Mentoring and other networks in high performance football coaching

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Introduction

High performance coaching is a highly contested profession and often the number of coaches outweigh the number of positions available at the elite level. This poses the question, “How do high performance coaches develop knowledge? More importantly, “What are the knowledge networks at play within the coaching context?” This research examined these relationships by analysing; learning and knowledge, communities of practice, and mentoring and other networks. Coaching involves complex interactions between coach and athlete/s. These interactions require specific coaching knowledge in order for a team or individual to be successful. For many coaches, coaching knowledge develops through their participation in sport as an athlete primarily through observation of their own coaches and secondly as neophyte coaches or assistants working with and observing experienced coaches (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). In high performance football, head coaches and assistant coaches from the same team might be apprehensive about mentoring too closely in fear of replacement. Therefore, quality mentoring may be affected by this lack of information exchange. What is known is that mentoring within coaching (in a broad sense) is prevalent; however what impact this plays on the development of coaching knowledge is not known. By understanding what role mentoring plays in the development of high performance football coaches’ means that we might be able to implement mentoring programs to ensure that the highest quality coaches are developed. Although it has been shown that mentoring occurs there has been little, if any, in depth investigation of the mentoring process. An in depth investigation is important in designing appropriate coach development programs and ultimately better coaches.

Main Text

Knowledge is defined as a pre-existing set of understandings that are foundational to further knowledge construction, which can be considered as learning. These understandings may include certain personal values, skills, attitudes or behaviours. From learning, knowledge gained can be applied to certain situations, which when deconstructed can then be applied to other situations depending on the needs of the learner.

Current research about coaching knowledge has been conducted by many leading academics within this field. Côté, Salmela and Russell (1995a) analysed the knowledge of 17 Canadian expert high performance gymnastic coaches using a qualitative methodology. From these series of interviews with open-ended questions, Côté et al., (1995) generated categories of knowledge that were consistent for the 17 coaches and found that coaches reported that their coaching knowledge were centred around three components: training, competition and organization. Gould, Giannini, Krane, and Hodge (1990) identified that experience developed from other expert coaches was the most important aspect in the development of coaching knowledge. Research indicates that listening and observing experienced coaches appeared to be the best method of gaining knowledge in technical aspects of coaching and coaching culture (Cushion et al., 2003).

A community of practice (CoP) is a concept that is strongly linked with a social theory of learning. At the forefront of CoP research is social theorist Etienne Wenger, who proposes that we all belong to numerous CoP. Wenger (1998) contests that the CoP we belong to change over time and have the capacity to alter the course of our lives. Some CoP are named, others are not, and they can be structured or unstructured, formal or informal and at times are so pervasive they rarely come into focus. What is known is that CoP exist in homes, workplaces, schools, bands, teams and just about any area in which there are a group of people who share the same interest and goals (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) defines CoP around three key dimensions; mutual engagement; a joint enterprise; and a shared. Research on CoP has been conducted in vocations such as nursing, business and education however what does Wenger mean by a CoP?

Mentoring has been the topic of much research, however a clear conceptual operational definition has been lacking. Mentoring has been used as an important component in the teacher education and in particular the teaching practicum. Based on this educational research, mentoring seems to be best conceptualised as a process by which expert knowledge is passed from a mentor to a protégé. Most of the research shows that mentoring occurs when a trusting relationship between a teacher/coach and the student/athlete, develops an interest on the part of the coach in the personal development of the athlete (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998). For example, Borman and Colson (1986) found that 85 collegians attributed mentoring to positive changes in self-confidence and overall development. In addition, Gould et al., (1990) studied the educational needs of 130 expert coaches and found that structured coach education programs incorporating learning sources other than coaching manuals were needed in order to make coaching more valuable for both the athlete and the coach.

The primary goal of this study was to develop a more in-depth understanding of mentoring and other knowledge networks using semi-structured interviews from high performance coaches. The standardized approach to developing the interview schedule consisted of a series of pre-planned and open-ended questions organized into a number of
interrelated sections. Therefore it was important that the semi-structured interview encompassed the key areas of focus. The areas for investigation were: a) how important have other coaches been to your development as a coach? b) The nature of the relationships between coach-to-coach and/or coach-to-other, c) Strengths and limitations of other coaches in developing coaching knowledge and d) enhancing the mentoring relationship with mentors and others. A critical evaluation of the results from the interviews will challenge the previously held notions associated with mentoring, informal knowledge networks, and communities of practice.

Conclusions

Currently the research has shown that mentoring and other networks are a major source of coaching knowledge. This coaching knowledge has long been thought of as being the product of experiences, however the way coaches learn to coach is far more complex and problematic. While certain aspects of coaching behaviour are based on prior experiences, these tend to be largely superficial. Instead questions that aims to target mentoring and other knowledge networks, as a process for coaches learning is important for future high performance football coaches.

References


