

Exploring the Potential Value of Self-Study to Support Coach Learning

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A range of learning opportunities needs to be afforded to coaches to support the complexity of effective coaching. Coaches learn to coach in formal and informal settings. Much research has advocated collaborative coach learning, but there is a need to conduct research in order to evidence reliable ways to support collaborative coach learning. Self-study has been effective to support practitioners' learning in teacher education and physical education teacher education. To date, there has been a very limited application of self-study in coaching contexts. This Insights paper advocates the use of collaborative self-study as a reliable and valid approach to support meaningful coach learning. This paper documents the researchers' own experiences of learning to coach within a collaborative self-study. The coaches focused on developing an athlete-centred coaching approach. This paper illustrates how self-study supported collaboration, reflection, and pedagogical innovation over the course of a Gaelic football season. The authors outline implications for future research into coaching and coach education.

Keywords: amateur, collaboration, improving practice

This paper provides an insight into how two volunteer coaches, Richard and Anne, supported each other's learning as they coached a university-level Gaelic football team. Richard and Anne both work in the faculty of education in the university. They were both interested in improving their own coaching practices. Their biographies as teacher educators and a familiarity with self-study as a research approach influenced their decision to explore this approach to support their coach learning.

Literature Review

In their definition of effective coaching, Côté and Gilbert (2009) recognize the complexity of coaching as "the consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character . . ." (p. 316). Quality coaching (United States Olympic Committee, 2017) encompasses these three types of coaching knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009), and Jowett's (2007) athlete-centred outcomes: confidence, competence, connection, and character. In addition to these, the United States Olympic Committee (2017) specifies the importance of considering the coaching context and aligning the coaching approach with the athlete's stage of development. A range of learning opportunities need to be afforded to coaches (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009) in these different contexts. Much research (Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009; Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin 2004; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007) advocates collaboration to support coach learning and development. Coaching research needs to uncover reliable and valid ways of supporting coach learning in different contexts so that comparative studies can be conducted (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). A recent review of literature (Walker, Thomas, & Driska, 2018) has recommended that coach education

research include nonelite contexts and employ greater methodological diversity. This Insight paper is based on experiences of coach learning using a methodology not widely used in coach learning within an amateur sport setting. Improving the quality of coaching is challenging, in part due to "the powerful influence of experience on coaches' practice and the relative ineffectiveness of formal coach education" (Light, Evans, Harvey, & Hassanin, 2015, p. 53). The purpose of this paper is to advocate the use of self-study as a reliable and valid way of supporting coach learning. Coaching can be a collaborative practice, both in planning and in action, and can benefit from the systematic inclusion of reflective practice (Moon, 2016).

There is a growing body of research (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004; Ovens & Fletcher, 2014) focused on dissemination and dialogue in self-study of teacher education practices. Self-study is a rigorous and systematic research methodology. It is aimed at improving and understanding practice (LaBoskey, 2004).

Paquette and Trudel (2018) mention the importance of coaches developing skills such as self-monitoring, reflection, and goal setting. These skills are necessary for self-study.

This Insights paper advocates collaboration in practice, reflection, and deliberation. The authors share insights of their collaborative self-study to demonstrate how the methodology supported their learning as coaches. Implications for coaching and coach learning are discussed.

Self-Study in Educational Research

Self-study is an open, collaborative, reframing, paradoxical (through collaboration with critical friends), postmodern (with nonlinear outcomes), and multifaceted (given the multiple data sources) practice (Samaras & Freese, 2009). Although different, primarily qualitative, methodologies are used in self-study, it is systematic. Self-study is self-initiated and focused on improving and understanding practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Data

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sources may include reflective diaries, recorded conversations, observation notes, etc. Collaboration with a critical friend is an important part of self-study to reduce personal bias or self-justification (Loughran, 2007). Self-study can be individual, when an individual seeks to understand and improve their own practice through interaction with others, and also collaborative, where two or more participants initiate a shared learning focus and collaborate together as critical friends to each other. There is much evidence of learning in collaborative self-studies in teacher education practices (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Fletcher & Bullock, 2012; Petrarca & Bullock, 2014; Richards & Ressler, 2016). In collaborative self-studies, participants may be critical friends to each other or may also involve another critical friend (Fletcher, Ní Chróinín, & O'Sullivan, 2016) who is not directly involved in the practice. The trustworthiness of self-study is established when researchers provide a detailed explanation of their procedures, and commit to sharing their work with others (LaBoskey, 2004).

Given the overlap in research, practice, and policy orientations between physical education and sport (Cassidy, Mallett, & Tinning, 2008), there is potential to extend the effective use of self-study from teacher education and physical education teacher education (PETE) into coaching. Casey, Fletcher, Schaefer, and Gleddie (2018) and other self-study researchers (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014) have noted the potential use of self-study in coaching and coach education context. Coach learning requires challenging assumptions, critical inquiry, and innovative thinking (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). This Insight paper responds to their call by evidencing coach learning using the methodology.

Challenges of Coach Learning

Given the complexity of coaching (Côté & Gilbert, 2009), reducing it to rules and processes can become problematic (Cushion, 2007). Coaching research needs to focus specifically on describing the complexity inherent in coaching to contribute to meaningful learning about coaching practices (Cushion, 2007). Vargas and Madrigal (2018) acknowledged the difficulties of research in coaching, recognising complexity of statistics, athlete variables, training, and social constructs. They outlined the need for improved research methodology, collaborations, and discussions, advocating mixed methods that may involve longitudinal and qualitative aspects.

To support the improvement of quality coaching, much research has focused on coach education, training, and learning (Mallett et al., 2009). While some formal coach education programs are criticised for their limited scope and impact (Erikson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Lyle, 2007), nonformal coach education programs are also criticised as they are short-term, voluntary, and have few prerequisites (Mallett et al., 2009). Despite this, the recognition of everyday experiences as valuable learning opportunities has gained increased acceptance in sports coaching (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006). Avner, Markula, and Denison (2017) have acknowledged the development of coach competences and knowledges as preferential to a narrow focus on performance and results. Research in Australia (Rynne, Mallett, & Tinning, 2008) and Canada (Wright et al., 2007) has attributed informal learning involved in everyday work situations as the greatest contributor to coach development. *Transformational Learning Theory* supports coaches in developing athletes, by using empowering and inspiring behaviours (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017). They outlined four dimensions (4 Is) of transformational coaching: idealized

influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These coaching behaviours align closely with athlete-centred (AC) coaching, focusing on the individual's developmental needs (Headley-Cooper, 2010). The National Standards for Sport Coaches (Society of Health and Physical Educators [SHAPE], America, 2019) include the development and enactment of an AC coaching philosophy in their vision, goals, and standards: "Focusing on the development of the whole athlete, sport coaches prioritize opportunities for development over winning at all costs. Sport coaches provide opportunities for athletes to reach their full potential within the sport" (SHAPE America, 2019).

Opportunity for Self-Study to Support Coach Learning

Situated learning places emphasis on the contexts that construct and constitute learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Given that we learn through our lived experiences and participation in everyday life, situated learning is a type of informal education (Mallett et al., 2009). It is important to specify that informal learning can be mediated and guided as well as incidental. Reflection on key moments in a coaching session helps to facilitate learning. Coach learning occurs through both acquisition and participation (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). Self-study provides an opportunity to support learning in both of these ways. Erikson et al. (2008) have highlighted the importance of both experiential and formally guided sources of coaching learning as well as the context-specific nature of coach learning.

Coach learning in coaching communities of practice is personally relevant to coaches' immediate coaching needs (Bertram, Culver, & Gilbert, 2016). The personal and collaborative nature of self-study authenticates it as a means to increasing our understanding of the learning that occurs in a coaching community of practice. Intrapersonal knowledge is one of three (professional, interpersonal, intrapersonal) types of coach knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). It refers to "understanding of oneself and the ability for introspection and reflection" (Côté & Gilbert, 2009, p. 311). Previous coaching research has shown the potential of coach reflection in contributing to development of knowledge and skill (Gilbert & Trudel, 2005). Barnson (2014) has called for research to go beyond the rhetoric and truly embrace coaching as a paradox. Self-study can be paradoxical in nature, as it is nuanced by the variable realities of practice in individual contexts. It provides a methodology for coaches to share experiences and better understand the dynamic, complex, messy reality of coaching (Cushion, 2007). Self-study provides a fitting approach for coaches to research and understand their own practice. The characteristics of self-study provide an opportunity to support and formalise what otherwise may be missed opportunities for informal coach learning.

Insight Into a Collaborative Self-Study in Coaching

Procedural Insights

Richard and Anne are both teacher educators in the same university, and coach the university women's Gaelic football team in a volunteer capacity. We had coached this team together for 2 years prior to beginning the collaborative self-study. Previous research (Fletcher et al., 2016) has acknowledged the importance of

developing a relationship of trust and openness to support collaborative self-study. Coaching, like teaching, primarily involves communication, learning, and maintaining positive relationships with those being taught (Jones, Potrac, & Armour, 2004). In collaborative self-study, the maintenance of a trustworthy and honest relationship between the coach participants was also important. The shift to AC coaching emphasised the relationship between coaches and players, as opposed to a mechanistic coaching focus (Jones, 2006). At the start of the season we decided to adopt a more AC approach to coaching (Pill, 2018). Developing AC pedagogies as part of a collaborative self-study enabled peer observation, feedback, and critical reflection to support meaningful learning. Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015) advise that self-study should offer “the professional community an exemplar or model of how a practice works” (p. 11). This allows other practitioners (coaches) to challenge and confront the practices. We have shared our experiences of AC coaching at a national coaching conference (Bowles, O’ Dwyer, & Ni Chroinin, 2018), and in other published work (Bowles & O’ Dwyer, 2019).

Table 1 outlines the characteristics of self-study and provides evidence and insight into our collaborative learning through self-study. The first column in Table 1 outlines the five characteristics of self-study as outlined by LaBoskey (2004). In the second column, each characteristic is described with relevance to the coaching

context. The third column provides an insight into our collaborative self-study in coaching.

Two distinct features supported our collaborative self-study. Firstly, our learning as coaches was supported by a five-stage cycle that we used each week. This involved (1) collaborative planning, (2) coaching, (3) individual reflection, (4) review of each other’s reflections, and (5) deliberation to inform future planning. The partnership in the planning, coaching, and reflective stages facilitated our individual and shared learning. In this sense, we were critical friends to each other throughout. The second feature that helped to exploit our learning was our external critical friend, who was not involved in the planning or coaching. Meeting with our external critical friend added a second layer of critique: problematizing practice, deepening deliberations, and helping us to recognize our key learning (O’ Dwyer, Bowles, & Ní Chróinín, 2019).

Evidence of Improved Coaching Practices

The structure and repeated cycle of the collaborative self-study (outlined above and in Table 1) supported the coach learning and improved AC coaching practices. Implementing AC coaching was new for the coaches, and also a new experience for the players. Evidence of effective AC coaching practices are illustrated in Table 2 with reference to the dimensions of transformational

Table 1 Characteristics, Opportunities, and Examples of Self-Study Methodology to Support Coach Learning

Characteristics (LaBoskey, 2004)	Opportunities for Self-Study in Coach Learning	Example of a Collaborative Self-Study in Coaching
Self-initiated and focused	Coaches initiate and identify an aspect(s) of their own coaching to focus on, as distinct to focus on team or athlete outcomes. In a collaborative self-study, it is important that coaches have a shared vision and desire to learn to improve coaching practices (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014).	We had coached together for two previous seasons, we shared a similar coaching philosophy. We decided to work together to improve our coaching.
Improvement-aimed	The focus of improvement in self-study is about a better understanding of practices (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) as distinct from necessarily improving coaching effectiveness.	Adopting an athlete-centred (AC) (Pill, 2018, Headley-Cooper, 2010) coaching approach fit with our shared coaching philosophies. We focused our learning on improving our understanding of AC coaching as we developed and trialled AC pedagogies.
Interactive at some stage	Gallimore, Gilbert, and Nater (2013) suggest that effective coaching is underpinned by a focus on continuous learning and reflection. A lack of collegiality can be a barrier to coach learning (Wright et al., 2007). Coaches value learning through discussions with others (Gilbert et al., 2009; Irwin et al., 2004). Self-study specifies the value of this interaction with others. Interaction with others (such as a critical friend) reduces self-justification and supports learning (Loughran, 2007). This could include other members of the coaching team, other coaches, coach educators, athletes, etc.	We completed weekly written reflections on our coaching. We shared and reviewed each other’s reflections before meeting to discuss these. At stages throughout the season, we shared and discussed our reflections with a critical friend (not involved in our coaching). We also met with a coaching expert to discuss our AC pedagogies during the season.
Multiple, primarily qualitative methods	Careful reflection on practice is critical to becoming a good coach (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Self-reflection can noticeably enhance coaches’ levels of self-awareness (Humm, 2010). Previous research (Millar, Oldham, & Donovan, 2011) has highlighted the need to develop methods which increase coach self-awareness. Gathering evidence of practice enables coaching experiences to be shared with others and to gain feedback.	We recorded our coaching philosophies (three diary entries) over the season. We kept detailed session plans (36). We kept written individual and collaborative reflections each week (42). Meetings with our critical friend (5) and focus groups (3) with players were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
Exemplar-based validation	A distinct understanding of coaching processes is needed to improve coaching practice and education (Lyle, 1999). The authenticity of coach learning and practices are validated when coaches share their learning with others. The premise of self-study values authentic, contextual experiences.	We have shared our experiences and challenges of the AC coaching pedagogies with practitioners (Bowles et al., 2018) and self-study researchers (O’ Dwyer, Bowles, & Ní Chróinín, 2019).

Table 2 Evidence of Transformational Coaching: Examples of Athlete-Centred Pedagogies in Our Coaching Practices

Transformational Coaching Dimensions	Description (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017)	Examples of Improved Athlete-Centred Coaching Practices (Extracts from Coaches' Weekly Reflections)
Idealized influence	Coaches gain athlete trust and respect by acting as a positive role model and following a consistent set of values	<i>As coaches we model what we consider to be best practice/behaviour. We plan very detailed, specific training sessions. We learn from each other through observation and collaboration . . . — Richard, week 16</i> <i>The positive team culture was evident during their game as all the subs and an injured player stood on the sideline, shouted and encouraged their team. They brought in water to the players and did their own warm-up before half time all without prompting from management. — Anne, week 18</i> <i>A few final year players, who have been really committed to Mary I [university] football over the past four years, had their last training session on Wednesday night, so we had cake for them! I think it's important to mark the contribution of players as they move on. — Richard, week 19</i>
Inspirational motivation	Coaches inspire athletes by clarifying expectations and by fostering perceptions of team unity, meaning, and challenge	<i>We were careful with our grouping [at training sessions] this week, putting players into equal ability groups before the session. This worked very well because players were appropriately challenged—it meant that everyone worked at a suitably high intensity—we catered for players' individual needs (and the "teams" overall needs). — Richard, week 4</i> <i>It is important that coaches believe in their players and team. I felt that instilling this belief and positive attitude was my main duty this week. I tried to highlight some examples of good play from the game on Tuesday to raise players' confidence and improve focus on their final game next week . . . As coaches, we need to exemplify the learning—good examples and areas for improvement with teams after games (irrespective of the result). — Anne week 6</i> <i>Our role as coaches (setting up an activity that posed a problem, applied a constraint) was to probe/guide rather than instruct. For me, it felt like a more meaningful coaching experience, with players and coaches working together, rather than us giving them our solutions — Richard, week 20</i> <i>In terms of pedagogies, using questions, generating discussions and learning through small-sided games underpinned our approach to coaching this season. We tried to coach by posing problems (Guided discovery? Constraints-led coaching?) and supporting players to find solutions. This worked best in the latter stages of the season where we were very focused on preparing for games, and when numbers were smaller. — Richard, week 21</i>
Intellectual simulation	Coaches provide opportunities for athletes to actively engage in the coaching process	<i>Two players approached Richard and myself after training on Monday night to suggest that we play more full-sided games at training to get to know each other's styles of play. We took this on board and modified Wednesday's session to include this. — Anne, week 5</i> <i>Players listen to each other more than the coach's voice—allowing players to lead stretching at end of session/drill organization may be more effective. Eg. All v attentive to [Grace] leading stretches on Wed. — Anne, week 6</i> <i>At the end of Monday's activities, we used post-its to get feedback on positives they took from the day, and asked for ideas for the following morning's session. In turn, we tried to implement aspects of this feedback into our planning. I think this was very player-centred . . . it helped to create a positive atmosphere as we finished up on Monday; and the "wish" post-it gave players a sense of ownership/responsibility — Richard, week 13</i> <i>Finding time and space to talk to players can sometimes be a struggle. On the bus home from the match, it was nice to talk to nearby players about particular parts of the game. Instead of me telling or instructing (as might happen on the pitch), I got a chance to listen to players' thoughts on the game. By responding to various comments, it was possible to deepen tactical awareness in an informal way. And it also enables players to discuss some aspects of the game while things are still fresh in our minds. — Richard, week 17</i>

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Transformational Coaching Dimensions	Description (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017)	Examples of Improved Athlete-Centred Coaching Practices (Extracts from Coaches' Weekly Reflections)
Individualizes consideration	Coaches show genuine care and concern for the unique needs and abilities of each athlete	<i>I think evidence that we are becoming more AC in our coaching can be seen in how we have deviated from our planned sessions . . . before and in 'real-time' E.g. noticing what players are responding well to, modifying pre-planned SSGs [small sided games] and drills to accommodate an opportunity for further player learning. — Anne, week 14</i> <i>The one-to-one interactions are also very important to build rapport, to direct attention towards particular issues (injuries, nonattendance at training, other commitments, etc). So our roles as coaches are much broader than "just" designing sessions—the informal conversations that occur at the "fringes" of sessions or on the corridors are becoming very important too. — Richard, week 15</i> <i>We have a role in developing each individual player, but also in moulding an effective team too. Being AC and team-centred go hand in hand. — Richard, week 19</i> <i>Prior to Tuesday's session, Anne and I compiled a document with feedback for each player. The feedback was individual, targeted, and focused on improving each player's performance. — Richard, week 20</i>

coaching (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017). The coaches modelled consistent, best practice, and attention to detail in our planning and preparation throughout the season. The coaches trialled AC pedagogies such as questioning, discussions and problem-solving to challenge the players. Throughout the season, the coaches listened to and welcomed player feedback and engagement in the coaching practices. The coaches knew many of the players, as students in our faculty of education, and hence were cognisant throughout the season of their holistic development (as university students), as well as athletic development.

Implications for Future Coach Learning

Building on recent research (Richards & Ressler, 2016) promoting collaborative self-study in teacher education, this Insight paper outlines the potential for self-study to bridge missed learning opportunities in collaborative coaching. As sport coaching is essentially a social endeavor (Nash & English, 2015), it requires interpersonal skills. Hence, there is a need for coach education to explore social issues and interpersonal approaches to coach education. Furthermore, Trudel and Gilbert (2013) have highlighted the scarcity of opportunities to foster the development of reflective practices among coaches in coach learning. Mallett et al. (2009) recommended that unguided or unmediated learning can gain quality assurance by adding a degree of structure, reflection, and evaluation. Formal coach education does not encompass all of the experiential opportunities required to "embed" learning (Mallett et al., 2009). The value of collaborative reflection and debriefing has been found to contribute to the setting, modification, and assessment of short-term processes (Middlemas, Croft, & Watson, 2017), rather than long-term or seasonal goals (McArdle, Martin, Lennon, & Moore, 2010). This was also evident in this research as the collaborative self-study served to improve the quality of the AC coaching as the season progressed. Many of the characteristics of transformational coaching, advocated by Turnnidge and Côté (2017), are also evident in collaborative self-study; it is interpersonally focused, evidence informed, and systematically informed. These components are key in enhancing coach learning and development (Evans, McGuckin, Gainforth, Bruner, & Côté, 2015).

As self-study requires honesty, vulnerability, and trustworthiness (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000), there may be limitations in implementing meaningful collaborative practice with coaches from different teams. The challenge of sharing of good practice given the competitive rivalry that often exists between coaches has been identified (Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). However, as exemplified in other research (Garner & Hill, 2017), enabling coach learning is feasible when coaches are committed in an unrivalled, noncompetitive manner to the learning. In our advocacy for collaborative self-study in coaching, we recognise that it may be more feasible for those coaching the same team because of shared improvement goals. A trusted critical friend "can help you to uncover elements of your practices that you may not see on your own" (Richards & Ressler, 2016, p. 293).

In addition, the authors acknowledge the importance of recognizing that coaches learn, and prefer to learn from a variety of mediated, unmediated, and situated learning environments (Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008). This research provides insight to learning experiences of nonelite coaches. Our advocacy for collaborative self-study in coaching is cautioned with the necessity to adhere to the foundational characteristics of self-study (LaBoskey, 2004). Meaningful learning in self-study is dependent on voluntary commitment from the participating coaches. It is important to consider the coaching context when designing coach development initiatives (Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006). For example, in this research, both participants were volunteer coaches in an amateur setting. Sharing a common workplace (on the university campus) did support collaborative planning, coaching, and reflection.

Given the "idiosyncratic nature of coach development" (Erikson et al., 2008, p. 536), self-study does offer opportunity for individual and collaborative self-directed coach learning. Zeichner (2007), and Ovens and Fletcher (2014) have outlined the notion of developing longitudinal self-studies to develop chains of inquiry. While this Insight paper reports collaboration between two coaches during one season, We are continuing this collaboration to support our development of AC coaching and our coach learning.

Author Biographies

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