Relational interdependence between individual agency and affordances in how high performance coaches learn

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Introduction
Coaches of elite football players of necessity must be lifelong learners, engaged in an ongoing quest for effective and successful work performance. Yet, little is known about how they achieve this performance. This project sought to identify, elaborate and verify coaches’ own self-initiated (agency) and self-directed learning through their coaching work and the affordances provided by the club (structure). It is proposed that a combination of external structures and practices, and the critical and agentic engagement of coaches are interwoven in sustaining high-performance coaching. In this study, the relational interdependence between agency and structure was examined with a group of Australian Football League (AFL) coaches.

Cushion et al. (2003) highlighted the need for research into learning in the workplace for the development of sport coaching knowledge. In other fields of work the workplace itself has been shown to provide opportunities for authentic learning (see Billett, 2001). In this project the AFL and the associated clubs were viewed as ‘learning organisations’ (Senge, 1992). The valuing of human resource has become one of the most significant changes in organizational behaviour in recent times and as Matthews and Candy (1999) suggest it is not so much the ‘stock’ of knowledge that is important within an organization, rather it is the “dynamic process through which that knowledge is enhanced and renewed” (p. 49).

Workplace Learning
The literature on learning in the workplace encompasses several theories of learning associated with understanding how individuals learn for and during work, which allows researchers to select appropriate theories to examine different problems or issues (Hager, 1999). Consistent with these theories is that learning occurs through social participation (Billett, 2001). The situated nature of learning was a notion that was particularly generative in helping us make sense of how AFL coaches learn.

Coaches’ life histories have been found to influence the development of coaching knowledge (e.g., Cushion, 2001; Gilbert, W., Côté, J, & Mallett; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Salmela, 1996), which subsequently contributes to their developing identities as coaches that, in turn, influence their agency. The affordances of the workplace will also influence the nature and quality of engagement in work by coaches. It is the relationship between individual agency and workplace affordances that is of prime interest in understanding how and what coaches learn in coaching work.

Relational interdependence. Central to workplace learning is the interdependence between (a) work activities/tasks, (b) other workers, and (c) the workplace itself (Fenwick, 2005). A major sub-theme within this discourse on learning that is relevant to coaching is the concept of relational interdependence (Billett, 2006). Billett (2006) proposes that relations between a coach’s personal agency (individual action) and workplace affordances (social practice) that facilitate learning are interdependent. One of the challenges in understanding the learning of new knowledge is the problematic nature of the relational contributions of both individual capacities, and those comprising social context (Billett, 2006;Valsiner, 2000). In the context of performing their daily tasks individuals learn as they encounter new problems and so deploy their agency selectively thus remaking cultural practices (Rogoff, 1990). The interplay between agency and social context are not easily presented as tangible and predictable sets of concepts or processes.

Billett (2004) noted that psychological conceptions of learning recognised a relational interdependence between the individual and the social over 100 years ago (e.g., Baldwin, 1898). He argues that although in earlier positioning of the relations between the individual and the social were considered reciprocal (Rogoff, 1995), co-constructed (Valsiner, 1994), and co-participative (Billett, 2002), it is more appropriate to consider them as interdependent. Billett (2006) argues that because the relations are unequal, inconsistent and incoherent, the quality of interactions is contingent upon time, place and circumstance, which makes any accurate reproductions of cultural practices somewhat unlikely. Further he argues that (a) the potency of social context is variable, and (b) individuals respond and engage differently to the social context. Therefore, Billett (2006) argues the interdependent relationship between the individual and the social.

Method

Participants
Five Senior Coaches (SC), six Assistant Coaches (AC) and five Administrators (and former coaches) at different clubs were recruited for the research project representing 11 of the 16 clubs. Participants were drawn from the current and past Senior and Assistant Coaches in the AFL and their participation in the project was voluntary and conducted through the AFL Coaches’ Association.
Procedures
Each participant was interviewed for approximately 45-90 minutes. Questions from the semi-structured interview schedule focused on the major sources for learning coaching tasks in their AFL clubs. Interviews were audio-taped with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. All transcribed interviews were returned to the participants for member checking after which some changes were made.

Data Analysis
The investigators conducted an interpretative analysis of the interview data using Nvivo (Version 7), which facilitated the identification of common themes associated with what and how AFL coaches learn.

Results and Discussion
It was evident that the coaches wanted to learn and were driven to be successful and were consequently always seeking innovative and creative ways of improving their coaching practices, which connected with their sense of identity and belonging (AFL and club). They reported high levels of adaptive self-motivation, which is significant and necessary for learning. The important questions are what to learn and how to learn that information?

Most coaches when they enter the AFL have some idea of what is expected of them but after a short time find that there is much more they need to know to survive and develop as a coach. That realisation comes about after engaging in coaching tasks, many of which may initially be novel, which helps them to identify what they don’t know. This finding suggests that much of what they learn is often serendipitous and opportunistic rather than structured and systematic.

The workplace is a major resource for learning AFL coaching practice but it can both facilitate and inhibit learning. Coaches can only learn for and through coaching tasks they have access to (e.g., Senior Coach, administration). The tasks undertaken, especially the novel (non-routine) tasks/activities, provide opportunities for "authentic" learning. In experiencing coaching work, coaches commonly use observation to challenge and/or affirm their own coaching practices and over time refine their coaching behaviours. Therefore, what the AFL coaches do on a daily basis and throughout the season/s largely determines what they have opportunity to learn.

Conclusion
Within the heuristic of workplace learning this project provided a better understanding of the problematic nature of ‘coaches’ work’, recognising the complexities of workplaces, including the often contested nature of the work and the concomitant personal and organisational influences that affect it (Boud & Garrick, 1999). Although the workplace learning literature promotes the view that workplaces are benign and uncontested environments (Billett, 2001), the reality is that the nature of high performance coaches’ work and the environment in which they operate are highly contested and volatile places. Such environments, might limit the affordances (e.g., opportunities) to develop coaching practice.

The perceived need to be successful (win) promotes individual intentionality and agency in developing creative and innovative coaching practices that transform and remake cultural coaching practices. Perhaps as coaches’ confidence grows the role of individual intentionality and agency might be increasingly privileged, but this is likely to be contingent upon many factors (e.g., personality). Therefore, it is proposed that the interdependent roles of social context and individual agency are likely to fluctuate throughout the careers of coaches. Perhaps initially, social context is more dominant and as the coach develops their practice maybe individual intentionality and agency become more powerful forces in the learning and the subsequent transformation and remaking of coaching practices.

References


