A Learning Community Approach to Coach Development in Youth Sport

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Abstract
Repeated calls have been made by prominent sport and education associations for the creation of ongoing professional development networks and learning communities for youth sport coaches. The purpose of this paper is to propose a learning community approach to coach development that complements large-scale coach education programs. This concept paper is organized into three sections followed by a brief summary. The three sections are: (a) overview of the effectiveness of community-based learning research on teacher development, (b) overview of how community-based learning literature has informed coach development initiatives, and (c) suggestions for how a learning community approach could be practically implemented in a typical youth sport setting.
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While there may still be a tendency towards thinking of professional development as occurring on particular days and involving attendance at organized courses, in educational arenas the emphasis is now upon engagement in a professional learning process that is ongoing and an integral element of one’s professional work. (Penney, 2006, p. 35)

The preceding quotation aptly captures the gap between current thinking about coach development and the dominant approach to coach education. While much has been written recently in coaching and teaching about the value of professional learning communities (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Penney, 2006; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, in press), communities of practice (Culver & Trudel, 2006; Jones, Armour, & Potrae, 2004; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004), and inquiry-based learning (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), it seems that much of coach development is still restricted and designed from a ‘train and certify’ approach (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006; Trudel, Gilbert, & Werthner, in press). This gap exists despite repeated calls for the development of ongoing professional development networks and learning communities for youth sport coaches by prominent national sport and education organizations such as the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 2008), the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS, 2002) and the National Association of State Boards of Education (Hill, 2007).

The calls for ongoing context-specific coach development opportunities are well founded given what has been learned over the past 40 years in related fields. For example, recent overviews of research comparing problem-based learning approaches versus traditional teaching approaches clearly shows why we need to integrate learning communities into coach development initiatives (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009; Walker & Leary, 2009). A problem-based learning approach is characterized by (a) ill-structured problems with no one correct answer, (b) a student-centered approach wherein the learner sets the problems to address, (c) teachers act as facilitators in the learning process, and (d) problems must be authentic to the learners’ professional demands (Walker & Leary, 2009). A careful analysis of over 200 studies conducted over four decades shows that traditional teaching approaches, such as the typical coach certification workshop, are very effective for short-term knowledge retention (e.g., a knowledge recognition test at the end of a clinic). However, the problem-based learning approach consistently results in higher learner satisfaction scores, long-term retention of knowledge, and performance assessments (i.e., knowledge application). Therefore, if the primary goal is to teach someone how to score well on a standardized test then the traditional approach to teaching is recommended. However, if you are trying to teach people how to effectively apply knowledge in real-life, complex situations, then the problem-based learning approach is by far the significantly better instructional method.

Sport coaching does indeed demand a recognition and retention of professional knowledge, but it is the ability to use this knowledge to resolve complex situation-specific problems that separates a knowledgeable coach from an effective coach (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Decades of coach education and certification clinics delivered almost exclusively from a traditional teaching approach may have given us millions of knowledgeable coaches,
but the research shows that we have done very little to nurture the development of effective coaches (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). One-shot coach certification courses are content driven with an emphasis on telling coaches as much as possible about the knowledge they should have as a coach (i.e., knowledge of energy systems, growth and development, team management, ethics, etc.). While this knowledge surely is relevant and important to coaches, it is presented out of context and assumes coaches will seamlessly assimilate and transfer course concepts to their specific settings. At least one study has tested this assumption with a large-scale coach education program and found no support for its legitimacy (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999). This may in large part explain why the growing body of research on coach development consistently shows that coaches, across all sporting contexts, place greater value on experiential learning than on formal coach education (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). Learning from experience occurs in context and allows coaches to draw on their social networks while trying to resolve coaching issues. Opportunities for coaches to develop knowledge based on the need to solve their own coaching issues seem to be more meaningful to them than being instructed about how to resolve hypothetical problems (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Vargas-Tonsing, 2007; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007).

Our intent here is not to critique coach education initiatives. Coach education, like coaching itself, is complex and must take consideration of many practical constraints – not the least of which is the fact that most youth sport coaches assume the role as volunteers or on a part-time basis (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). The profession of teaching, with its much longer history and far more developed infrastructure, still struggles with the issue of teacher development, so why would we expect sport coaching to be any different? Our purpose with this paper, then, is to propose a complementary coach education approach that helps bring coach development closer to actual practice, is ongoing, and places the development of athletes at its core. This approach is not presented as the ‘new way’ for coach education, which would necessitate relinquishing current coach education initiatives. We present this approach more as a way to complement large-scale coach education and certification programs with locally owned professional learning communities. In this sense, the approach advocated within this paper is best viewed as a step in the evolution of coach education, not a call for wholesale change. We believe that large-scale coach education programs (i.e., certification programs) together with local professional learning communities has the potential to significantly improve coach development and enhance the youth sport experience. This multifaceted approach to coach development is consistent with the recommendations recently put forth by the National Association State Boards of Education (NASBE) Commission on High School Athletics in an Era of Reform (Hill, 2007). The proliferation of school-based sport in particular has resulted in greater scrutiny of how youth sport coaches are prepared to teach in sport settings.

This concept paper is organized into four sections. In the first section we provide a brief overview of the effectiveness of community-based learning research on teacher development. This section is important because there is considerably more research on this approach in the teaching literature and hence much that we can learn about the approach as we attempt to adapt it to coaching. Although it is widely acknowledged that coaching is teaching, and sport is an educational setting, researchers from education and coaching seldom combine forces on coach development projects. Some have referred to this situation as the ‘undiscovered link’ between pedagogic theory and coaching (Jones, 2006). This is surprising given that there is a major push in the United
States for youth sport to be reframed as an extension of the educational system, wherein the goals and structure of youth sport programs should parallel school systems (NAYS, 2002). In the second section we present an overview of how community-based learning literature has informed coach development initiatives around the world. What would a learning community approach to coach education look like in an actual youth sport setting? We answer this question in the third section of the paper by providing suggestions for how a learning community approach could be practically implemented in a typical youth sport setting. Each of the three authors drew on unique, yet related, experiences and wisdom to formulate these suggestions. One author has over 40 years of experience conducting research on teaching and testing teacher development initiatives, while also conducting some of the earliest and most influential research on coaching. The other two authors have a combined 45 years experience conducting applied coach development research in a wide range of youth sport settings and are also certified coach education instructors. Furthermore, one of the authors was coaching youth sport while in the process of writing the manuscript. The final section of the paper includes a brief summary of our proposal for a learning community approach to coach development.

Overview of Community-based Learning Research in Teaching

The assumption that teachers can create and maintain those conditions which make school learning and school living stimulating for children, without those same conditions existing for teachers, has no warrant... (Sarason, 1972, pp. 123-124)

Sarason’s claim echoed the reports of many teachers who felt conventional professional development was too isolated from their everyday work to be of much use. Then and now the focus is on workshops, courses, and other events, that address general instructional issues often held in universities, hotels or district offices. The resistant and specific instructional challenges teachers face everyday is seldom explicitly addressed in these conventional venues.

Growing criticism of workshops and courses was a response to an enduring problem. Beginning in the 19th century, the literature counts in the thousands essays, studies, and books decrying the minimal changes in instruction that follow even major efforts (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, Chapter 1). This sad state of affairs was the broader context for Sarason’s assertion that schools must be places of learning for teachers as well as students. He drew for evidence from an extensive evaluation of the 1960s New Math program, which set a standard for assessing the benefits of instructional reforms. New Math set out to fundamentally shift the nature of teacher-student interaction to a greater focus on understanding mathematics and on applying principles to real-world problems. Even with a massive investment of resources the New Math managed only to replace the old textbooks with new ones but teachers still taught as they had before – presenting and practicing procedures without understanding. By relying on conventional teacher workshops disconnected from classrooms and schools, the reformers doomed New Math so that it is still not clear whether the reform program was ineffective or never actually implemented. Thirty years later a nationally representative sample of 8th grade lesson videos revealed little change in mathematics instruction; someone who was in 8th grade in 1950s U.S. would instantly recognize the kind of instruction in use in 2000 (Hiebert et al., 2003).
Many now believe that a radically different approach to teacher learning and development is needed. Three decades after New Math, the National Staff Development Council (2001) encoded Sarason’s vision in standards for quality professional development (PD) that feature site-based, long-term, and collaborative professional learning and development focused on improving classroom teaching and student performance. Despite attempts to integrate such approaches into teacher professional development initiatives, many of these programs still fail to produce measurable growth in either teaching practices or student outcomes. In their recent review of 25 professional development programs in math and science teaching, Blank and colleagues (2008) found measurable improvements in only one third (8/25) of the programs. Two features differentiated these successful programs from the unsuccessful programs. First, successful programs took an integrated approach to professional development by providing a focus on teacher content knowledge training plus support and follow-up for developing pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., learning networks, lesson study, and peer observations). Second, effective programs required a greater time commitment from the teachers, typically at least 100 hours over the course of a year (Range = 45 – 300 hours). What this review shows is that effective professional development for teachers does not occur in bite-sized de-contextualized in-service workshops unless they are supported with ongoing follow-up support and training over extended periods of time, that requires a significant time investment from teachers.

A related approach that has gained attention and interest is the establishment in schools of professional learning communities and teacher learning teams. Although limited in quantity and scope, what evidence there is suggests that such an approach can produce meaningful gains in student achievement, if student performance gains remain the focus of teacher collaborations (Saunders et al., in press; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). It is an approach that has also recently attracted attention in the coach education field as a promising alternative to conventional practice (Culver & Trudel, 2008a; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004; Werthner & Trudel, 2006). Two recent investigations identified five keys to creating and sustaining effective teacher learning communities and teams (Gallimore et al., 2009; Saunders et al., in press) that might be of particular relevance to applying this approach to coach education.

1. **Stable settings dedicated to improving instruction and learning.** To improve instruction and achievement, teacher teams need stable settings in which to work. Team meetings that are co-opted for other urgent matters, cancelled, or stray off topic defocus and disrupt the kind of incremental, continuous improvement process that is the key to the value of a learning team.

2. **Job-alike teams.** A job-alike team is composed of 3-7 individuals teaching the same grade level, course, or subject area. Unless members share common instructional challenges, teams tend to drift into superficial discussions and truncated actions.

3. **Published protocols that guide but do not prescribe:** Saunders et al (in press) documented the value of a protocol that structures but not prescribes. Their protocol includes steps familiar to educators, including jointly identifying goals for student learning; finding or developing assessments of student progress toward
those goals; bringing in the experts who assist in accomplishing goals; planning and delivering lessons everyone tries out; using classroom performance data to evaluate the commonly planned and delivered lessons; and reflecting on student gains to determine next steps. Although the protocol structures and focuses a team’s collaboration, it creates recurring opportunities for every member to contribute their knowledge, creativity, and skills as they work to solve common instructional challenges.

4. Trained peer facilitators. Even the most motivated teams need a “point person”—at least one member trained to guide their colleagues through the process over time. Because peer facilitators try out in their classrooms the same lessons as everyone else, they can explain protocol steps, and encourage the group to stick with a problem until it is solved.

5. Working on student learning goals until there are tangible gains in student learning. Whatever teaching challenge teams work on, it is critical they stick with it until their students make progress. When teachers see gains in student performance as a result of using a systematic approach to improving instruction, they begin crediting their own teaching, and their confidence in the inquiry process strengthens. Once they see tangible student gains, teachers are less likely to assume “I planned and taught the lesson, but they didn’t get it.” Seeing causal connections between one’s efforts and student progress comes when there are stable settings and peer facilitators that support job-alike teams’ use of protocols that support continuous improvement. This shifts teachers to a stance legendary coach John Wooden argues teachers and coaches should take – you haven’t taught until they’ve learned (Nater & Gallimore, 2006).

In place, these five keys to effective learning teams create a context for a common human experience. When humans set and share a common goal and persist until it is solved, they develop a bond, a shared commitment that is very familiar to anyone who has been a member of a well-functioning team, a squad, or any other grouping. It can happen in sports, the military, business, school, political organizations, families, or any number of other human settings. There is substantial evidence from behavioral science that indicates this is no trivial phenomenon, and it is probably one that has evolved through many generations of men and women – and it occurs in every culture and society (Gallimore, 2005). For example, there is substantial evidence in education science that common and mutually understood goals are vital for successful change efforts (Brophy & Good, 1986; Peterson & Lezotte, 1991). These five keys to effective teacher teams overlap with features of other approaches to site-based or team-based teacher professional development. Among others, these approaches include promising forms of school-based teacher learning and inquiry such as U.S. adaptations of Japanese lesson study (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006), cognitively-guided instruction or CGI (Kazemi & Franke, 2004), and teacher-as-researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Overview of Community-based Learning Literature in Coaching

Similar to what is found in school settings, the effectiveness of traditional coach education programs has been questioned by many (see the June 2006 special issue on coach education of The Sport Psychologist). Trudel, Gilbert, and Werthner (in press) recently conducted an analysis of 16 studies on coach education effectiveness.
published during a 10-year period (1998-2007). Coach education initiatives were classified into three categories; small-scale coach education training programs (4 studies), university-based coach education programs (6 studies), and large-scale coach education training programs (6 studies). The small-scale coach education training program studies provide information on intervention strategies developed by researchers and validated with small groups of coaches. A good example of such work is the line of research by Ronald Smith and Frank Smoll (http://www.y-e-sports.com/). Although significant positive differences were reported in some of these studies, changes generally were very small and no data are available on the potential long-term impact of participation in these types of coach education interventions.

A major characteristic of the studies on university-based coach education programs is the attempt to develop reflective coaches instead of changing specific coaching behaviors. Results of these studies show it is not easy to teach and assess implementation of the reflective process. Even with research participants who are university students in coaching programs delivered by accredited institutions, there is little evidence to suggest increased use of reflection skills post-graduation. Regarding large-scale coach education programs, such as the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) in Canada or the Program for Athletic Coaches Education (PACE) in the U.S., two methods have been used to evaluate program effectiveness. One approach used self-report questionnaires to measure impact of learning reflection skills on individual’s feelings of efficacy. It was found that coaches did indeed increase their belief in their personal capacity to affect athlete learning and performance (i.e., improved coaching efficacy). However, there are no data on the coaches’ actual behaviors after course completion and the long-term impact of changes in individual’s sense of coaching efficacy. The second approach has relied on observation at coach education courses followed up with multiple methods of data collection (interviews, systematic observation of coach behaviors, etc.). While this strategy is more sensitive to the context, the complexity and time required make it a less practical approach to measuring the effectiveness of large-scale coach education programs. Finally, it is worth noting that contrary to the school setting where it is common to find studies that report data on student performance to assess the effectiveness of teacher development strategies, coaching researchers generally focus on coaches’ beliefs and/or behaviors’ or athletes’ psychosocial outcomes (i.e., anxiety, self-esteem). Only one study (Trudel, Bernard, Boileau, & Marcotte, 2000) was found in which athlete performance variables were measured.

For the purpose of the present article, we will focus the remainder of this section on the results of recent studies in which researchers have investigated how coaches in North American settings learn to coach (Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Gould, Giannini, Krane, & Hodge, 1990; Lemyre et al., 2007; Rodgers, Reade, & Hall, 2007; Vargas-Tonsing, 2007; Wright et al., 2007). The results of these studies show that there is consensus among coaches that the day-to-day learning experiences in the field is considered the most valuable method for learning how to coach. This should not be a surprise considering “the small amount of time a coach might spend in a formalized learning environment in comparison to the number of hours she or he spends in the sporting venue, coaching and interacting with athletes, other coaches, and officials” (Werthner & Trudel, 2006, p. 199). Research on coach developmental profiles supports this assertion, showing that coaches spend upwards of 1,000 hours each year on coaching duties (training, competition,
administration) while sometimes spending as little as 10 hours annually participating in formal coach education activities (Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006; Gilbert, Lichkenwaltd, Gilbert, Zelezy, & Côté, 2009). Clearly coaches place great value on learning through experience, and this type of learning is very much a social activity that can be used to stimulate coach reflection.

The confirmation that coach learning is a social process most valued when it is embedded in specific coaching contexts highlights the need to study how coach social learning networks form and their impact on coach development. The practical implication of this line of inquiry is the application of ‘what works’ to coach education and coach professional development initiatives. Culver and Trudel (2006; 2008a,b) identified three types of social learning networks used by sport coaches. The first is referred to as Networks of Practice (NoP), through which coaches exchange information with others whom they may not necessarily know very well or interact with on a regular basis. This way to interact has gained popularity with the wide range of social networking tools now available on the Internet. An Informal Knowledge Network (IKN) is composed of people who are not working together but who know and trust each other enough to share information. For example, coaches can contact previous coaches or a relative to get specific information. The third type of network is called a Community of Practice (CoP) which can be defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.4).

Of these three types of social learning networks, the Community of Practice (CoP) approach has garnered the most research attention in sport coaching. Galipeau and Trudel (2004, 2005, 2006) studied university teams and concluded that each team should not be viewed as a single CoP, but instead as two distinct CoPs (one for the athletes, and one for the coaching staff). These two CoPs are constantly in a negotiation process in relation to how to direct and lead the team. A prime example of a coaching staff operating as a CoP is seen in how legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden planned for practice sessions. Coach Wooden met with his coaching staff everyday for two hours to prepare practice plans, and then created 3x5 index cards for each coach. Coach Wooden then extended his learning network each off-season by interacting with coaches across the country while researching a particular aspect of basketball. The results of these yearly research studies were then integrated into the next season’s practice plans and shared with members of his UCLA coaching staff (Nater & Gallimore, 2006).

More recently, Culver and Trudel conducted two studies on coaches’ CoPs (Culver, 2004; Culver & Trudel, 2006). They first studied coaches in a club to see if they naturally form a CoP. It was found that coaching CoPs, even among coaches in the same club, will be ineffective unless elements of the setting are specifically designed to nurture and sustain the CoP. In their second study they tested the effectiveness of an intervention designed to support a coaching CoP in an alpine ski club. Culver assumed the role of facilitator during coaching round table meetings in an attempt to direct and support coach experiential learning. Initially the coaches were satisfied with the process and reported that it did indeed contribute to their development. However, follow-up interviews with coaches one year after the intervention showed that the CoP dissolved without the leadership and structure imposed through the intervention.
In their latest study Culver, Trudel, and Werthner (2009) documented the attempt of a technical director to foster a coaching CoP in a competitive youth baseball league. Coaches in the league were at first reluctant to share their coaching knowledge, because it seemed to contradict the traditional view of sport where opposing coaches are viewed as rivals and the goal is to gain a competitive advantage over opponents. Strong and constant leadership was required by the technical director to establish a cooperative learning environment. Unfortunately, when this visionary leader retired from the position, the league returned to its more traditional, competitive environment. A final example of research designed to create and nurture coaching CoPs is the work of Lemyre (2008). Lemyre examined the feasibility of establishing CoPs in two sport settings – a competitive karate dojo and a high school. In the karate setting, Lemyre used a collaborative research approach to facilitate the interactions among the karate instructors. The hierarchical structure of the traditional karate dojo was counterproductive to establishing a culture of negotiated learning, a core element in a healthy CoP. In the high school sport setting, Lemyre worked with six coaches. He started with the assumption that if these coaches had the opportunity to reflect on their coaching experiences they would progressively see the importance of meeting with other coaches to share their knowledge. All of the coaches said they appreciated the opportunities to meet with the facilitator individually and in groups, and acknowledged the importance of sharing their knowledge. When interviewed the following season, though, it was clear that none of them was willing to assume the facilitator role for lack of time and perceived competence to lead the CoP. The common theme, then, across all of this recent research on communities of practice and sport coaching is that the CoP approach can indeed work with coaches in a sport setting but it is dependent on the sustained commitment of a dedicated peer leader. Adopting a learning community approach in youth sport settings in essence requires a cultural change. Changing culture means changing everyday routines. Asking coaches, and peer leaders, to change routines surely will be challenging as existing routines are in place to ensure balance between what is possible and what is practical in typical youth sport settings. In the next section of this paper we present a proposal for adapting the learning community approach to a typical youth sport setting, in a way that we believe will be both practical and effective.

Application of a Learning Community Approach to Youth Sport Coaching

Based on a review of the teaching and coaching literature, how realistic is a learning community approach for youth sport coaching, and what might this approach look like in a typical youth sport setting? The research with teachers, with its use of quasi-experimental research designs that include student outcome measures, shows us that this approach can lead to effective teacher development and improvement in student learning outcomes. In fact, we see that the lessons from this research can be synthesized into five key elements essential to effective teacher learning communities. The research in sport, with a more exploratory descriptive approach, shows us that there is indeed potential and willingness for youth sport coaches to adopt coach learning communities as an effective way to nurture ongoing professional development. In fact, a recent survey of 366 youth sport coaches across sports found that 97% of them reported that continuing education was important and 87% of the coaches indicated that continuing education should be mandatory (Vargas-Tonsing, 2007). Furthermore, the two main reasons cited for pursuing continuing education were (a) league requirement and (b) relevance to their particular
needs and setting. Combining the lessons learned from the sport and education research, with sensitivity to the realities of typical youth sport settings in North America, a proposal for a learning community approach for coaches can be put forth for consideration.

We outline our proposal using the five key elements of successful teacher learning communities and explain how these elements might be realized in a typical youth sport setting. We have decided to organize our suggestions using these five elements not only because there is empirical support for the effectiveness of these elements in teaching settings, but also because a review of the research on coach learning provides support for the relevance and efficacy of these key characteristics. While reading these suggestions it is important to be mindful of the true intent, and value, of the learning community approach to professional development which is to “provide an arena in which colleagues work together to understand and accomplish shared goals, examine data about whether students are accomplishing goals, and provide each other with assistance to accomplish the goals” (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2005, p. 146).

1. **Stable Settings Dedicated to Improving Instruction and Learning**

Typical youth sport settings, like school settings, are the result of decades of negotiation between what is possible (resources) and what is desirable (local beliefs and values). There are many very real constraints on what is possible in typical youth sport settings, not the least of which is time for coaches to spend on professional development. The vast majority of youth sport coaches are volunteers and/or parents of children who are involved in the sport experience (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). Although in school-based sport coaches often are full-time teachers, sport coaching typically is an addendum to their teaching job, not their primary responsibility. Put simply, much of youth sport coaching in North America – unlike school teaching – is best viewed as a form of community service, not a profession. With this in mind, we do not believe it is a worthwhile endeavor to require more resource investment (time and money) from youth sport coaches in the form of extensive continuing education requirements. We believe that stable settings with the potential to improve instruction and learning already exist in the typical youth sport setting, although they may seldom be framed as such. There are at least three stable elements across all youth sport settings: games, practices, and meetings. For example, all youth sport settings hold coaching and/or league meetings on a regular basis. The frequency and duration of these meetings most certainly varies widely across the country. Our collective experience tells us that these meetings typically focus on organizational issues (rule changes, disciplinary actions, fundraising, etc.), with very little if any time allocated to coach development. It is evident, then, that there are indeed elements of stable settings across youth sport settings that can be used for the explicit purpose of coach development. For example, time could be allocated in regularly scheduled league / coaching meetings for coaches to pose questions to other coaches about how to resolve current coaching issues. Another possibility, although one that would require a more substantial cultural change in youth sport settings, would be to reduce the number of practices and/or games and transfer this time allotment to coach learning community meetings. Neither suggestion would increase the time or financial commitment for coaches nor youth sport settings – it simply is a re-organization of existing resources. Although many youth sport stakeholders surely would rebel against reducing practice and/or game schedules, would the benefits of a coach learning community meeting offset the loss of one practice every 2-3 weeks? Considering that youth sport coaches most likely spend
at least 2-3 hours on a typical practice (planning and teaching the practice), this subtle change would result in up to six hours monthly for youth sport coaches to work with their fellow coaches on learning how to address context-specific coaching issues. Of course the effectiveness of these meetings would be dependent upon the setting’s ability to meet the remaining four criteria for successful learning communities.

2. **Job-alike Teams**

We know from the vast array of research on adult learning, teaching, and coaching that adult learners place great value on learning experiences that are directly related to their immediate needs and context. In other words, people pay attention when the information is relevant to them personally. This may in large part explain the lack of confidence in, and impact of, traditional teacher and coach development initiatives such as in-service workshops delivered by experts far removed from the particular setting (Blank et al., 2008; Garet et al., 2001; Trudel et al., in press; Vescio et al., 2008). Schon’s (1983; 1991) seminal research on how practitioners learn in context highlighted this observation, and he used the term ‘operative attention’ to describe a practitioner’s heightened sensitivity, or openness, to learning in-context. This is not to say that youth sport coaches can’t learn out-of-context in traditional coach education programs such as coach certification workshops, although there is no research to support that they do at this point (Trudel et al., in press). Instead, what we can learn from this body of literature is that for coach development to be effective, there absolutely must be an in-setting experiential learning component to the effort. A professional learning community for youth sport coaches may be most effective – and practical – with small groups of coaches who coach the same sport in the same context (i.e., age-group and/or competitive level). Recommendations from the teacher development research are for teams of 3-7 teachers working in the same grade level and/or subject area. In a typical youth sport league with 8 or 10 teams, 2 or 3 coach learning teams could be created. These learning teams would use their coach development meetings to set and share dilemmas to work on that have immediate relevancy to their coaching. Small teams of coaches in the same league could be organized according to coaches’ availability to meet and/or coaching experience (perhaps ensure that each team has at least one experienced coach). The critical point here is that coach development can be effective when coaches work through real dilemmas with other coaches who share the same context.

3. **Published Protocols that Guide but do not Prescribe**

A requirement for increasing the accountability of coaches for their own learning, and for helping them capture and share the results of this vital learning experience, is to have a written protocol that describes how to operate effective coach learning teams in specific settings. Typical youth sport coaches work mostly in isolation and have brief tenures as coaches, often less than five years (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). In addition, typical youth sport coaches don’t have formal training in the teaching-learning process and will need guidance on how to effectively use their coaching experiences as professional development opportunities (i.e., how to learn in and from experience). The protocol should not present rigid prescriptions for learning teams, but instead should provide guidance on how best to structure typical youth sport learning communities. The protocol functions advocated in the teacher development research can easily be adapted to a typical youth sport setting:

- Jointly identifying goals for athlete learning (what realistically should our athletes know and be able to do after participating in this sport program?).


Finding or developing assessments of athlete progress toward those goals (how will we know if our athletes learned these things?).

Bringing in experts who assist in accomplishing goals (what other coaches do we have access to for helping us resolve the dilemmas we encounter while trying to teach our athletes?).

Planning and delivering lessons everyone tries out (helping each other plan practices that incorporate agreed-upon athlete learning goals).

Using performance data to evaluate the commonly planned and delivered lessons (what types of information should we be collecting during practices and games to determine the effectiveness of our practice plans and teaching strategies?).

Reflecting on athlete gains to determine next steps in the learning process (using this information to adapt and organize strategies for enhancing athlete learning).

It likely would take several years of experimenting with, and documenting, coach learning communities in order to create appropriate protocols that can then be distributed among coaches in specific settings.

4. Trained Peer Facilitators

Any attempt to create and nurture a professional learning community requires leadership; ultimately someone in the group has to provide guidance and hold other group members accountable for contributing to the learning effort. Without this leadership, the learning community will quickly dissolve and old practices will once again become the norm for that setting (Culver et al., 2009; Gallimore et al., 2009; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Important questions to ask at this point are: (a) Who should assume this important role, and (b) What are their responsibilities? It has been suggested that effectiveness of the learning community will be enhanced with a group leader selected from among the group of learners themselves (Gallimore et al., 2009). A peer leader, or facilitator, is considered more effective than an outside ‘expert’ because the peer has instant credibility with other group members, will be able to relate well to the real problems of practice, and perhaps most importantly will be able to participate in the testing of community generated strategies. Compare this profile of a peer facilitator with an outside facilitator or mentor who does not share the same context as the other members of the learning community. An outside facilitator can at best provide an external perspective on the process, but will not be able to fully participate in the generation of solutions because they are not living the problems like the other group members. The use of a peer facilitator counters the often heard critique of traditional professional development workshops and clinics, where teachers and coaches complain that the speaker ‘doesn’t really know what it’s like in my classroom (school, team, league, etc.)’. A peer facilitator does really know what it’s like because they too are embedded in the same context working with the same type of learners.

What then is the role of the peer facilitator in a professional learning community, and what is realistic to expect of a coach who already is extremely busy with their own team? Applying this element to a typical youth sport setting might look something like this. Once a small group of job-a-like teams (element #3) has been assembled in a stable setting dedicated to improving instruction and learning (element #1), the group will either select or be assigned a peer facilitator. The peer facilitator will need to complete some basic training on how to lead a coach learning community, which may be as rudimentary as a 1-2 hour orientation session. These orientation sessions might initially be lead by professionals with experience creating and leading professional learning
communities, but over time can and should be lead by league administrators or other coaches who have at some point served as peer facilitators. The role of the peer facilitator is to keep the group on-task and guide the process through to the conclusion; that is resolution of the problem and evidence of athlete learning.

How practical would it really be to have a fellow coach guide other coaches through the process of solving real problems? In the CoP baseball study by Culver and colleagues (2009) the peer facilitator was a league technical director. The fact that he was a coach in the league for three seasons prior to becoming the technical director surely increased his credibility amongst the other coaches. However, once in the role of technical director he lost the ability to participate directly in the inquiry-process – there was no opportunity for him to test and evaluate strategies developed in the coach learning community. Furthermore, as technical director he was able to enforce his vision but there was a power differential that had to be respected by the coaches. This creates a very different dynamic than a peer who is simultaneously facilitating the group and engaging in the protocol-guided inquiry process with his or her own team. As was evident in the Culver et al. study, the will to engage in a learning community approach dissolved as soon as the technical director left the position. Also, typical youth sport leagues across America may not have technical directors on staff. Therefore, selecting a fellow coach as the peer facilitator is most practical and will empower all coaches in the community of learning to openly share and test coaching strategies in a non-evaluative setting. Unlike a technical director or director of coaching (as is common in many youth sport leagues), a fellow coach can also participate in the learning experiments by testing the coaching strategies in their own practices and games. This opportunity for all members of the professional learning community to participate in and reflect on the experiments fulfills the three critical features of successful CoP’s: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Lastly, having coaches serve as peer facilitators – a role that can and should be rotated among members of the job-alike-teams – also would help fulfill one of the key steps required for improving community sport put forth by the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS, 2002). As a result of a national summit on raising community standards in sport, NAYS outlined three steps for action – the third being creating an atmosphere where youth sport stakeholders are held accountable for their behavior. Working in small job-alike teams led by peer facilitators will force coaches to hold each other accountable for creating safe and effective strategies for resolving common coaching problems.

5. Working on Athlete Learning Goals until There are Tangible Gains in Athlete Development

The peer facilitator has the special opportunity to harness and maintain the group’s energy while targeting one specific coaching problem at a time, until there is measurable evidence that the athletes have improved their competence related to the problem. For example, if the learning community decides to tackle one coach’s concern about keeping young athletes focused during practice sessions, the group will not stop testing and evaluating coaching strategies until there is measurable evidence that the athletes have improved their ability to stay focused during practices. Furthermore, the group will be responsible for documenting the problem solving (i.e., learning) process. The means used to prepare and share the documentation may vary widely depending on the capacity of the youth sport setting. For example, in some settings coaches may prepare a typed summary of the problem, the solution, and the instruments used to collect evidence of problem resolution (i.e., athlete development). The league could provide the coaches with ‘problem resolution summary’ sheets as a template
for facilitating the collection and sharing of wisdom gained through participation in the learning communities. These sheets could then be collated into a league handbook that is distributed in the first coaches’ meeting at the start of each season. It is important to reinforce here that the documentation of problem solving is not to be viewed as answers to problems that can then be transferred seamlessly by other coaches to their particular settings. The ongoing compilation of ‘problem resolution summaries’ in a particular setting would not be a recipe book for coaching. Instead, this exercise holds coaches accountable for their learning and responsibility to other members of their learning community while generating a treasured archive of best practices developed in and for particular settings. Ideally coaches would have open access to these evolving archives which would then serve as nourishment and motivation for their own problem-solving activities.

Summary

As promising as learning teams are as a form of professional improvement, and as much appeal as they have for teachers (Garet et al., 2001), available evidence of their impact remains severely limited (Vescio et al., 2008). However, a review of the coach learning research suggests that there is a considerable likelihood that applied to coach development, learning teams offer a promising complement to large-scale coach education programs. But that remains a hypothesis, not fact. In this paper we have provided suggestions for creating professional learning communities in typical youth sport settings. Certainly, there are formidable challenges to the application of the learning team concept, e.g. limited time and other resources to support learning teams for coaches, training of peer leaders, and development of protocols. If recommendations in recent national reports on youth sport and coaching are indeed accurate representations of current views on coach development, then clearly these challenges to creating coach learning communities can be overcome (Hill, 2007; NASPE, 2008; NAYS, 2002). While there is evidence that youth sport leaders in the United States believe in this approach, it is not apparent that these beliefs have been transformed into action. Unlike several other countries around the world in which coach education design has begun to shift from a ‘coaching knowledge’ to a ‘coach development’ perspective (Gilbert, 2006), policy makers in this country seem preoccupied with expanding certification mandates than creating and evaluating learning networks and ongoing professional development initiatives for youth sport coaches. In one sense we have taken an advocacy approach with this article, following the recommendations of others in the field who have stressed the need to improve the scientific rigor of the messages we deliver to youth sport stakeholders about the need for quality youth sport coach education (Bodey, Brylinsky, & Kuhlman, 2008).

Throughout the process of formulating our suggestions for applying the lessons learned from the teaching and coaching literature, we have asked ourselves one basic question – Would our suggestions be practical in a typical youth sport setting today? This critical self-evaluation was greatly facilitated by one of the co-author’s experience coaching youth sport while writing the manuscript. We are intimately aware of the many challenges that may be encountered when trying to adopt a learning community approach in typical youth sport settings. Stable settings dedicated to improving instruction and learning may only be possible if sport associations/school directors provide their coaches with a place to meet (Culver & Trudel, 2006). To form job-alike teams, coaches will have to agree to share their knowledge with other coaches in their league, which does not naturally occur
(Wright et al., 2007). The written protocol – on how to engage in an effective learning community, not on how to coach – will have to be reviewed on a regular basis because of the high turnover rate and brief tenure of many youth sport coaches (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). In this sense, the written protocol becomes a key element of creating a stable setting; coaches and administrators will come and go, but the learning community approach remains embedded in the particular sport setting. The selection of the peer facilitator will not be an easy task either. The peer facilitator should be someone who is respected in the sport association but at the same time will be able to inspire a new view and be familiar with the community of practice approach and how to nurture it (Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). Finally, crafting athlete learning goals and reliably measuring athletes’ progress will be difficult because of the complexity and variability of athlete learning (Ford, Coughlan & Williams, 2009).

We suspect that most all coaches already engage in personal reflection and inquiry while experimenting with coaching strategies to resolve coaching problems. The typical youth sport setting, however, does not provide coaches with the elements required to nurture and sustain this critical form of professional development. Whereas in a typical youth sport setting coaches will attempt to resolve some or all of the many dilemmas routinely encountered, how often do they (a) have regular opportunities to share and test their solutions with other coaches working in the same setting, (b) actually resolve the dilemma with evidence that the solution was indeed effective, and (c) document their solutions and make them public for other coaches in similar settings so they might avoid having to repeat the same process all over again? We do not envision this compendium of ‘solutions’ being used as an ‘answer book’ for youth sport coaching. Instead, this problem solving archive should be viewed as a living document – one that will provide field-tested and evidence-based guidance to other youth sport coaches struggling to find effective ways to resolve the myriad of challenges they regularly encounter. The archive of learning reports provide real solutions created by real coaches working in real settings with real athletes just like the ones other coaches in similar settings will be working with. We wouldn’t expect other coaches to simply take the solutions and apply them to their setting. We firmly believe that this public record of ‘what works’ based on systematic evidence has great potential to short-circuit the messy experiential learning process that coaches so heavily rely on for learning how to coach.

On a final note, we suspect that one of the main criticisms of a coach learning community approach to professional development will be that it devalues the competition aspect so inherent in youth sport in America. Why would coaches of rival teams want to share coaching strategies, when after all, one of their primary goals is to win competitions against the other teams in their league? In fact, there is evidence that until youth sport settings are changed to nurture learning communities, youth sport coaches will continue to view other coaches as rivals, and open knowledge sharing will not occur (Lemyre et al., 2007). The learning community approach does not in any way diminish the importance of competition and striving to win. The only documented example of a true learning community approach to coaching in youth sport clearly showed that competition remained high and was still a primary focus of the youth sport experience (Culver et al., 2009). However, the educational value of competition in youth sports is realized only when competitive events are viewed primarily as another opportunity to learn and improve performance – of athletes and of coaches. When youth sport leagues are framed more as educational systems where athletes are students of the league – not the ‘property’ of one
particular coach in a league – then the learning community approach can become a natural and extremely valuable part of the youth sport experience.
References


