

SPORTS COACH MENTORING PROGRAMMES: A MINI-REVIEW OF HOW STRUCTURED SUPPORT CAN BENEFIT THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF MENTORS

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ABSTRACT

Within the field of sports coach education, sustaining and improving learning is promoted through informal to formal learning opportunities. Here, a broad consensus amongst literature highlights the importance of informal learning as the most impactful of these. Indeed, many authors state that coaches best develop an understanding of their working knowledge through informal settings, interaction, and reflection. Linked to this, the use of mentoring has gained considerable traction in the last two decades. There is, however, limited evidence pointing towards the possible benefits that the mentors themselves can accrue from engaging in the process of mentoring. This mini-review provides a short overview of the role and applications of mentoring programmes and also outlines the findings of the author's previous work on the benefits that mentors (not the 'mentees') accrued from a collaborative mentoring project. This previous work consisted of a case study that summarised the experiences of six coach mentors over a two-and-a-half-year period. The results of the study indicated that formalised mentoring programmes and communities of learning facilitated support, problem solving, and even the development of professional profiles.

Keywords: Sports Coaching, Education, Mentoring, Communities of Practice, Learning.

INTRODUCTION

For sport coaches, the important elements of practice, design, quality provision, and improving general methods are embraced through the use of continued professional practice. Currently, within this context, the facilitation of learning for sport coaches is an area that continues to be highlighted as an important element of ensuring practical and conceptual expertise. There remains the question, however, of how best this perennial problem of learning is best resolved given its complexity. Indeed, it is often argued that coach education and coach learning are part of an intertwined, highly intricate process (Nelson et al., 2006). The manner in which much existing research related to coach learning and coach education can be well summarised is through the work of Cushion et al. (2010). Here, they outline the three ways in which learning is most often

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considered to take place in the field of sports coaching. These are, respectively, formal learning (i.e., through accredited courses and qualification) non-formal learning (i.e., through short courses and general continuous professional development) and informal learning, which is seen as unstructured, unaccredited learning. Of note, however, the use of the terms formal, informal and non-formal coaching need to be viewed as interconnected modes of learning rather than separated.

Whilst these learning methods often sit alongside each other, either in a beneficial or indeed detrimental fashion, the consensus among the research is that informal learning offers the most profound and lasting learning opportunities (Cushion et al., 2003; Cassidy et al., 2004; Collins et al., 2012). This is most often seen to be facilitated through a process of collaborative, social learning, and interaction with others. This approach and process of learning is especially apparent in the nature of coach mentoring, a practice that facilitates mutual support systems, the enabling and reinforcing of work-based learning, and the opportunity to learn and acquire knowledge from someone more experienced. Mentoring then, can be briefly summarised as a process that allows more experienced mentors to assist, in an advisory fashion, the less experienced mentees. Interventions in this fashion are seen to be characterised through improved professional practice and competency.

Various studies (for instance, Bloom et al., 1998), meta-reviews (such as Jones et al., 2009) and governmental/governing body strategy papers (i.e., North, 2009) have demonstrated that programmes designed to provide mentoring to less experienced coaches across varying levels have proven successful at increasing the quality of coach practice. Here then, a review of literature demonstrates that there are positive, tangible benefits for the mentees who take part in mentoring projects. However, the research body does not necessarily engage with the entire mentoring process. This is in terms of the extent to which we understand the nature of mentoring projects, and possible benefits, for the mentors themselves. The author next presents the findings from one of their previously published articles/papers (Crisp, 2018) that focused on the benefits that the mentors accrued, over a two-and-a-half-year period, from a mentoring project.

DISCUSSION

The article, *Sports Coach Mentoring – Impacts on the Mentors, not the Mentees*. A Case Study of the Active Sussex Coach Support Officers Scheme (Crisp, 2018), summarised a particular case study of six UK-based ‘expert’ coaches who were involved in a mentoring programme as mentors to less experienced coaches across a variety of coaching areas. The programme/project was set up in response to research that the author had presented related to coaching workforces (Crisp, 2013), and the author helped design and implement the programme. The mentor-coaches were Coach Support Officers (CSOs) for a County Sport Partnership (CSP) and were primarily tasked with improving coach practice across a number of Sport England funded projects (essentially participation sport programmes) by supporting the local coach workforce. Given the fact that the research article was a case study and the participants were a discrete target population, the sampling was purposeful and fully representative and reflective of the scope of the project. The data collection took place concurrently with a

particular time period within the author's involvement and contribution to the mentoring programme, specifically, between February 2013 and August 2015.

Using a qualitative approach that looked for themes resulting from meeting notes (held every few months) and CSO/mentor recollections over a two-and-a-half-year period, the following themes emerged: 1) 'time away from others', 2) *'Shared experiences and collective understanding'*, and 3) *Mentor education – 'career' guidance and support*. The first theme related to how professional development and working practice could be developed through reflective practice. The second theme outlined how an emerging community of practice (CoP) facilitated an additional level of support, one unique to the mentors themselves that ensured a collaborative exchange of ideas and encouragement. Both of these themes, however, could be argued to have had a more limited nature of significance given the fact, as the author pointed out, that the findings reinforced pre-existing research related to reflection and the use of Action Sets.

This left the third theme, *Mentor education – 'career' guidance and support*, as potentially the one with the most novel and impactful contribution. By this stage, the article had emphasised that the mentors in the study had experienced a growing sense of professional credibility and, moreover, that this had been facilitated through the meetings, framework, support and subsequent CoP that had emerged amongst the mentors themselves. Their trust in each other, support, and the confidence gained from increasing their network and expertise had led all of them to progress their careers and professional standing over the two-and-a-half-year period of research. To be clear, this progression in career was directly linked to the manner in which they had increased their employability and professional practice having been involved in the scheme. However, the research was not without its limitations. These include what many consider, using a traditional approach to considering limitations, the small sample size. However, given the relatively wide timescales and scope of the data collection this in itself was not necessarily a limitation, but it does indicate that other, separate case studies may well not produce similar results. This is because, as a case study, whilst the research questions and analysis of what happened could be accurately presented, these are not necessarily generalisable. Additionally, the involvement of the author as researcher may well have influenced the case study.

CONCLUSION

While the article may have presented the results of a study of a particular coach-mentoring programme in the U.K, there are broader applications of this research. These sit within, but are not exhaustive to, how all mentoring programmes can look to formalise their mechanisms. These mechanisms should include provision to ensure that they develop mutual support systems, facilitate and enable learning, and improve coaching (or other disciplines/fields) cultures. Of note, while the benefits for mentees can be seen to be the opportunity to learn from someone more experienced, to profit from a 'sounding board' for ideas and suggestions within a safe environment and to acquire experience from established coaches' behaviors and practice are well established, the mentors can also develop as well. Possible benefits for mentors include the development of professional competency, the opportunity to obtain new perspectives, to network, to co-enquire and problem-solve, and to develop their own ability beyond the immediate boundaries of their practice. In essence then, the CSO programme outlined in the article contained the rubric of support that mentoring projects should consider to intentionally facilitating the development of their mentors, alongside the mentees.

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