Understanding QAS coaches’ learning at work through affordances and agency

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Introduction

Australian institutes and academies of sport (AIAs) have been in existence for more than two decades. The Queensland Academy of Sport (QAS) is one such AIA and given that organisations such as the QAS employ significant numbers of full-time performance sport coaches, it and AIs like it, may be accurately characterised as a genuine workplace. As such, it may be entirely appropriate, or perhaps even most desirable, to investigate the ways these coaches learn their work through the application of a workplace learning framework. This paper will argue that an understanding of the interaction between what the workplace (QAS) affords the individual and the personal agency of the individual (high performance sports coaches), is important for structuring work environments that facilitate meaningful learning. Throughout this paper, reference will be made to a recently completed study examining what high performance sport coaches within the QAS know and how they have come to know.

Main text

Traditional view of learning

The traditional view of learning is as a process by which a learner internalises knowledge, whether ‘discovered’, ‘transmitted’ from others, or ‘experienced in interaction’ with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From this perspective, the learner is viewed as unproblematic and the process may be oversimplified and viewed as a matter of transmission and assimilation (Billett, 2000; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998). This view has been steadily replaced with the focus on the person as a member of a sociocultural community in which activities, tasks, functions and understandings do not exist in isolation but rather as a part of broader systems of relations such as those found in workplaces (Hager, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Workplace learning

Organisations are now recognising that the types of activities that individuals engage in and the kinds of guidance they access will determine what they learn and also the quality of that learning (Billett, 1999). Billett (2006) advocates a consideration of the interdependence between the individual and the social when describing learning through engagement in work practices. In other words, it is necessary to consider both the relationship between the participation that the workplace affords individuals and how they decide to engage with what is afforded (Billett, 2001). This way of understanding learning has the potential to be quite generative in that it allows a consideration of both the individual (the QAS coach) and the organisation (the QAS) when discussing the learning that does, and just as importantly, does not take place. Given that QAS coaches are expected to be ‘innovative’ and ‘constantly learning’ while employed by the organisation, a consideration of both aspects is critical.

Personal agency

Individuals’ personal agency will profoundly affect their perceptions of, and subsequent engagement with what the workplace affords. The kinds of social experiences that individuals have throughout their life (i.e., their personal histories) contribute to their subjectivities and identities and shapes their agentic actions (Billett, 2001). The personal athletic and coaching histories of the QAS coaches (N=24) were obtained through a face-to-face questionnaire. The coaches were found to have an average of 22.7 years coaching the sport they were currently coaching at the QAS. While this represents a significant period of time in which they were engaged in coaching work, the range (5-48yrs) indicated that their previous coaching experiences, and more generally, their pathways to QAS employment were extremely idiosyncratic. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with QAS coaches (N=6) and administrators (N=6) over a two-year period. The semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants of this purposive sample were analysed inductively using a procedure similar to that outlined by Côté and Salmela (1994). The results supported the view that the experiences of the coaches leading to full-time employment with the QAS were highly varied. Of greater significance to this study were their discussions of the learning that occurred once they began their QAS coaching work. It became clear that coaches learned through a variety of sources both within and outside of the QAS. It was their personal agency, which directed their engagement with these sources. Regarding their specific responses, ‘people of influence’ (Mallett, Rossi, & Tinning, 2007) was a source that coaches spoke of and the degree to which it was important was determined by the coaches’ own agency. Their agency was in turn, mediated by what the QAS afforded them. For example, QAS sport scientists were often cited as a source for learning but the degree to which the QAS coach accessed these individuals was determined by the nature of the program and by the coaches’ attitude and intentionality.
Elaborating further, the QAS programs are tiered (ranked) based on a number of factors, and it is this tiering that
determines funding and access to services such as the sport science support. Coaches of Tier one programs may have
regular access to sport scientists while Tier three programs may have extremely limited access. If coaches were afforded
access to the sport scientists, then whether or not they were considered to be a genuine source of learning was variously
determined by their personal agency as evidenced through descriptions of whether they liked the person, felt threatened,
understood the material and so on.

**Workplace affordances**

As alluded to in the example provide above, workplaces by their nature, are not benign entities. They have explicit and
implicit goals and practices, which will direct and guide what is learnt and what is valued (Billett, 2006). Affordances in
workplaces are also shaped by workplace hierarchies, group affiliations, personal relations, workplace cliques, cultural
practices, race, gender, language skills, worker or employment status, and social norms (Billett, 2001, 2004, 2006). The
QAS was no different, with the interview data highlighting the existence of workplace hierarchies and policies, which
resulted in varied access and affordances for different coaches. A significant issue is that although the QAS
administrators demonstrated a willingness to foster the learning of coaches, there were significant limitations regarding
how effective they could be. For example, administrators acknowledged that although they knew what they expected of
the coaches with regard to the management of the program, they were not well positioned to know the intricacies and
emerging trends within each of the respective sports. The result was an emphasis on the development and promotion of
general courses in areas such as strength and conditioning, psychology and business management. While these may
certainly be worthwhile areas for coaches to develop, these provisions may be viewed as somewhat inadequate given
the organisational aim of being cutting edge and innovative. There were also differences between what coaches and
administrators viewed as being worthwhile activities and as mentioned previously, engagement and what is learnt are not
determined solely by the social practice or organisational affordances. Rather, individuals decide how they participate,
how they respond to guidance, and what they construe and learn from their experience (Billett, 2001, 2004). Given that
this is the case, it may be inferred that it is predominantly the coaches who must drive their own professional
development at the QAS and this is directed by their personal agency.

**Conclusion**

Given the established importance of coaches to the success of the QAS (Rynne, Mallett, & Tinning, 2006) it is surprising
that to date, there has been very little research into how coaches specifically learn within high performance sport
workplaces. Conceptualising high performance sport coaching settings as workplaces, has allowed the use of a
workplace learning framework (relational interdependence) to facilitate an examination of the learning that occurs within
the QAS. This study has found that QAS coaches perform a variety of roles in the execution of their work. The selected
framework has facilitated a better understanding of the integral role of personal agency in the selection and use of the
variety of learning sources identified by QAS coaches. Factors that influenced the ways in which these coaches
exercised their agency included the nature of the sport, their athletes, perceived threats, and the conditions of
employment.

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