Learning Communities as Continuing Professional Development for Sport Coaches

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Abstract
Continuing professional development (CPD) for sport coaches has been defined as all kinds of professional learning that occurs after initial certification (Nelson et al., 2006), and includes both non-formal and informal learning situations. Despite the fact that within the past decade there has been an increasing number of studies on these learning situations, learning communities as a type of CPD have received little attention. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to share initial observations and lessons learned from creating and implementing sport coach learning communities. In addition, this paper extends the dialogue on learning community implementation and assessment. Our learning community efforts were formulated around five key guidelines: (1) Stable settings dedicated to improving instruction and learning, (2) Job-alike teams, (3) Published protocols that guide but do not prescribe, (4) Trained peer facilitators, and (5) Working on student learning goals until there are tangible gains in student learning.

Key Words: Coach education, coaching effectiveness, youth sport, non-formal learning
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Coach education may best be considered an umbrella term for the various ways in which sport coaches learn to coach. Authors have recently classified these diverse learning experiences into formal, non-formal, and informal learning situations (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; Trudel, Gilbert, & Werthner, 2010; Werthner & Trudel, 2006). Traditional coach education programs that are designed to certify large numbers of coaches are perhaps the most common example of formal learning situations. Several recent reviews of the literature on coach education programs show that there are relatively few empirical studies of these formal learning situations, and that there is even less evidence of these programs having any durable influence on improving coaching effectiveness (McCullick, Schempp, Mason, Foo, Vickers, & Connolly, 2009; Trudel et al., 2010). In contrast, non-formal and informal learning situations have been studied quite extensively in the past decade, and may be grouped together as examples of continuing professional development (CPD). CPD specific to coaching has been defined as “all types of professional learning undertaken by coaches beyond initial certification” (Nelson et al., 2006, p. 255). Research consistently shows that coaches place great value on these types of learning experiences (Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Research also shows that coaches accumulate hundreds of hours annually in the actual process of coaching (non-formal and informal learning situations) compared to maybe a few dozen hours in formal learning situations (Gilbert, Lichktenwaltd, Gilbert, Zelezny, & Côté, 2009). The importance of non-formal and informal learning situations is also recognized in the National Standards for Sport Coaches (NASPE, 2006). The last of the 40 standards suggests that coaches should “conduct periodic self-reflections on coaching effectiveness” (p. 23) and “seek feedback from experienced coaches to evaluate practice sessions, discuss observations, and implement needed change at regular intervals” (p. 23).

This type of ongoing learning is often considered the key to becoming an effective coach (Armour, 2010). However, the quality and effectiveness of these ongoing learning experiences depends on a coach’s access to peers – sometimes referred to as a learning community (Barnson, 2010; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009). Although learning communities are increasingly advocated in the coach education literature, research on this topic is extremely rare.

In 2006, Culver and Trudel presented two intervention studies designed to promote social co-participation amongst coaches. The first study was conducted with an athletics club and the authors’ aim was to act as a sport psychology/pedagogy consultant while observing coaches’ interactions. Culver helped coaches define their own “practice-related problems and discuss
possible actions in relation to solutions” (p. 102). Participants who coached within the same organization did not necessarily form a community of practice. Rather, they formed more of an informal knowledge network, which is often a ‘breaking through’ adventure where coaches must penetrate the inner circle to gain access to the group. Discussions between coaches consisted of organizational aspects of the club and rarely included the exchange of coaching knowledge, which limited coach and athlete development. Researchers found it challenging to convince coaches of the need for ongoing interaction. Culver and Trudel’s (2006) second study included coaches working in youth (11-12 year old) ski clubs, and the researchers took a more proactive approach to restructure coaches’ time in order to bring them together with the intent of discussing coaching knowledge. Culver assisted coaches throughout ‘round table’ meetings by attempting to establish “value based on the aliveness of the interactions related to everyday coaching issues” (p. 105) and creating a “rhythm that was sustainable” (p. 105). Coaches profited from round table discussions and the facilitator was a necessary component leading to the success of the community.

In 2009, Culver and colleagues retrospectively studied a sport leader’s attempt to foster a coaches’ community of practice in youth baseball. They found that during the sport leader’s four-year reign, he created a culture of knowledge sharing and established a common goal of developing each athlete within the league. This lead to a cooperative environment where all coaches focused on the development of all players in the league, not just those on their team. However, after the sport leader resigned from this position the coaches reverted to their more traditional approach to coaching, and formal knowledge sharing faded. This highlights the importance of strong leadership in the maintenance of an informal learning structure.

Other than the few small-scale studies presented here, there does not appear to be any concerted effort in the youth sport community to provide coaches with guidance or infrastructure needed to facilitate these types of learning situations. Although Armour (2010) presented a list of eight recommendations for ongoing professional development for sport coaches, they were presented as generic concepts and did not provide specific guidance on how to apply these recommendations. Recently, however, several authors have attempted to provide specific guidelines for designing ongoing professional development experiences in youth sport settings using a learning community approach (Barnson, 2010; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009). Gilbert and colleagues listed five keys to effective learning communities based on their comprehensive review of research from coach and teacher development:

1. Stable setting dedicated to improving instruction and learning: Stable settings within youth sport already exist in the form of games, practices and meetings. Within these current
settings, learning community meetings can be effectively integrated and highlighted as important components for coach learning.

2. **Job-alike teams**: When group members lack common challenges, learning teams tend to turn toward superficial discussions. Creating groups of 3-7 coaches in similar contexts ensures that knowledge and dilemmas shared have direct relevance to each participant.

3. **Published protocols that guide but do not prescribe**: A written protocol that provides guidance on how to best operate and structure a learning community.

4. **Trained peer facilitators**: A trained peer facilitator is a group member (typically a coach) who has completed basic training in effectively leading a learning community, and who provides guidance and holds other members accountable for contributing to the learning effort.

5. **Working on athlete goals until there are tangible gains in athlete development**: Effective learning communities must keep working on a specific issue until it is evident that it has been resolved via measurable evidence in coach behaviors, knowledge or athlete outcomes.

The effectiveness of these five guidelines has not been tested with youth sport coaches. The purpose of the current paper is to share initial observations from our attempts to create youth sport coach learning communities in adherence with the five keys to effective learning communities (Gilbert et al., 2009). Our discussion is based on 18-months of field work with high school sport partners. Although originally designed as a formal collaborative action research project, it evolved into an informal ongoing partnership with high school sport stakeholders interested in improving the effectiveness of their youth sport coaches. As such, we offer the following discussion not as a formal research report, but instead as a first-hand account of attempts to design and implement learning communities in specific settings. This exercise is an important step in the ongoing dialogue about how to provide youth sport coaches with guided opportunities for ongoing professional development as a central part of their overall coach education experience (Armour, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2009; NASPE, 2006; Trudel et al., 2010).

### Designing Learning Communities in Youth Sport Settings

In this section of the paper a summary is provided of our attempt to create and implement coach learning communities in three youth sport settings. The summary is organized around the five guidelines for operating effective learning communities in educational settings (Gilbert et al., 2009). For each guideline we describe how we implemented it in each setting and discuss lessons learned for improving future efforts to create and sustain effective learning communities. Presenting the information in this format brings transparency to the challenging and complex process of actually trying to create and implement learning communities in youth sport.
Learning Community Settings

The learning community approach was tested in three high school (ages 14-18) sport settings in the United States: (a) basketball, (b) water polo, and (c) a high school athletics department. Within the high school basketball learning community there were four participants: the School District Athletic Director, one peer facilitator who was a varsity boys head basketball coach, one varsity boys head basketball coach, and one female varsity girls head basketball coach. A typical high school basketball season within this school district consisted of 25 to 35 games over a 12-week season. Each team’s coaching staff included three to four coaches and teams generally practiced five days per week throughout the season.

The water polo learning community included three participants from the same high school: the varsity boy’s head coach, the varsity boy’s assistant coach and the junior varsity boy’s head coach. A typical high school water polo season within this school district lasted 12-weeks and included approximately 20 games. Teams generally practiced five days per week throughout the season, played one to two games per week, and competed in up to four tournaments per season.

The third learning community consisted of an entire high school athletics program. Participants included the Principal, Vice Principal, Athletics Director, Assistant Athletics Director and various sport coaches within the high school, which included: football, volleyball, tennis, water polo, cross country, basketball, baseball, soccer, wrestling, baseball, softball, golf, track and field, lacrosse, swimming and badminton. Generally, participants coached sport teams that played 12 to 35 games per season that lasted approximately 12 to 14 weeks. Sport teams typically practiced five days per week (except for game days) for the duration of the season.

Guideline #1: Stable Settings Dedicated to Improving Instruction and Learning

Implementation: Through negotiation with the basketball setting administrator (the School District Athletic Director) we were able to reorganize coaches’ responsibilities and time to create a more stable setting for the learning community activities. Because coaches were not willing to give up practice time, the Athletic Director agreed to give coaches one day off of teaching each month in order to attend coach learning community meetings. The school district provided substitute teachers to cover each coach’s teaching responsibilities. This allowed coaches to attend and focus on learning community meetings without requiring them to (a) lose time from actual coaching and (b) add extra time demands to their already busy schedule. The group met for three 3-hour meetings, in addition to frequent informal meetings between the learning community team, during the Spring 2010 school semester and included the athletic director and
peer facilitators. The water polo learning community was directly related to the participating coaches’ college coursework and the application of coaching concepts. In this particular setting the coaches were willing to dedicate time outside of school and coaching in order to improve their coaching effectiveness. This learning community held three 1-hour meetings during the Fall 2010 school semester. Within the high school athletics program learning community, many coaches were willing to meet during their daily ‘open period’ of teaching. As a result, the setting administrator successfully reorganized coaches’ time, making the learning community meetings a priority during a time when coaches were not scheduled to teach yet still required to be on the school campus. Three learning community meetings were held at the high school over a 2-month period in the Fall 2010 school semester. Each meeting lasted between 2 and 4 hours.

**Lessons learned:** Through continuous negotiation with setting administrators we found that it was especially difficult for them to view the learning community as an immediate ‘need’ for their coaches. Coaches and sport stakeholders have many duties and responsibilities that are typically perceived as more urgent that require immediate attention. Whereas, ongoing professional development is clearly an important element to increasing coaching effectiveness, our experiences show it is not typically recognized as ‘urgent.’ Therefore, it was common for these continuous improvement opportunities to be rescheduled or canceled at the last minute. For example, during the athletics department learning community, the school’s head football coach suddenly resigned. As a result, the principal viewed this as a more time sensitive demand and a learning community meeting was postponed. A similar occurrence took place within the basketball learning community. As Gilbert and colleagues (2009) suggested, learning community meetings that are pushed aside, cancelled, or stray off topic disrupt incremental improvements that are necessary for continuous development and remain key to the value of the learning community group. The setting administrators have substantial influence over group members’ coaching and teaching duties and play a key role in the reorganization of members’ time. It is critical for coach educators to attain initial ‘buy-in’ from setting administrators in order to acquire adequate commitment from coaches and other sport stakeholders within the learning community project. Once satisfactory buy-in and commitment is obtained, an on-site learning community collaborator can then take over more of the organizational responsibilities. This arrangement allows setting administrators time to deal with more time sensitive setting demands, while still permitting them to attend meetings and contribute to learning community protocols and continuous development.

Initially, learning community meetings were seen as a priority amongst group members, however, attendance decreased toward the end of the intervention within the basketball and water polo learning communities. We suspect this was due to the lack of accountability and incentive
for participating in the learning community efforts. Although every single participant across all three youth sport settings said they valued the learning community idea and ongoing professional development, each setting lacked a system for holding the participants accountable for their learning. In other words, there were no consequences for missing a meeting or not completing learning community ‘homework’. This is in stark contrast to how effective learning communities operate in other educational settings. For example, in Japan where learning communities are a regular part of the school culture, learning community participants are required to write formal reports describing the teaching strategies that were developed and the impact of these strategies on student learning (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Culver and colleagues (2009) highlighted the importance of strong leadership throughout efforts to embrace a continued culture of learning. A strong leader is key in holding group members accountable and providing incentive for continued effort. It has also been suggested that participation in coach education be rewarded in order to encourage participation (NASPE, 2008).

A re-organization of coaches’ time to include CPD is also necessary. Coaches within these three settings regularly attended athletic department meetings, taught high school courses, coached team practices and games, discussed student-athletes’ performance with their coaching staff, and conversed with other high school sport coaches. However, prior to participating in the learning community projects they did not engage in regularly scheduled formal meetings or discussions with the intention of improving coaching effectiveness. Gilbert et al. (2009) noted that coaches typically attend games, practices, and meetings, but that these ‘stable’ settings frequently focus on organization issues, with minimal time allocated for coach development. Gilbert and colleagues (2009) also argued that when organizational meetings currently exist, they could be reorganized to include ongoing professional development. They also suggested that a small portion of practice or game time could be set aside for coaches to engage in ongoing development. Re-organization of coaches’ time is possible. If setting administrators could set aside time for professional development during meetings already in place, there would be no extra time or financial commitment required from coaches and they would be more likely to persist in the learning community effort.

Guideline #2: Job-alike Teams

Implementation: In an attempt to create job-alike teams, we identified coaches and administrators within each setting who would initially be most receptive to the learning community idea. For example, through negotiation with the school district athletic director, we identified high school basketball coaches who would be excited to participate in ongoing professional development and who currently sought out development opportunities. The water
polo learning community included three water polo coaches within the same high school. These participants frequently dealt with comparable coaching issues specific to their context and athlete demographics. We knew two of the coaches previously and therefore this particular learning community was created largely out of convenience. In the case of the entire athletics department, we collaborated with high school administrators to identify group members. In an attempt to create smaller job-alike teams within the department, we created a coach needs assessment.

The coach needs assessment was designed to identify coaches’ perceptions of their teams needs and assess how well the coach was meeting those needs. This instrument was administered to coaches and will be used to create learning teams during the fall 2011 school semester. As a result, coaches within this learning community can be grouped into smaller, complementary job-alike teams, providing a structured form of peer-coaching.

Lessons learned: During collaboration with learning community members, our interactions supported research on guideline #2 in that members must feel ‘similar’ to others in the group in order to identify with coaching issues and accept feedback from group members. Gilbert et al. (2009) reported that coaches place considerable value on learning experiences related to their specific context and needs, therefore, it is important for coaches’ issues and experiences to be relevant to others in the group in order to foster context specific knowledge sharing. Côté and Gilbert (2009) proposed that one of the three main variables influencing coaching effectiveness is the context, or setting, where coaching occurs. In order for coaches to feel similar to one another, their context must be similar. Within the three learning community groups, coaches taught the same sport or coached at the same high school. It appeared that these two similarities were satisfactory in the creation of effective job-alike teams.

To go one step further, we administered a coach needs assessment with the high school athletics department, which was intended to identify coach development areas based upon context-specific needs. This instrument will be discussed in more detail under ‘guideline #5’ later in this paper. Learning community facilitators could group coaches together who find it challenging to successfully meet student-athletes needs with those who effectively meet the same need with their sport team. This would allow smaller, more synergistic relationships to be formed, thereby enhancing the professional development experience. Although the needs assessment can be an effective tool for identifying smaller, more cohesive groups within a larger group, it is still necessary to include as many sport stakeholders as possible. We found that the presence of administrators and other sport stakeholders increased coaches’ commitment to and engagement in learning community discussions and learning.
Guideline #3: Published Protocols that Guide but Do Not Prescribe

_Implementation:_ Although we made suggestions on the frequency and duration of meetings, ultimately participants decided the parameters of each meeting. In order to increase coach learning, we attempted to create meeting agendas that promoted coaches’ self-reflection and insight. Specifically, coaches completed a Pre-Meeting Reflection Sheet (Appendix A), which prompted coaches to reflect upon their coaching practices and attempts to resolve those issues. We then used these reflection sheets to focus discussion during the meeting on the current learning needs of each coach. We also helped direct coaches’ attention to identifying the root cause of each of the issues identified on their reflection sheets, differentiating between ‘people problems’ (those due to athlete attitudes or beliefs), ‘setting problems’ (those due to the coaching context), and ‘instructional problems’ (those due to ineffective coaching practices). By discussing these potential roots and identifying elements of a problem that either confirm or deny its root, coaches were able to identify the true cause of a problem and create potential solutions, rather than merely alleviate the ‘symptoms’ of a problem. At the end of each learning community meeting, a Post-Meeting Reflection Sheet was also completed (see Appendix B). This tool was used to encourage reflection on what coaches had learned in the meeting and direct them toward taking specific action for learning how to address their current coaching needs. It is critical that coaches leave meetings with specific action steps to improve commitment to learning efforts.

_Lessons learned:_ We found that published protocols, typically in the form of meeting agendas and reflection sheets, were important in maintaining the focus of learning community meetings. The intent was to create some simple practical tools that could be used to optimize coach learning within the limited meeting time, while promoting opportunities for coaches to share and learn from one another. Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore (2009) described the importance of providing structure to meetings in order to facilitate knowledge sharing as coaches work toward common goals. Accordingly, when the reflection sheets were used, we found that coach educators, peer facilitators and coaches were better able to stay focused on learning throughout the meetings. When discussion began to deviate from the current topic, meetings were easily pulled back on course by directing participants’ attention to the specific issues identified on their reflection sheets. Additionally, Gilbert and colleagues (2009) noted that published protocols also increase the “accountability of coaches for their own learning, and [help them] capture and share the results of this vital learning experience” (p. 11).

It is important to clarify that a published protocol does not imply that learning community facilitators arrive with ‘answers’ to coaching issues. We found that the learning community participants would occasionally look to us for answers to the problems they noted on their
reflection sheets. Instead of providing an answer, we continually pushed the group to co-create solutions – or at least identify peers who might be particularly helpful in figuring out how to resolve the issue. We would also help them ask more questions about the issue to spark deeper and extended discussion.

**Guideline #4: Trained Peer Facilitators**

*Implementation:* In an attempt to select peer facilitators that would benefit both the learning community’s purpose and coach learning, we identified coaches who were considered ‘leaders’ within their specific setting. For example, coaches who were identified as strong candidates to assume the role of peer facilitators had the following characteristics: experienced in the particular sport context, achieved a record of success, well-liked by peers, known for valuing professional development, and reputation for sharing their coaching knowledge with others.

Once peer facilitators were identified, separate meetings were held with each one in order to help them understand the importance of learning community protocols and knowledge sharing. Within these meetings we shared research and allowed peer facilitators to ask questions. These meetings with peer facilitators were also used to gain a better understanding of group members and insight into each coaching context in order to create more effective protocols. During the actual learning community meetings peer facilitators were expected to help lead and promote knowledge sharing and adherence to meeting agendas.

*Lessons learned:* As described by Gilbert et al. (2009), well trained peer facilitators can help group members better understand protocols, attempt changes in teaching, and encourage group members to stick with a coaching problem until it is resolved. We found that when peer facilitators were not effectively doing these three things, other group members would mimic their lack of commitment. However, because the learning community is a platform for coaches to learn from each other, the peer facilitator can play a key role in drawing out group members’ experiences by instigating discussion and reflecting upon their own experiences. It has been argued that the role of the peer facilitator is to encourage interactions between group members and foster coaches’ knowledge sharing (Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). As reported by Culver and colleagues (2009), facilitators also provide essential direction for group members. We found that when peer facilitators openly shared ideas and experiences, other coaches followed their lead and felt comfortable doing the same.

The peer facilitator can fulfill other roles throughout the learning community’s attempt to facilitate knowledge sharing and coach development. As we observed, the peer facilitator can...
help hold the setting administrators accountable. Rather than constantly contacting setting administrators, coach educators could develop a direct line of communication with peer facilitators. We also found that peer facilitators can help bridge the gap between research and the development of protocols that can be implemented in specific sport contexts. By creating an open dialogue, peer facilitators could help coach educators gain insight into group members’ coaching context and consequently, protocols that will more effectively promote and facilitate coach learning could be created. Therefore, it is beneficial to select peer facilitators that are experienced within their specific coaching context and have developed a shared repertoire with other group members (Blair & Capel, 2011).

Guideline #5: Working on Athlete Goals until There Are Tangible Gains in Athlete Development

For this fifth and final guideline we deviate from the ‘implementation’ and ‘lessons learned’ format because we were unable to implement our ideas specific to this guideline. Despite the importance of connecting coach learning to athlete development, we underestimated the time required to create context-specific and meaningful learning communities. For example, in each of our three youth sport settings, it required months – sometimes as much as 8-10 months – to teach the participants how to operate like a true learning community. Granted, our three settings were all school-based settings where coaches and administrators have constant multiple demands on their time. However, the key lesson here is that ‘preparing the learners to learn’ is a fundamental first step in any effort to create and implement an effective learning community intervention in youth sport. Protocols and objectives have to be carefully negotiated in each setting while slowly building rapport and positive relationships with setting stakeholders.

Even though we did not progress to the point of assessing the learning community impact on athlete development, several suggestions are put forth for helping learning community efforts make formal links between coach learning and athlete development. First, we found that making time to help learning community participants identify – or create – core values for their team or athletics program was extremely valuable. Although every coach, team, and athletics program typically has a mission statement, core values are different in that they provide clear and shared direction for setting stakeholders on what matters most in that particular setting. We borrowed the idea of creating core values from the research on successful companies, where it was found that adhering to core values was a key feature distinguishing good from great companies (Collins, 2001; Collins & Porras, 1997). Investing time to create and discuss core values perhaps had the greatest impact among all the activities we tested across the learning community project. Setting stakeholders in the school-wide athletics program in particular found this exercise to be extremely valuable, and have begun to widely publicize their core values. An example of the
core values created in the athletics program setting is provided in Appendix C. These core values were created over the course of three learning community meetings and now are being used as the foundation for all subsequent learning community activities. Core values provide a stable foundation for setting stakeholders to discuss needs, issues, and potential strategies.

Second, administering a coach needs assessment\(^1\) is an important step in the process of identifying goals for athlete development, making changes in coaching knowledge and the application of that knowledge, then measuring the impact on athlete outcomes. It is important to make the link between coach learning and athlete outcomes, as ultimately coaching effectiveness is dependent on a coach’s ability to improve athlete development (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Without clear goals for athlete development, coach learning will likely not lead to the desired athlete gains (Armour, 2010). A coach needs assessment – that connects athlete learning goals to coach learning needs – is a valuable tool to help coaches in a learning community connect their learning efforts to athlete developmental outcomes. Another way to connect coach learning to athlete development is to use the ‘benchmarking’ approach recently advocated by Brylinsky (2011). Coach needs assessments could be created using benchmarks in the National Standards for Sport Coaches (NASPE, 2006) as the foundation for coaches to identify their learning needs in relation to recommended and appropriate athletes’ outcomes. It is also necessary to identify athlete needs relevant to a specific sport, developmental level, age and coaching context. Desirable developmental outcomes for youth sport athletes were recently re-grouped into four broad categories, also referred to as the 4 C’s of athlete outcomes – competence, confidence, connection, and character (Côté, Bruner, Erickson, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2010; Côté & Gilbert, 2009). We recommend future efforts create coach needs assessments that combine Brylinsky’s (2011) National Standards benchmarking idea with the 4 C’s of athlete outcomes to capture a broad range of recommended athlete developmental outcomes.

**Measuring Impact of Learning Communities on Coach Development**

Coaches’ knowledge can be separated into three types of knowledge: professional (sport specific knowledge), interpersonal (effectively communicating with others), and intrapersonal (knowing oneself and ability for self-reflection) (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). In the following section we offer suggestions for tools that could be used to measure changes in coaches’ knowledge as a result of participation in learning communities. We have discussed these tools with learning community participants across the three learning community settings, and even informally tested a few. However, we have been unable to implement and test these tools on a wide-scale basis yet, and as such present them with the intent of extending the dialogue on learning community implementation and assessment. To our knowledge, there are no published accounts of anyone...
formally measuring the impact of a learning community intervention in youth sport settings. The closest example we found in the literature is a very recent continuing professional development study with youth soccer coaches in England (Blair & Capel, 2011). Although the soccer coaches (n=21) participated in a 12-month learning community effort, the focus was not on improving coaching effectiveness, but rather on helping them improve their ability to teach elementary school physical education – a practice that evidently is becoming commonplace in the United Kingdom. Regardless, Blair and Capel do provide a rare glimpse into methods that can be used to assess the impact of youth sport coaches’ participation in a learning community. Blair and Capel used a multi-method approach to assess changes in coaches’ knowledge and attitudes related to teaching elementary school physical education, combining a series of questionnaires (forced-choice and open-ended) and interviews (individual and group semi-structured) created specifically for the purpose of their study. Unfortunately the authors did not provide examples of the questionnaires or interview guides. In the remainder of the present paper we briefly discuss some potential measurement tools that can supplement self-created questionnaires and interview guides.

Professional Knowledge

Traditionally, a change in coaches’ professional knowledge as a result of participation in coach education is measured with a written knowledge test. Although this provides an efficient way of assessing professional knowledge across large groups of coaches, it may not be the most appropriate tool for measuring changes in professional knowledge as a result of participation in a learning community. It may be more appropriate to consider what is sometimes referred to as a ‘360-review’ (McLean, 1997). This process consists of assessing coaches’ knowledge and performance from numerous sources, which might include coaches, other sport stakeholders, as well as the coaches’ athletes. This type of assessment could provide coach educators with various perspectives of a coach’s effectiveness, then another source of information when examining changes in knowledge as a result of participation in ongoing professional development. Another tool that could be used in future attempts to measure changes in coaches’ professional knowledge is concept mapping. Concept maps are “graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge” (Novak & Cañas, 2008). Although concept maps may provide a detailed glimpse into a coach’s professional knowledge, and how it is organized, much work needs to be done in coach education to test this method as it can be extremely time-consuming and presents challenges both for the coach to complete and for the evaluator to assess.
Intrapersonal Knowledge

In order to assess changes in self-reflection and insight, we experimented with using the Self-Reflection and Insight Scale (SRIS) (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). The SRIS is a 20-item self-reporting scale with two subscales: (a) the self-reflection scale, which measures engagement in reflection and one’s need for reflection and (b) the insight scale, which simply measures insight. We were able to use this questionnaire with the three water polo coaches before and after their learning community experience. Due to the small number of participants and informal nature of the project, the results were not subjected to statistical analysis. However, we did learn that the coaches were able to easily and quickly complete the instrument, and that small changes in self-reflection and insight were apparent. We also shared the instrument with several administrators in the learning community settings and they too endorsed its use.

The Self-Reflection and Insight Scale alone is not an all-encompassing tool for assessing changes in self-reflection, or coaching knowledge in general. Therefore, we suggest using the SRIS in conjunction with other tools to fully understand changes in coaches’ knowledge. One tool in particular that may prove useful in this context is the Coaching Efficacy Scale (CES) (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). The CES is a 24-item instrument scored on a 10-point likert scale that ranges from ‘not at all confident’ to ‘extremely confident.’ It assesses the degree of a coach’s confidence in his or her ability to influence athletes’ learning and performance. When working with high school team sport coaches in particular, the revised Coaching Efficacy Scale II for High School Teams (CES II-HST; Myers, Feltz, Chase, Reckase, & Hancock) may be more appropriate. One would expect an increase in coaching efficacy as a result of participation in an effective learning community. Finally, a third practical method that can be used to assess the effectiveness of learning communities on developing intrapersonal knowledge is a focus group, or small group semi-structured interviews (Blair & Capel, 2011). Focus group questions could include “What aspects of the learning community were most helpful for you as a coach?” and “What would you change about the learning community to make it more effective?” These types of focus group questions may help coaches reflect on their reflection – a sort of meta-reflection if you will – and reinforce the importance of ongoing reflection for improving coaching effectiveness. Results from focus groups, conducted both during and after a learning community intervention, can also be used to revise learning community protocols in ways that will make them more relevant to coaches in specific contexts.
Interpersonal Knowledge

In addition to improving self-reflection (intrapersonal knowledge), an expected positive outcome from participation in a coach learning community is increased frequency and depth of knowledge sharing. This will require coaches to expand their ‘learning network’ and improve their ability to connect with other sport stakeholders. This ability to connect with others is referred to as interpersonal knowledge in recent definitions of coaching effectiveness (Côté, & Gilbert, 2009). Sociometry is a method that can be used to measure changes in interpersonal knowledge (Treadwell, Kumar, Stein, & Prosnick, 1997). Sociometric methods can be used to better understand an individual’s status within a larger group and extent of knowledge sharing (Smith, 2003). Studies have utilized sociometry to categorize participants based on who people choose to interact with and their degree of social impact. These ‘learning connections’ between people can then be presented graphically in the form of a sociogram (Leung & Silberling, 2006).

Although it can be expected that growth in all three types of coaches’ knowledge will result from participation in effective learning communities, we would encourage coach educators to focus initially on measuring growth in intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge. Because learning communities are designed to promote self-awareness and coach reflection supported by peers, changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge provide good indicators of a learning community’s impact on coach development.

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to extend the ongoing dialogue on how the learning community approach could be a valuable supplement to traditional coach education (Barnson, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). In this paper we provided a brief overview of the learning community framework, the importance of learning community guidelines, lessons learned from our attempt at implementing these guidelines, as well as suggestions for measuring coach learning. The learning community approach can be a valuable method for increasing coaching effectiveness. However, as Trudel and Gilbert (2004) noted, it is best viewed as an appropriate complement to traditional forms of coach education and an approach that facilitates ongoing coach development. In order to promote appropriate coach development, it is important to connect coach learning needs to target conditions or benchmarks such as those provided in NASPE’s National Standards for Sport Coaches. Due to the fact that they are developed in the best interest of athletes, it may be an appropriate first step to reference these standards when identifying what coaching skills to develop, and then create coach development initiatives with those outcomes in mind.
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Appendix A
Learning Community Pre-Meeting Reflection Sheet

Name: ___________________________ Date: ______________

Please answer the following questions in relation to events that have occurred since the time of our last learning community meeting (or in the past month if this is your first learning community meeting).

1. What types of issues have you noticed recently with your athletes that need to be addressed?

2. Please underline any of these issues that you are actively trying to address.

3. What have you done to try to resolve / improve these issues?

4. Please print the name, position, and affiliation of anyone you have contacted in the past month in your quest to resolve this issue.

5. Please list the resources you have accessed in the past month in your quest to resolve this issue (e.g. websites, books, etc.).
Appendix B
Learning Community Post-Meeting Reflection Sheet

Name: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Please answer the questions in relation to events that have occurred during this learning community meeting and things you will do before the next learning community meeting.

1. Briefly identify ideas you have learned today about how to address current athlete needs and coaching issues.

2. Identify 1-2 specific things you will try in your attempt to address athlete needs or coaching issues in the time period before we meet again.

3. What resources (people, coaching materials, other) do you expect to consult related to these athlete needs or coaching issues prior to our next meeting?
Appendix C
High School Athletics Program Core Values

Edison Athletics
“One tiger, many stripes.”

We are committed to:

Character
Pursuit of excellence on the field, in the classroom, and in life. An all-around champion.

Tradition
Respect and stewardship of Edison Athletics’ legacy. Representing Edison today and forever.

Passion
Enthusiasm and love for all that you do. Finding the enjoyment in sport and all aspects of life.

Notes

1 A copy of the 7-page coach needs assessment can be obtained by contacting the first author.

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