be able to do' (2, FG), and used it in their coaching as 'something that definitely helps' (14, I). They were motivated to engage with it to improve as coaches, as 'the smart way to put it is that you can only develop in coaching from reflection' (13, I). Despite significant learning content and activities intended to develop student coaches' understanding of reflective practice, participants conceived of it as, similar to previous research (e.g., Authors, 2017), an implicit and informal process that happened 'subconsciously', either 'within the session' (21, FG) or afterwards:

> Probably we all do it by ourselves. As the session finishes, as you're walking in from the pitch or you're in the car, you're going to be thinking about it, what went well, what you'll do again, what you'll change. (19, FG)

Participants framed reflective practice as a systematic and cyclical 'process of plan-do-review' (17, FG), which consisted of simply thinking about and evaluating individual coaching sessions in order to inform future sessions. They gave examples of 'technical' levels of reflection, based on achieving set objectives and effectively applying pedagogical knowledge (Cassidy, Potrac & Jones, 2016; Knowles, Borrie & Telfer, 2005), for instance, 'changes in terms of the format of the session i.e., number of players, space' (4, RC). In line with the findings of Knowles et

al. (2005), ‘formal’ reflection was seen as involving writing, yet followed a similarly simplistic process:

> You write stuff down and you think about and it is my reflections and that is how it works. (12, I)

While coaches sought to evaluate the utility of their coaching practice with a view to generating new strategies (Gilbert and Trudel, 2005), this perspective could be considered ‘shallow’ reflective practice, as it is at odds with recent wide-ranging definitions emphasising conscious examination of self, experiences and responses with a view to gaining new insights and developing knowledge-in-action (e.g., Knowles, Gilbourne, Cropley & Dugdill, 2014). Nevertheless, such definitions also highlight reflection as taking place within the context of practice, and correspondingly, coaches in the current study emphasised practicality with a focus on ‘what works’ supported by their contexts and roles.

> Like, hey that didn’t work or I did it like this and it worked this time or yeah, just by probably spending a lot of time thinking about the success rates of what I do, and the behaviours and testing different ideas that I had. (11, FG)

As one coach described of his coaching context, ‘we have what is called the thinking environment’ (12, I). A clear preference for practical knowledge application and self-referenced judgements of ‘what works’ in these environments mirrors previous research into coaches’ learning (e.g., Nelson et al. 2012; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) where coaches reflect on fundamental schemes and decisions related to practice-design and athlete outcomes. This process formed a basis for coaches to reappreciate and restructure the technical dimensions of their work (cf. Schön, 1983). Indeed, guided by theoretical tenets, the module was both

designed around and resulted in this emphasis on the authentic, context-dependent nature of coaches' work, as seen in the following reflective conversation example:

> 8: And it's still a varied basis on each individual and it needs to be looked at in several different ways because it's got to be different for each individual player. So, with each session I think, well this worked, this didn't have any impact for whatever it might be or what impact it had on the players.
>
> CD: Yeah, absolutely and that's that process there and that's why we have set it up in that way.

Together, these data outline the ways in which reflective practice was understood as 'good' for coaches' development, yet was narrowly conceptualised according to superficial, inward-looking and self-referential judgements about 'what worked', reflecting an instrumental or conservative tradition (cf. Cushion, 2016) that serves to reinforce existing understandings of coaching practice.

Despite participants' rather simplistic and technical conceptions of reflective practice, there were indications that levels of self-awareness and meta-reflection were enhanced through the module. Reflective conversation data demonstrated that coaches talked about a shifting focus, from thinking about and 'diagnosing' (9, RC) problems with their athletes' performance, to figuratively 'stepping back' and questioning themselves and locating potential issues instead within their own coaching. In a similar vein, data from the following reflective conversation, conducted towards the end of the module delivery, demonstrates a moment of reflecting on reflection:

> A lot of the reflections I was doing were very superficial and I thought to myself, what's the point in it, the need of reflection, and that's when I identified that there was actually a point to it (9, RC).

This introspective process of personal inquiry about reflection itself bodes well for coaches' developing identities as reflective practitioners (Canning & Callan, 2010) and their ongoing lifelong learning capacity. The development of metacognitive skills has been recommended for coach education to support a deep approach to learning (Paquette & Trudel, 2018), as it has been argued that only those who have learned the importance of thinking about their own thinking are effectively positioned to teach others (Greene, 1995).

Learning to reflect

The second theme highlighted participants' explanations of how they learned to use reflection and reflective practice. Participants reported that the ability to reflect was picked up and self-taught through 'a collection of all the experiences that we've had' (14, FG) such as playing the sport and being coached by others, formal coach education and involvement in related professions such as teaching and the emergency services. The following quotations illustrate this perceived learning from several interacting sources, echoing the consensus of previous research in coach learning (e.g., Cushion et al, 2010):

> I think reflection in general probably started from when I was playing. I just reflect on my game…I definitely developed them probably watching my coach be bad at things. And then being like no I wouldn't do it that way or I like the way he did that. Then when I started coaching, applying them same things. (2, FG)

> When you go on your [SGB] courses, they asked you to reflect on your sessions. Then you draw it from a bit of yourself and externally as well. (11, FG)

Some participants discussed their previous experiences of formal coach education, suggesting that ‘there wasn’t really a lot of in-depth thinking about individuals and how you reflected on yourself’ (12, I). On completion, taking part in the current module was reported to have provided ‘more detail and more depth about what I already knew’ (1, FG), developing prior understanding of reflection and reflective practice. Learning about ‘different methods to reflect’, predominantly as a function of the reflective conversations, enabled coaches to increase the frequency and in some cases the depth of their reflection. As this example demonstrates, participants reported thinking differently about reflective practice after completing the module:

> I would say that I definitely spend more time, not effort just duration of time, like I slow down and consider things in more ways than I was doing before, you know, and I still do spend more time thinking and reflecting, if not critical just passive on days or trainings. (2, I)

While some participants just did ‘more’ reflection, developing the quality of reflection through ‘deeper’ (12, I) thought and connecting to practice was particularly challenging, as illustrated by the following reflective conversation excerpt:

> Where you [coach developer] said about my reflections needing to show greater depth I wasn’t sure what this might look like... I think that is what I have been finding really difficult because it is not something I really ask myself or really know how I would know this. (4, RC)

For some, though, the reflective conversation process enabled greater depth of reflection, particularly in promoting ‘why questions’ (11, FG) and more adequately framing coaching issues to be reflected on:

> I think it enhanced the reflection skills because [CD] forced you to go a couple of levels deeper than you probably would have done prior, right. So, I missed a training session and got a report from a coach that he kicked a kid out of the session - she was my best player. And it got me thinking, what was going on? Why was she acting like that, what else could have gone wrong in that session, or be presented in a different way that resulted her acting in that way? So, it trained me to think below the surface issue, the first issue. (14, FG)

This example denotes the beginning of an internal reflective conversation by the coach, triggered by the development of a perceived coaching issue as explained by Gilbert & Trudel (2001). Here an enhanced problem-setting process, taking priority over premature problem-solving and reviewing reasoning around the elimination of other alternatives, embraces the value of interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge and can increase coaches' professional effectiveness (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Denison & Avner, 2011; Schön, 1979). Popular models or theories of reflection and experiential learning, such as Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988) and ironically Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) coaching-specific grounded theory were in contrast thought of as something that coaches 'should be aware of' but less relevant to practice, and therefore useful 'only really for like paper writing situations' (2, FG). These data suggest that there was a perceived disconnect between theory, or models of reflection, and coaches' reflective practice in context – even when these theories were grounded in coaching practice. Similarly, a tension between academic conventions in the form of research evidence, and personal conceptions based on past 'on the grass' (14, I) coaching was apparent. While many participants were positive about using research evidence to rationalise and 'back up ideas and theories that I have been using', which 'shone a new light on coaching' (2, FG), some initially rejected 'new' concepts in favour of reliance on their personal theories and experiences. 'Reflection tools' linked to coach developer-led reflective conversations - such as thorough

issue setting and questioning – did help to narrow the perceived theory-practice disconnect, and the third theme illuminates how this was made possible.

Supporting reflective practice

The role and characteristics of the coach developer were reported by participants as significant in supporting the development of their reflective processes. Recognition of the knowledge, skills, and expertise required to be an effective coach developer is growing, yet as a developing profession, evidence to inform practice remains limited (Callary & Gearity, 2020). As such, the coach developer drew upon wider educational literature, namely the concepts of dialogic pedagogy, alongside the domain-specific evidence-informed principles, to underpin effective employment of reflective conversations. For example, a central aspect involved encouraging student coaches to 'lead' the conversations to advance dialogue:

> The whole purpose and premise of a reflective conversation is about putting the ownership or giving ownership to the student. Allowing kind of the power balance, if you like, to be broken down. It was very much a dialogic relationship rather than, 'oh by the way these are important issues or an approach that could have been, or these are some of the issues in teaching and coaching and I want you to reflect on these issues.' To an approach whereby they ultimately spoke to me about, 'this is what I'm thinking is going well or not going well'. (CD, I)

Indeed, student coaches seemed to recognise and value the opportunity to lead conversations. One participant commented 'it is asking those questions in a prompting, right way. [CD] used a lot of open questions rather than closed questions. Allowing people to talk' (12, I). This approach of supporting, questioning and challenging thinking, rather than telling learners what to think was acknowledged:

> [CD] made you think in a different way. And he like, he'd guide you there and he would like…he would give you opportunity to go ok that's good but how about this? It wasn't black and white, and I think that's what reflection is all about. (15, FG)

Relinquishing control of the conversation and allowing coaches greater opportunities to discuss authentic issues relevant to their practice (Chappell & Craft, 2011) was well received:

> He [CD] presented it in a way that wasn't a dictator scenario and that his way is, this is the exact answer, because obviously the topic of the…the topic's not so descriptive but he really engaged you to continue thinking about the topic. (19, FG)

Following Schön's (1987) ideas on educating reflective practitioners, there was no single-track agenda impressed upon coaches. Instead, the effective coach developer possesses a repertoire of options, drawing from them as appropriate and responding to the learner's actions by re-framing, listening, reflecting, engaging in dialogue, and trying again. In so doing, the coach developer also exposes their own thinking, opening up a range of perspectives for consideration. This dialogic approach to working with coaches goes against the historically dominant conservative tradition of coach education delivery, particularly in football (Authors, 2019d). Indeed, one participant drew contrasts with SGB education courses that 'forced reflection and it's dictated by basically what data they want to get out of it, or what they believe you should be reflecting on' (14, FG). Coaches instead welcomed the coach developer showing restraint in imposing knowledge or views of what they should be doing and how they should be working with their athletes. Fostering this two-way relationship between coach and coach developer was particularly important within the online distance learning setting, where students face particular challenges linked to feelings of isolation (Park, 2008). Student coaches pointed out that 'having that person to talk to that is aware of what you are going through is quite nice because you can feel isolated' (13, I).

The level of trust afforded by this way of working facilitated opportunities for new concepts to 'land' with coaches. In line with Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) reflective conversation process, the coach developer supported learners by signposting and engaging with a variety of different learning resources, as a stimulus for coaching strategies to be generated. In contrast with their thoughts on content relating to models for reflection, participants considered resources targeted towards applied coaching strategies practically relevant, further supporting deeper reflection:

> CD: How else do you know if you are becoming better at communicating? I guess it is probably worth spending a bit of time unpicking your work on this and talking about what effective communication is?
>
> 8: Yes this is where I found the reading, the coach behaviour paper you sent us really interesting where it spoke about levels of instruction and how often coaches do this in a session. It made me think about my coaching and communication style and how much I do this. (8, RC)

The coach developer's identification of relevant knowledge concepts, and connection to their uses in practice, seemed imperative in allowing these concepts to pass through coaches' individual-level filters towards the forming of personal knowledge conceptions (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Thus, the coach developer is significant in offering the learner more than simple facts, helping to guide coaches' learning where they can be limited by their own knowledge. Video recordings of coaching practice were an expedient tool to facilitate this process in the online setting:

> If it's at a distance, send a clip of a session but then reflect on it with [CD], so then maybe he could probe the questions for you to reflect on. Because obviously there will

be details that I won't be thinking about, that maybe if [CD] watched he could think about something that I could reflect on. (17, FG)

These findings reaffirm those of previous studies (e.g., Partington et al. 2015) that video feedback is a useful means by which coaches can reflect against their practice. However, what was discussed here and seems critical, is the use of questions from the coach developer that led to coaches perceiving themselves to more critically examine what they do and connect theoretical content to knowledge conceptions for use in practice. So, while video has been suggested as an important reflective tool, these findings suggest a coach developer can elevate deeper reflection and construction of personal knowledge-in-action using effective theory-informed content and questioning alongside video as a stimulus.

Discussion

While developing student coaches' reflective practice has received some attention in the literature (e.g., Knowles et al. 2001, 2005; Kuklick et al. 2015; Stoskowski & Collins, 2017), so far, no work has integrated coaching-specific theory and evidenced the role of pedagogy and the coach developer in supporting coaches' reflective practices. This study built upon those before it by moving beyond examining *what* coaches reflect on in coach education programmes, to offer insight into *how* coaches could be supported in their reflective practice and professional learning.

A central aspect of this study was the deliberate evidence-informed underpinning of the module pedagogy (the design, delivery and assessment). Stodter and Cushion's (2017) grounded theory of the coach learning process and Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) application of Schön's reflective conversation cycle in coaching were used as tools to conceptualise how coaches' learning and reflective practice could be best supported. Stodter and Cushion's (2017)

work was used as a means to think about how coaches could be assisted in developing new knowledge, while the reflective conversation framework (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001) served to structure the discussions between coach developer and coach. The 'issue setting' component was especially important in serving as a stimulus for dialogue, which enabled the coach developer to prompt coaches in thinking more deeply, in particular locating 'issues' within their existing knowledge-practices. However, while participants had been exposed to other theories or models of reflective practice, there was limited understanding of their scope and application. To borrow Schön's (1983) metaphor, coaches thought of theoretical frameworks as more relevant to the solid 'academic' cliffs overlooking the messy problematic 'swampy lowlands' of their professional practice. This may be in part because of the superficial, disconnected or even weaponised way theory had been encountered during prior learning experiences (Downham & Cushion, 2020). These findings seem to support other research highlighting the importance of multiple opportunities to cycle through reflective conversations in developing progressively deeper reflective skills (e.g., Kuklick et al. 2015). Given the short 12-week timeframe of the module, learners had limited ability to go through several cycles of meaningful reappreciation and action.

This research underlines the utility of reflective conversations for facilitating coaches' reflective practice (Gilbert and Trudel, 2001), in particular illustrating the additional value of the coach developer as a *condition for* reflective practice. Regardless of models, theories, or frameworks used to underpin the reflective practice, the evidence suggests simply exposing coaches to these is unlikely to develop levels of reflection over and above the superficial and technical. Engaging with the coach developer appeared to be of importance in supporting some participants in reflecting more deeply and in developing metacognition, yet this has not been well considered in the reflective practice literature. Even within the theoretical frameworks applied here the positionality of the coach developer is missing, despite their importance in

supporting coach learning (Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne & Llewellyn, 2013). Gilbert and Trudel (2001) acknowledged the need for coaches to have access to respected and knowledgeable peers (which could be a coach developer), however, more direction is required on how coach developers can engage coaches to better make sense of their coaching experiences. An adapted, operationalised version of these theories is required to appreciate the greater levels of iteration that occur between the stages and the nuanced role the coach developer plays, which presently appears neutral. At the same time, coach developers are also practitioners who may themselves rely on 'what works' in practice based on their experiences, resisting theoretical frameworks as limited by technical rationality (Schön, 1987; Stodter & Cushion, 2019b).

Literature in education and particularly the concept of dialogic practice seems to offer value for the ways in which coach developers could think about working with coaches to develop the depth of their reflective practice (Driska, 2018). Understanding the role of dialogue in facilitating professionals' personal understanding of specific topics might provide further insight into reflective conversations as a generative process, or what Bamberger and Schön (1983) described as the 'momentary articulation of an ongoing process' (p. 68). In this study, the coach developer used 'issue setting' to put the onus on coaches and their practice within context. This helped reposition the power dynamics of conversations, which is often imbalanced in sport coaching and reflection discourse (Cushion, 2016). However, as noted, it is not the reflective conversation nor any other theory or model that leads to the genuine redistribution of power, but in coaching where power is inherently relational (Atkinson and Gibson, 2017) it is the positionality of the person facilitating a shift from power-over to power-to that is important. Nonetheless, some decisions taken in this project, such as determining that reflective conversations would be used as a means to engage coaches in reflection, could be perceived as disempowering coaches. At the level of the coach developer, judgements regarding the coaches' identified issues and whether these aligned to what was happening in

practice were also made. These are examples of well-intended, evidence informed attempts to shift existing practice and power relations rather than attempts to impose control over coaches' thinking, which may nevertheless have unintended consequences (Downham and Cushion, 2020).

While the findings from this research are positive in that coaches perceived developing conceptions of reflective practice and some reported more reflection at deeper levels, a limitation is that the impact on coaches' actual behaviours and practices is not known. Although capturing coaching practice pre- and post-intervention, perhaps using systematic observation, presents challenges in this study given the online delivery of the education programme, we acknowledge, and advocate research of this nature is required and should be strived for to better evidence the direct impact of reflection in particular on coaches' learning and effectiveness.

Conclusion

Reflective practice is considered crucial to the ongoing professional development of sport coaches as educators. This study is a starting point in moving past 'informed guesswork' to demonstrate the utility of integrating domain-specific, evidence-informed theories of learning into the design of a formal higher education module focussed on developing reflective practice. Various reflective models and theories have gained popularity in education, yet this study supports the potential of the reflective conversation framework (cf. Schön, 1983) as a valuable conceptual tool for those developing professionals in sport coaching. However, while the theories used here (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Schön, 1983; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) were important in guiding pedagogical design and delivery, the critical factor resulting in deeper, or different ways of coaches' thinking was *how* the coach developer supported this. Capturing the ways coach developers best support reflective processes, and evidencing the impact on practice, is a necessary area for future research. In particular, a consideration for how coach

developers can work in more evidence-informed and dialogic ways is especially important given the significant investment being made into coach education programmes in supporting coaches on more individualised bases, alongside a concomitant understanding of coach education as an inherently social process. Overall, this study promotes the idea that integrating a dialogic approach grounded in evidence-informed theoretical frameworks can be a valuable pedagogy for those who wish to develop reflective practitioners in educative professions.

Notes

1. The United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) is a recognised professional framework for developing, endorsing and continuously improving governing body of sport coach education programmes, brought in by a government commissioned Coaching Task Force. It is split into levels beginning at 1 and progressing up to 4, providing a clear vocational pathway for coaches.

2. Football Academies are linked to adult professional clubs and deliver the youth football performance pathway programme consisting of coaching, games, sport science support and education for players (Premier League, 2020).

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Table 1. Aspects of coach learning theory (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) and corresponding characteristics of pedagogical design applied to the module.

Theoretical Aspect	**Corresponding Pedagogical Design Characteristic**
Biography frames the learning process	Introductory tasks to outline existing coaching experiences, beliefs and values e.g. post about personal role frame on discussion board, provide a short video of their coaching practice. Module content driven by individuals' needs (e.g. questioning, feedback, communication) and signposted by coach developer.
Individual-level 'filter'	Coach developer questions individuals' assumptions and poses alternative viewpoints.
Contextual-level 'filter'	Students required to form an individual coaching issue and address this using an identified strategy within a specified, authentic context.
Reflective conversation loop (including 'trying out' concepts through experimentation)	Content delivered primarily through one-to-one 'reflective conversations' with coach developer, iteratively addressing: 1) coaching context, goals and role frame; 2) issue setting (appreciation); 3) strategy generation; 4) experimentation; 5) evaluation of 'what works' and why (action).
'Adopt', 'adapt' or 'reject' concepts	Coach developer supports students to make changes and plan for future implementation (reappreciation)

Table 2. Participant details and forms of data collected

Participant Code	Age	Years of Coaching Experience	Reflective Conversation (RC)	Follow Up Interview (I)	Focus Group (FG)
1	28	10	3	1	
2	25	7	2	1	1
3	54	20	2		
4	21	5	4		
5	26	6	1		
6	24	8	2		
7	28	12	2		
8	29	6	3		
9	23	7	1		
10	39	18	2		
11	22	7	2		1
12	49	14		1	
13	20	3		1	
14	54	26		1	1
15	23	7			1
16	23	3			1
17	29	6			1
18	25	9			1
19	23	5			1
20	31	15			1
21	25	7			1
CD	29	5	24	1	