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Coaching Philosophy: A Systematic Approach for Development

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to present a student-centered learning approach for developing a working coaching philosophy. The strategy provided is appropriate for coaching educators to use with students as well as practicing coaches to reflect on their own development through personal experience and practice. It stems from the constructivist approach to learning and guides the reader or student through an active process of recollection, reflection, and critical thinking. During this progression, a personal construct of understanding is created from impact moments that have occurred to-date involving their sport and/or coaching experiences which shape their own philosophy.

Coaching Philosophy: A Systematic Approach for Development

Success and longevity in the coaching profession depends on a philosophy that guides and defines teams (Brown, 2003). A developed coaching philosophy gives coaches a crutch that can be relied on in any situation and enables them to work through challenging times as well as great times with confidence and poise. Time should be taken to reflect on the values associated with the philosophy such as; training rules, style of play, codes of conduct, competitive outlook, short- and long-term goals, and individual sport-specific factors unique to its game (Garrett, 2008; Hammermeister, 2010; Martens, 2004) .

Frequently coaching education students and young coaches replicate the philosophies of coaches they played for or observed, or borrow viewpoints offered in educational books by successful coaches. While all of these provide great learning opportunities and most likely offer positive qualities to model, students need to be provided guidance to find their strengths based on their own personality (Clifford & Feezell, 1997). Individual values and beliefs are reflected in nearly every aspect of coaching. They determine actions and reactions in uncertain situations, professional conduct, leadership characteristics, goal setting techniques, interpersonal communications, and personal motives for coaching (Hammermeister, 2010; Sabock & Sabock, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative to offer a developmental strategy that provides an opportunity for students to reflect upon moments in time that had a significant impact on their lives and discuss the learning outcomes from those experiences. The learning outcomes are then translated into part of their working philosophy.

Theory of Learning

The National Standards for Sport Coaches (NASPE, 2006) provides domains, standards, and benchmarks regarding the skills and knowledge that coaches should possess. The first standard of *Domain 1: Philosophy and Ethics* states that the coach will “develop and implement an athlete-centered coaching philosophy” (p.7). It seems logical then to provide a developmental strategy that is learner-centered and creates the opportunity for individuals to build their philosophy through a discovery process that becomes unique to them. Tenets from the constructivist approach to learning present guidelines for that experience.

Constructivism is an educational theory about how reality is shaped, information is acquired, understanding is obtained, and individuals learn (Bolliger, 2006; Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Marlowe & Page, 1998). Knowledge is created by interpreting and reflecting upon experiences to assist learners in the “individual sense-making process” (Bolliger, 2006, p. 119).

Students learn through investigation and discovery. They actively attach meaning to concepts by creating personal constructs that enable the student to apply what they have learned.

Brooks and Brooks (1993) identified descriptors highlighting constructivist practices that motivate students to search for understanding and personal meaning. Constructivist teachers encourage student initiative, ask questions, and provide opportunities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate concepts. They inquire about student's

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understandings before sharing their own, encourage dialogue between students, as well as the instructor, and seek elaboration when required. Bolliger (2006) adds that instructors become role models, coaches, and facilitators. Because of this, learners take personal responsibility for their learning and transfer takes place from theory to practice.

Strategy

Generally, students in coaching education programs have diverse backgrounds. Some have participated in athletics through middle school, some have participated through high school, and some are still participating in college. Some students may already have coaching experience, while others do not. Accompanying this diversity is the desire for these students to coach at a variety of different levels. These variables can present challenges for the coaching educator working to assist in the development of individual philosophies. The strategy that follows utilizes constructivist practices to take into consideration the uniqueness that each student brings to the classroom. It provides an opportunity for students to collaborate, discuss, and think critically about their personal learning outcomes from individual experience in sport. The process applies the learning outcomes to a working coaching philosophy that can be enhanced throughout a career as more lessons are learned.

Opening Discussion

Initially students are placed into small groups according to the level at which they desire to coach. They are asked to write, discuss, and rationalize policies they may want to implement pertaining to academics, practice attendance, work ethic, and general team rules. Feedback and/or questions are encouraged within the groups to promote individual understanding. The next class period they are intermingled between groups to share insights learned and expand knowledge for the creation of their new construct. Again, feedback and questions are encouraged. This process provides students the opportunity to practice communicating their philosophy which is a benchmark to developing an athlete-centered coaching philosophy (NASPE, 2006).

The next phase provides the opportunity for students to recall moments from their personal experience in sport. They are asked to identify impact moments that occurred during different time periods in their life. Both positive and negative events are recorded. The students are then given time to write down a reaction, thought, or lesson learned from each particular event. This reflection process helps students attach a personal meaning to the values that shape their actions and beliefs, which ultimately build their working philosophy. What follows is an example of this phase.

Reflection

Students are guided through the reflection process via a PowerPoint presentation providing time frames and examples of memories and experiences. Figure 1 illustrates key words used to stimulate their efforts to recall key events that made a significant impact in their lives. The first time frame begins with the students' earliest recollection of athletic participation which varies from student to student. This particular example will start in

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elementary school (Figure 2). Our student started to play basketball in fifth grade and instantly achieved success. The coach was a positive motivator and that particular style of leadership encouraged her to work hard and put in extra effort outside the gymnasium. Unfortunately, this athlete was also quite heavy as a child and also remembered not fitting into the team uniform. This made her feel out of place at times and did not know how to respond to that.

The next step continues with middle school recollections (Figure 3). Our student cherishes a tournament victory that reminds her that hard work pays off. The feeling of success motivates her to continue to practice on her own and attend basketball camp in the summer months. But then she remembers a moment in 8th grade where she fouled out of a game and was completely self-absorbed with her disappointment that she neglected to cheer on her teammates for the remainder of the game. She wonders why nobody ever said anything to her.

The process moves forward with examples of high school memories (Figures 4 and 5). Initially, our student makes the junior varsity volleyball squad as a freshman. She continues to reap the benefits of her hard work in the off season. That same year she is moved from the forward position on the basketball team to the guard position. She has mixed emotions regarding the change. By the end of the season she is experiencing individual success as well as team victories. She learns to trust her coach and opens her mind to change. Later in her basketball career a regional playoff game is televised and she shoots an air ball. She felt nervousness like she never felt before. It peaks her interest in mental training techniques and pre-game routines. And finally, her senior year of softball at state tournament she was asked to relieve the starting pitcher. She pitched the very first ball over the backstop while her future college coach was in the stands watching her. Her high school coach walked out to the pitching mound and light heartedly made a joke and relaxed the team. She was reminded of how much fun it is to be part of a team and humor can be a helpful strategy in stress relief.

Memories from collegiate athletic experience follow (Figure 6). Freshman year of volleyball our student hits a ball out of bounds while blowing a bubble. Coach immediately removes her from the game while ranting and raving about the gum chewing and her level of concentration. She quickly discovers that one lapse in focus can make a difference and that coach wanted her to learn that fact early. She then recalls her senior year in which the ability to sustain that focus aided in a district championship. After losing the first match of the day, her team had to regroup and play through the loser's bracket to earn a trip to Nationals. After ten grueling hours of competition, they won. She felt she had experienced the true essence of teamwork. Each of her teammates put forth every ounce of effort they had until that last whistle blew and they all collapsed with a sense of achievement.

Putting Together a Working Philosophy

Following the collegiate athletic example, students are given time outside of class to define how their impact moments have shaped their lives. They are asked to bring their learning outcomes for small group discussions with students who are interested in coaching similar competition levels. This creates yet another opportunity for them to communicate their philosophy (NASPE, 2006). Information from the PowerPoint timeline assists the

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facilitation process of applying learning outcomes into a working philosophy that incorporates the core values identified by the students (Figure 7).

Our student was overweight as a middle school athlete, and therefore, became passionate about educating her future athletes about healthy eating habits and nutrition. She also feels that experiencing success, whether in practice or games provides motivation for athletes to continue to work to improve. The emotional breakdown after fouling out in basketball, as well as hitting the ball out of bounds in a volleyball tournament at a critical moment motivate her to want to communicate her expectations early in the season to avoid confusion or misconceptions. Knowing how nerves can affect performance she wants to make it a priority to understand how her athletes react to competitive stress and how she can intervene to reduce anxiety.

She appreciated her coach telling a joke to relax her and the team after an embarrassing moment when she pitched the ball over the backstop. That memory helped her realize that mistakes and errors are part of everyday life and coaches are leaders who provide solutions to learn and grow from each experience. Lastly, she played through the ultimate commitment of her team laying it all on the line to achieve a common goal of a national tournament appearance. She believes in the “TEAM” concept and expresses her desire to develop a process to teach the true meaning of “TEAM.” This, in following the constructivist approach will be through experience and reflection.

Summary

Presented is an example of a coaching philosophy development process that promotes critical thinking from coaching education students and/or coaches who are ready to reflect and learn from their experiences. Coaching philosophies are “lifelong” in their development and are tested throughout the duration of any coaching career. The strategy provides tools to learn, adapt, and formulate new constructs pertaining to changing and developing communities which creates the opportunity for continuous growth and development. This is an effective tool for self-evaluation as well as a system that can be used to develop or redefine methods, techniques, and strategies.

About the Author

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Kelly Witte is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where she is also the Athletic Coaching Education Minor Coordinator. Prior to her current position she spent eighteen years coaching both volleyball and softball at the collegiate level. Her teaching interests include: Theories of Coaching, Psycho-Social Aspects of Coaching, Conditioning for Interscholastic Sports, and Application of Mechanical Principles to Coaching.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1. The reflection process.

Figure 2. Elementary school example.

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Figure 3. Middle school example.

Figure 4. High school example.

Figure 5. High school example.

Figure 6. College example.

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Figure 7. Applied philosophy example.

APPLIED PHILOSOPHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Educate athletes regarding proper nutrition and fitness➤ Provide opportunities for success along the way➤ Communication is essential➤ Mental aspect of the game critical➤ There is a place for humanness in coaching➤ TEAM is bigger than self➤ With TEAM there are no limits