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# Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste)

## Practice papers

# Embedding experiential learning in HE sport coaching courses: An action research study

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 3 February 2016

Accepted 5 February 2016

### Keywords:

Experiential learning

Flipped classroom

Coach education

## ABSTRACT

Despite recommendations imploring coach educators to utilise experiential learning, analyses of how this has been implemented are sparse. This study analyses the integration of experiential learning within a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) context. Student coaches were provided with coaching opportunities with local school-children. Data were collected over three years through student interviews, coach educator reflections and discussions with a critical friend. Experiential learning presented two key challenges; 1) dealing with difficult emotions and competence awareness by students and the coach educator; 2) ensuring children received appropriate coaching practice. The integration of mediated pedagogical strategies helped overcome these problems.

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## 1. Introduction

Whilst non-formal and informal coach education have been explored and analysed (Cushion et al., 2010), the central focus of much research has been on formal coach education delivered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Sport Governing Bodies (Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012; Cushion et al., 2010; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; Trudel, Gilbert, & Werthner, 2010). In general, this literature has been critical of formal coach education courses<sup>1</sup> (Cushion et al., 2010; Knowles, Tyler, David, & Eubank, 2006; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). In particular, courses have been criticised for a decontextualised, compartmentalised approach that may provide sport science information, but typically fails to enhance coaches' holistic pedagogical knowledge (Nelson et al., 2006). Furthermore, these courses also tend to involve simulated peer coaching; a situation that does not replicate the authentic complexities of actual coaching contexts that coaches experience (Nelson & Cushion, 2006).

Formal coaching courses in UK HEIs have traditionally contained a wide variety and depth of content that generally includes research methods, sport science, pedagogy and applied coaching modules. This content is regularly delivered to full time student coaches over a three-year period. Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne, and Llewellyn (2013) argue that the delivery of this content is not always contextually relevant to the practice of coaches in 'industry' and thus formal coach education courses may not develop the pedagogical skills required of coaching practitioners. Similarly, Knowles et al. (2005, 2006) explored perceptions of undergraduate coach education in HEIs and reported a chasm between the theory and rigour of

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educational experiences and the ‘reality of life’ as a sport coach. Indeed, coaching practitioners have expressed concerns that knowledge gained from formal qualifications<sup>2</sup> is divorced from the ‘reality’ of practice (Morgan et al., 2013; Mouchet, Harvey, & Light, 2014; Turner & Nelson, 2009). Specifically, coaches have deemed knowledge gained from formal coach education as lacking the “interactive experiences within practical coaching contexts” that serve as “the principal knowledge source of both neophyte and experienced coaches” (Jones et al., 2012, p. 313).

In contrast to formal coach education research, there has been support for informal learning processes such as experiential learning (Araya, Bennie, & O’Connor, 2015; Callary, Werthner, & Trudel, 2012; Camire, Trudel, & Forneris, 2014; Kuklick, Gearity, Thompson, & Neelis, 2015; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Mouchet et al., 2014; Paquette, Hussain, Trudel, & Camire, 2014). Experiential learning has its roots in the work of Dewey (1916/2011), who promulgated the value of knowledge gained from individual experience as a means of growth. Dewey espoused the value of shared informal learning that is relevant to the lives and contexts of learners. Dewey (1916/2011, p. 9) argues that without a relevant connection to the experiences of learners, “there is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the matter of life–experience”. Dewey (1938) advocates that the quality of the experience for the learner is key, and that the educator’s role is to provide experiences that not only engage students but impact their future actions.

Consistent with Dewey, a range of authors argue that if structured appropriately, and if incorporating authentic, quality coaching experiences, then HEI based coach education can aid student learning (Araya et al., 2015; Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Nevill, 2001; Mallet, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009; Mallet & Dickens, 2009; Mallet, Rynne, & Billet, 2014). Consequently, Vella, Crowe, and Oades (2013, p. 417) implore coach educators within universities to ensure learning is;

Situated within practical demonstrations and discussions where the coach learner and coach educator work collaboratively to facilitate understanding of the applications of program content to coaching practice.

In response, coach educators have begun to adopt more innovative pedagogies. For example, Stoszkowski and Collins (2015) integrated shared online blogs as a means of scaffolding reflection and exploring conceptions of coaching experience within a HEI coach education course. Findings from this intervention revealed that the use of such novel experiential learning pedagogies hold promise for coach educators through the promotion of higher order reflection.

There is however, an important caveat to the clamour for coach educators to embrace experiential learning. Whilst many studies (e.g. Callary et al., 2012) have illustrated that naturally occurring coaching experience is crucial to the education of coaches, typically such studies have often focused on established, expert coaches whose experience has been gathered in the field rather than in Higher Education contexts (e.g. Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Nash & Sproule, 2009). Indeed, even in the Stoszkowski and Collins (2015) study cited above, it is important to note that the educators did not facilitate any coaching experiences. Thus, until this study, there has been limited light shed<sup>3</sup> upon the provision of experiential learning within formal coach education contexts. In particular, the lived experiences of student coaches rather than established coaches, and coach educators themselves, are noticeably absent from coach education literature.

## 2. Methodology

Imbued by the research discussed above, and as part of an action research project (Stenhouse, 1975), I (the first author) facilitated hockey and basketball coaching sessions. During these sessions, the student coaches worked with children from local schools for nine hours at the UK HEI. The coaching sessions were scheduled as part of an applied coaching module in which students were also provided with formal lectures on relevant topics e.g. coaching pedagogy. During and after this intervention, data were collected as means of evaluating the action and effecting positive change in my practice. To date, action research such as this has been used sparingly in sport science and coaching.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, a brief introduction to the tenets of this methodology is provided to aid readers.

Action research is a paradigm of inquiry where the researcher’s primary purpose is to improve the capacity and subsequent practices of the researcher rather than to produce theoretical knowledge (Elliott, 1991). A defining characteristic of action research is that the researcher initiates change, based on a feeling and ambition to create a ‘better’ human situation (Freire, 2005). Teacher educators in the UK have readily embraced and effectively utilised action research to challenge understanding, and subsequent transformation of, their own practice (Casey & Dyson, 2009; Rossi & Tan, 2012; Tinning, 1992). By contrast however, examples of action research from the field of coach education are sparse.

The close pedagogical links between teaching and coaching (Armour, 2011; Jones, 2006) would suggest that action research may aid coach educators effect positive changes in their practice. Consequently, the authors in this study attempted to effect change in our world through the integration of coaching theory and practice (Jones et al., 2012). Specifically, following ethical approval by an institutional committee and informed consent, student coaches were tasked with planning,

<sup>2</sup> This criticism is not solely directed at HEI based coach education but is also directed and based upon experiences of formal coach education developed by national governing bodies of sport.

<sup>3</sup> Bethell and Morgan (2011) do however provide a useful account of problem-based learning and experiential learning effectively developing of students’ knowledge and learning on a sport management course.

<sup>4</sup> See Evans and Light (2008) and Ahlberg, Mallet, and Tinning (2008) for notable exceptions.

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