Perceptions of Self-Development throughout the Spectrum of Football Coaching Expertise

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Abstract

The knowledge and experience acquired in Continued Professional Development (CPD) is considered self-development and is dependent upon the individual’s perception of control over professional growth (Chalofsky, 1990). The purpose of this study was to analyze coaches’ self-development perceptions through Chalofsky’s (1990) eight constructs. An inductive analysis revealed that novice coaches lacked responsibility for self-development and believed the head coach to be responsible for athlete results. Intermediate coaches had increased perception of control that enabled them to use their own coaching styles as they relied on experiences and daily reflection to improve. Similarly, expert coaches perceived full responsibility for their self-development, and realized the dependence of their assistant coaches as well. The findings supported Chalofsky’s (1990) contention that self-development is dependent upon individual perception of control.

Key words: Continued Professional Development, Coaching, Self-Development
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Introduction

The number of children participating in youth and interscholastic sport continues to grow at an unprecedented rate (Payne & Issacs, 2002), which ultimately increases the demand for greater numbers of qualified coaches through education and certification (Knorr, 1996). As sport has increased in popularity and participation across all sports has risen, coaches are expected to manage a variety of situations from injured players to team and organizational dynamics, and it remains unclear as to the role of coaching education programs in preparing coaches for these varied situations (Mills & Dunlevy, 1997). Coaching education has been defined as a standardized educational process intended to improve behaviors and attributes of coaches (Sullivan et al., 2005). These authors indicated the coaching education programs act to improve the skills and knowledge of the coaches so as to maximize the sporting experience for all involved.

One contribution to the rise in coaching education programs in the United States is that many states and school districts now require coaches to obtain a recognized certification or coaching education certification (Inskeep, 1995). Additionally, many coaches depend on these certification programs and courses to ply their trade, which raises additional concerns over the quality of these courses and the improvement of coaching practices (McCullick, Belcher, & Schempp, 2005). Woodman (1993) indicated that coaching education and development were the keys to improved coaching, which was further corroborated by the establishment of NASPE’s National Standards for Sports Coaches (2006). These standards outline abilities that coaches should possess, subsequently providing coaches with information on development as they reflect on their routines and practices to ensure continual learning (NASPE, 2006).

Previous interest has been expressed in the investigation of coaching education and a variety of associated issues. Cushion, Armour, and Jones (2003) investigated coaching education and assessments of coaching practice. While these authors viewed coaching education and the assessment of practice as a composite of knowledge, they indicated little work had been completed which specifically addressed the influence of experience on coaching practice.

Additional issues arise related to coaching expectations as a result of unclear certification directives and guidelines from the varied private and national credentialing bodies (Mills & Dunlevy, 1997). While some coaches feel more compelled than others to increase their ability to contend with various coaching situations by taking courses, attending workshops and clinics, and reading coaching manuals (Malete & Feltz, 2000), it remains unclear as to the effects these experiences have on coaching development.

Campbell (1993) indicated the coaching education process (i.e., coaching courses) should include sport specific technical and tactical components. Additionally, these programs should include a common core of performance-related knowledge. It is of interest to determine if there is a specific retention for tactical,
technical and performance-related course content, or if attendees at a coaching course only retain information to a single area of course content. While the course content for the current study was not controlled by the investigators, it is worthy to note the Nike Coach of the Year Clinics incorporated speaking presentations on strategy, technique and motivation, round-table discussions, social gatherings, and question-and-answer sessions over a three-day weekend clinic. This type of clinic arrangement was ideal for inclusion and interactions of the participants to enhance the self-development process; however the interviews with the participants were the instrumental data-gathering technique to determine their perceptions of self-development.

Professional development takes place in a variety of contexts, but according to Chalofsky & Lincoln (1993), professional development is a specific process that enables individuals to keep current in the state of the art, maintain competence in practice, and remain receptive to new theories, techniques, and values. Coaches have numerous opportunities to further their professional development; however, it is unclear which of these results in the greatest enhancement of their skills.

Bloom et al. (1995) discovered that coaching education programs can better train coaches to be creative thinkers by including clinics, seminars, symposia, hands-on experiences, passive observation, and mentoring processes to further aid acquisition of content knowledge. Specifically, these clinics involve the interaction and exchange of ideas with both expert and novice coaches, which can be very beneficial in affirming coaching methods in both content and process (Bloom et al., 1995). Although the benefits of participating in clinics to continue professional development are evident, the internalization, reflection, and utilization of the experiences and the subsequent development of coaching skills remain understudied. Specifically, the effects of the material presented, experiences, and the communities of practice as they pertain to the establishment of true learning experiences in an effort to continue professional development for coaches is unclear.

Bell (1997) believed that proficient coaches and teachers are less rule-focused than novices and can therefore take control of the learning environment and create new ideas and strategies based on their own experiences, and then personalize those strategies. Gilbert and Trudel (1999) published a report outlining a single coach’s experience at a large coaching course. While these authors indicated there were no changes in the coach’s knowledge, there were changes observed in the coach’s use of the course content in the field. Of interest will be future investigations in which coaches are polled to determine if they have the perception that they experienced changes in knowledge during large-scale coaching courses. Of specific importance becomes the self-reported perception of the coaching education experience by the participants. Through the interview process the best attempts to identify the coach’s experience at the clinic were made. In the interpretation and transcription of these interviews the suggestion by Wilcox and Trudel (1998) it was considered that verbally cued recall interviews provide an accurate means of revealing the beliefs and principles of the coaches. The current study utilized a qualitative analysis paradigm to address the modes of learning used by football coaches of different levels of experience.

It is important that future studies of coaching education investigate coaches with different levels of experience. Berliner (1994) established criteria to determine expertise levels. It is possible to establish a coach’s level of
expertise based upon these criteria. An additional issue surrounding coaching education is the process or delivery of coaching knowledge.

Chaolfsky (1990) suggested for individuals to achieve professional development, individuals must be able to anticipate potential problems and prepare to proactively support the organization as it develops, changes, and grows. All professionals have an ethical responsibility to strive to be as competent and effective as possible. Chaolfsky (1990) has, therefore, identified an eight-step recurring process which outlines professional development and includes constant evaluation and feedback in an effort to enable professionals to exert more control over their growth. These steps were created for professionals in general (applied to the nursing profession) and have been applied to the coaching profession in this study. These steps are as follows:

1. Identify tasks (tasks that are expected to be performed daily).
2. Prioritize activities (identify essential areas to improve and rank these in order of importance).
3. Identify competencies (what knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and values are needed to perform the task).
4. Assess proficiency (what is the performance level in the competencies and are there gaps?—competent, proficient, and excellent).
5. Specify learning objectives (identify gaps and knowledge to be obtained).
6. Develop a professional development plan (establish best strategies to meet learning objectives).
7. Perform activities (read, attend clinics or workshops).
8. Assess performance (did chosen activities increase performance?).

Chaolfsky (1990) further explained, individuals identify their tasks based on what they are expected to perform on a daily basis, which should be prioritized because it is less efficient to attempt to work on everything at once. Once competencies (knowledge, understanding, skill, attitude, and values) that are needed to perform the activity are identified, proficiency should be assessed. Proficiency can be considered a hierarchy of standards for evaluating oneself, which include the levels: competent (satisfactory), proficient (above average), and excellent (extraordinary). Upon identifying proficiency levels, the individual can then prioritize learning needs to increase proficiency and further explore the best learning strategies to meet those needs. Individuals can then perform the activities and assess performance to finally determine proficiency before beginning the process again.

Chaolfsky (2004) studied human resource development to determine the differences between the discipline and profession. He concluded that human resource development should rely on people, learning, and organizations, while allowing individuals to be responsible for their knowledge and learning. As it becomes embedded in the culture of the workplace, individual desire to fulfill the responsibilities to increase knowledge and learning will continually enhance the organization (Chaolfsky, 2004). The framework presented by Chaolfsky (1990) is an integral part of the current study, as it will help determine the perceived control participants have over their professional development.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand novice, intermediate, and expert football coaches’ perceptions of self-development in order to identify key aspects which will enable coaching clinic organizers to address and improve the professional growth of their participants.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were six coaches attending a football coaches’ Nike Coach of the Year Clinic in Atlanta, Georgia or Orlando, Florida. The author gained permission to recruit participants, attend the clinic and conduct the research by the Nike Coach of the Year Clinic National Organizer and the Georgia Regional Nike Coach of the Year Organizer. There were roughly 800 participants at each clinic and purposeful sampling was used to select participants from a pre-specified group of coaches according to their caliber of expertise (Patton, 2002). The purposeful sampling was utilized in order to select the coaches within each level of expertise. These six participants consisted of two novice, two intermediate, and two expert coaches (one coach from each level at each clinic) based on Berliner’s (1994) established criteria for identifying teachers at varying levels of expertise and all six were white males. This was strictly being utilized to identify the coach’s caliber of expertise, which was transferable from the closely related field of teaching. Berliner (1994) established criteria included experts (10 plus years of experience, formal recognition of achievement, ability to perform their trade effortlessly; evidence of success); advanced, beginner and proficient were blended together to create intermediate (increased experience and knowledge, enhanced intuition); and novice (beginners that know the rules but have little experience performing the activities on their own). Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the data was collected on a relatively low number of participants in order to obtain a high level of thick description during data analysis.

More specifically, the novice coaches in the study were assistant coaches with minimal coaching experience. The two novice coaches were at the high school level and possessed less than three years coaching experience (N1 had three years and N2 had one year), have not been formally recognized for achievements in the coaching profession and both were subordinates to their head coach. The two intermediate coaches are quite different in their years of experience (I1 had seven years and I2 had 20 years), but they had similarities based on Berliner’s criteria. Both of them had more than five years experience, both had autonomy to coach their teams even though one was an assistant and the other was head, and neither intermediate coach were credited with high winning percentages or championship titles to distinguish high levels of success. The two expert coaches have agreed to the use their names in the publication and presentation of study results as they are widely regarded as expert football coaches based on their experience, winning percentages and championship titles. The two experts were Tommy Bowden [E2] (20+ years coaching experience) former head coach of Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina and Bobby Bowden [E1] (50+ years coaching experience) retired head coach of Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Both coaches achieved at least once conference title and Bobby Bowden has two National Titles and was also the coach recognized as having the second most wins in NCAA college football Division-I history. The expert coaches’ names were included to give the uninformed
Data Collection Methods

Thirty high school coaches were emailed based on a list of high schools that frequently attend the clinics and recruited for participants. The two college coaches were identified from a mutual colleague who contacted them directly to ascertain their interest in participating. After agreeing to participate, the football coaches were emailed an informed consent form and data gathering took place at the 2007 Nike Coach of the Year Clinics in Atlanta, Georgia and Orlando, Florida. Data collection included participation in an audio recorded individual interview (approximately 1 hour) at the completion of the conference and audio taped follow-up individual interviews via telephone (approximately 30 minutes) to verify the collected data was accurate. The background questionnaires were emailed to the high school coaches during the recruitment stage to help identify the participants’ level of expertise and were based on criteria by Berliner (1994), which was utilized to select the participants accordingly based on their level of expertise. Upon receiving the background questionnaires, two coaches at the novice (nine responded) and intermediate (16 responded) levels were identified and given the specifics of the study and agreed to participate. The two expert coaches were selected based on their attendance at the clinic and asked to participate. The interview protocols were based on theories by Chalofsky (1990). Chalofsky’s (1990) eight constructs of self-development were individualized to create the eight questions in the interview protocol, which included:

1. Describe a typical day coaching and the tasks you perform.
2. Of those tasks, further describe the top two tasks you feel would benefit your coaching practices if you could improve them.
3. Describe the knowledge, understanding, or skills that are needed to perform those two tasks?
4. What do you feel your current level of proficiency is regarding the two tasks (competent, proficient, or excellent)?
5. Describe any new skills or knowledge needed to better perform those tasks.
6. How would you try to increase learning as it relates to the tasks?
7. What activities, if any, have you performed in the past to increase knowledge and skills (read, attend clinics or workshops, observe other coaches)?
8. Describe how those activities affected your coaching abilities.

These constructs consisted of a) daily coaching practices; b) prioritization of activities; c) identification of competencies; d) proficiency assessment; e) specific learning objectives; f) professional development plan; g) professional development activities; and g) performance assessment.

Data Analysis

Data were collected through audio taped interviews and transcribed; each transcript was later analyzed. These data were then summarized and synthesized by identifying commonalities and disparities of the lived experiences of novice, intermediate, and expert football coaches. While the theoretical framework of Chalofsky
Van Manen (1990) provided the main perspective for the data analysis, Van Manen (1990) also contributed as he described analysis as performing research in order to question real world experiences so as to better understand the world. These interpretations involved the perceptions that the football coaches had toward their self-development.

Van Manen (1990) proposed three approaches to uncover or isolate themes: (a) the holistic or sententious approach; (b) the selective or highlighting approach; and (c) the detailed or line-by-line approach. The analysis in this study involved the combination of these three approaches to uncover and isolate themes of self-development, legitimate peripheral participation, and information recall for the novice, intermediate, and expert coaches. Using the holistic approach, the text was attended to as a whole and assessed based on: “what sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93). The selective approach required the text to be read several times to ascertain “what statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Finally, the detailed approach involved assessing every sentence or sentence cluster to determine “what does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (Van Manen, 1990, p.93).

Once the themes were determined, a record of the themes was created in a spread sheet format to individualize the themes based on level of expertise. These records were later used in the analysis to identify specific aspects of the coaching clinic that related to self-development, legitimate peripheral participation, and modes of learning for the three levels of expertise.

Data Trustworthiness

Patton (2002) addressed the importance of ensuring data trustworthiness as a process function for each qualitative study. Trustworthiness was achieved in the current study by minimizing researcher biases through intellectual rigor. Trustworthiness is associated with the credibility of the research by eliminating factors such as knowledge of the profession and participants that could possibly contaminate the data, while intellectual rigor pertains to the action of repeatedly going over data to make sure that the explanations and interpretations reflect the nature of the phenomena, and not the researcher’s bias (Patton, 2002). For the current study, any potential experimenter bias was addressed through methods triangulation and member checks, these biases were limited and allowed for a fair analysis of the data. In addition, a peer-debriefer was utilized to ensure experimenter bias did not influence the clear illustration of results to the uninformed community. Trustworthiness was therefore established in this study through methods triangulation, member checks, and a peer-debriefer.

Pilot Study

Pilot testing was conducted with one novice and one intermediate swim coach via telephone interview. The purpose of this preliminary exercise was to test the interview techniques to establish the quality of the questions in producing viable data for analysis to determine the extent to which coaches felt they had control over their own professional development, which directly related to the football coaches interview protocol. Also, the
The purpose of the pilot study was to give the researcher experience with the protocol and determine the approximate time for the interviews. The pilot study revealed the interview questions as effective in producing viable data for analysis. Further, the questions and administration of the testing was perceived by the pilot testing participants as understandable and time efficient.

Findings

As previously stated, self-development involves the amount of control an individual perceives they have over their own ability to stay current in the state of the art, maintain competencies in the state of the practice, and remain receptive to new theories, techniques, and values (Chalofsky, 1990; Chalofsky & Lincoln, 1993). Chalofsky (1990) commented that regardless of intent to learn, individuals are constantly involved in experiences as they ply their trade that affects their self-development and how they internalize and use experiences enables them to develop (or not develop) professionally. In the following section, the eight constructs of self-development presented by Chalofsky (1990) are discussed as they pertain to novice, intermediate, and expert football coaches’ perceptions of their self-development and a practical application of the findings concludes this section. Coaches are identified by level of expertise and number or name. Novice coaches are identified as N1 and N2 and intermediate coaches as I1 and I2. The expert coaches approved the use of their names and are identified accordingly.

Daily Coaching Practices

Chalofsky (1990) referred to the construct of daily coaching practices as the ability to identify tasks that are expected to be performed routinely in an effort to better understand what areas of their profession individuals can improve. The years coaches spend as athletes essentially serves to familiarize them with the skills, perspectives, and responsibilities associated with the coaching profession, but since they have not had the experience as a coach, novices typically focus on learning the rules and procedures and discard their intuition (Bell, 1997; Schempp, 1989). The same can be observed as it relates to the self-development of novice football coaches. The novice coaches in this study had a clear understanding that there is an abundance of knowledge specific to the sport of football they still needed to learn. However, the avenues utilized to learn and develop as a coach were in stark contrast with the avenues utilized by intermediate and expert coaches. The perception of self-development of novice football coaches was almost entirely dependent upon aspirations, goals, and established rules of their head coaches.

In response to a question about daily coaching practices, one novice coach (N1) responded that “you kind of have to be creative a little bit, but you are kind of limited in what you can do when you get information unless you are the head coach.” Similarly, the other novice coach (N2) responded by identifying a pre-practice meeting as being essential for him to participate, which allows the head coach to “classify what we’re doing for the day.” N2 further commented the head coach detailed their practice responsibilities by “how our practices are split up, where we’ll do film breakdown, weight lifting and conditioning, who’s got work detail, and who’s got detention” each day before dividing into individual groups. It was thus demonstrated that novice coaches
lacked a sense of ownership over their daily coaching practices as they basically performed the duties that were pre-established by the head coach with little or no opportunity to incorporate their own views.

In regards to the self-development of coaches, intermediate coaches had a stronger grasp of their many daily tasks and essential areas to improve those tasks. Although one of the intermediate coaches (I1) was an assistant coach, he took more ownership of his daily tasks as he integrated his personal coaching philosophy into daily routines. In his seven years of coaching football, I1 commented that he has worked under several head coaches who range from “some of the most laid back coaches to the most gung-ho” and “I think I can adapt” to the styles of different coaches because they can see the effectiveness of his coaching. He continued to state “I also think coaching is teaching and teaching is coaching, and you’re trying to get kids to do what you want,” which further illustrated I1’s recognition of his involvement in the daily coaching routines.

The other intermediate coach (I2) was a head coach with over 20 years experience and was fully aware of his ownership in daily coaching practices. Although these practices differed in-season and out, he commented he had “lots of motivational stuff during the in-season, a lot more preparation to get practices ready” and out-season “you’re doing a lot of organization as far as getting your season set up, making sure your kids are not doing stupid things on the weekends and getting in trouble, trying to figure out which coaches you may or may not move, making plans to adjust your staff, and reevaluating players that are returning for the next season.” Rather than simply performing the duties that have been pre-established as the novice coaches typically do, I2 worked mostly on “filling relationships with the players, making them understand that we’re all out there doing the same thing.” According to I2, daily coaching responsibilities were not just about game strategy and skill, but had a direct impact on the development of the personal characteristics of his players.

The expert coaches participating in this study were Head Coach E2, formerly of Clemson University; and Head Coach E1 of Florida State University. Both expert coaches seemed to have a deep sense of personal control over their self-development which correlated directly with the conclusions of Bell (1997) that expert teachers and coaches felt a strong personal responsibility for their successes and failures while demonstrating high levels of personal accountability. These coaches also relied heavily on their coordinators and assistant coaches which they viewed as extensions of themselves and strived to have them work on self-development as well.

The diversity involved with the responsibilities of a head football coach at the collegiate level made it somewhat difficult for the coaches to identify tasks that were performed daily because it changed so drastically throughout the year. E2 stated that the activities were seasonal with the focus shifting from the strategy of the football game, to the strategy of practice, recruiting, travel, meeting parents, media, public speaking engagements, and fundraisers. He further stated that “the biggest thing in our profession is wins and losses; therefore, when you lose you go to see what you did wrong and try to improve on the reason that you lost.” Once he and his coaching staff determined the most significant factor in the loss, they could devise new strategies and implement them into the daily coaching routines that would lessen the likelihood of the same mistake occurring again, but in the end the losses were his responsibility.
Similarly, E1 took full responsibility for his daily coaching routines and the resulting successes and failures, but looked at himself as more of a manager. He felt that his understanding of how a football program should operate gave him an advantage as he met with his coaching staff daily to go over key points, then he left them to work on their own schedules as he looked “at scrimmages and stuff like that, and check the mail and try to do what needs to be done.” He then stated that “you know, that’s about all a head coach does nowadays, the other coaches do all the coaching.” Although he allowed the other coaches to “do all the coaching,” he commented that he had the final approval and if he saw that something was not working, it was his responsibility to make the correction.

Ultimately, it was evident that the daily coaching practices of football coaches developed with knowledge and experience. Progressing from the rule-bound novice coaches that disseminated information and skills pre-established by the head coach with low perceptions of control, to the intermediate coaches with increased perceptions of control that infused their own style of coaching in an effort to develop the skills and personality of the athlete. The expert coaches basically served as a manager and instructed assistant coaches on the most effective daily practices to increase performance. As these coaches developed, increased perceptions of control gave rise to increased responsibility and the basic understanding that coaches must work as a team and some control must be delegated to the novice in order for them to progress.

Prioritization of Activities

Once professionals can identify their daily tasks, Chalofsky recommended they prioritize their activities with individuals identifying essential areas to improve. With regards to Chalofsky’s (1990) eight-step process of self-development, the novice coaches perceived the head coach as an integral part of the development process with little internal responsibility to develop. While the novice coaches from both clinics (N1 and N2) could quite easily identify coaching tasks which were expected to be performed daily, there was some difficulty in the identification of how to prioritize these activities as essential areas to improve. This was possibly due to the daily expectation being “handed down” by the head coach and what Bell (1997) described as beginners’ attempts to focus on learning the environment and enforcing the rules, which caused a feeling of lesser personal control over the conditions and events of the workplace.

The novice coaches felt that head coach would inform them of the areas in which they needed to improve. N1 clarified this as he explained the new head coach brought in a completely different style of play that made it challenging to identify improvement areas on his own, because of the perception that “a lot of times, you’re limited to what your head coach wants you to do.” N1 further stated the head coach brought in a new playbook which made it challenging and although there were several things about coaching he felt he still needed to learn, “the biggest thing is just learning that playbook a little bit better.” N2 similarly commented in the meetings before practice the head coach described the tasks that would be performed each day and there were no specific opportunities for him to implement his own strategies and therefore the head coach prioritized the activities for him.
While the intermediate coaches could determine essential areas to improve, they were vastly different in the areas they desired to improve upon. I1 explained he needed to improve upon his time management during practice. He felt if he could improve his practice time management, he could “get the kids in there and teach them new material” (I1). I2 on the other hand felt comfortable with the strategy of the game, but could greatly enhance his coaching by working more on the relationship development with his players and gaining more comfort in delegating responsibility to other coaches. He commented he struggled with a variety of coaching aspects, but one area he strived to improve upon was “taking a coach and trusting him to the point where I don’t have to worry about him, delegating I guess is the word.” With nearly three times the number of years experience over I1, I2 placed a larger emphasis on the development of a personal relationship with his players and other coaches to enhance the game; while I1 remained focused on strictly increasing the knowledge of his players as it pertained to football.

Just as there was a high level of difficulty for experts to identify their daily coaching activities which were performed throughout the year due to the extreme diversity in seasonal expectations, it was also difficult for the expert coaches to identify areas to improve. Although both experts felt they needed to improve in a variety of areas, there was some difficulty in identifying the essential areas. This resulted from what E2 described as their coaching performance being assessed by “wins and losses.” He further explained that there was no way to tell if they lost a game because they didn’t recruit the right player, didn’t sign their top recruit, the athlete just messed up, or the play wasn’t designed appropriately. He did, however, comment if he had to choose one area to improve upon, it would be his reactions to the media. He stated that sometimes “I wish I would have said this to the media and not said that, you always learn in that regard, but sometimes you get a little hotheaded and react to the situation, which might not be the best approach.”

E1 described a need to continuously improve upon on all areas of the game of football. He explained while many coaches may do things to increase knowledge, “wisdom is something we all want.” When he prioritized his activities, he did so in way which would increase his wisdom and allow him to be better prepared to solve problems rather than simply relying on knowledge of facts. With this in mind, he commented that he had the strategy of the game under control, but he could always improve upon his leadership, enthusiasm, and communication with his athletes and other coaches. While E1 felt that his coaching “always needs improvement,” he contended that his prioritization of activities to improve upon involved “keeping up a bit more with what is going on.” He also explained that “I spend more time with the offense than I do with the defense” and to increase his time with the defense he would “set a block of an hour somewhere and go with them during that hour, that way I could get more time with them.”

Essentially, as football coaches developed, their prioritization of activities was comparable to the daily coaching practices construct. While the novice coaches had a perception that the head coach was responsible for their (team) successes and failures and would inform them of their deficiencies and areas to improve, the intermediate coaches relied on their personal reflection for areas to improve. The extreme diversity in seasonal responsibilities once again hindered the expert coaches in the identification of areas to improve. However, both
coaches agreed it was their sole responsibility to improve as coaches and although they could not prioritize their activities to improve upon, they emphasized their need to continue to learn and develop in all areas of coaching.

Identification of Competencies

According to Chalofsky (1990), as professionals gain an understanding of their essential areas to improve, it becomes important to identify the competencies that are needed to perform the tasks allowing for improvement. The identification of competencies (knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and values needed to perform coaching tasks) was perceived by the novice coach as dependent upon the goals established by the head coach. Although N1 and N2 felt that it was their responsibility to learn more about these competencies, they believed the head coach would guide those efforts, just as it was the responsibility of the head coach to inform them of their daily coaching practices and prioritize their activities. This reliance upon the head coach would change as the novice coaches gained experience and understanding, but as novice coaches they were content with placing the responsibility on the head coach for much of their development.

Both intermediate coaches could identify the competencies (knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and values) needed to perform their tasks and included the clinic as one form of professional development to improve upon those competencies. I1 and I2 believed they were very good at performing their duties as a coach, but also recognized the need to continue learning. While I2 placed much of the emphasis of athlete development on the skills and knowledge he could transfer to them in a way that they could best understand, I1 commented regardless of his self-development, a lot of what he was able to learn and teach his athletes depended on the caliber of athlete on the team. Therefore, what needed to be learned was not fully dependent on his self-development, but the aptitude of the athlete as well. I1’s perceptions illustrated what Tan (1997) referred to as the process of development toward expertise experienced by intermediate coaches as being less likely to take full responsibility for their failures.

The expert coaches, E2 and E1, identified their competencies as a broad spectrum that changed throughout the year. E2 itemized these competencies as “knowledge of the game, honesty, relationships with administration, recruitment, media relations, people skills, and trust in my coaches.” As previously alluded to, he felt that “the biggest thing in our profession is wins and losses; therefore, when you lose you go to see what you did wrong and try to improve on the reason that you lost” and since there was no way to truly distinguish the exact reason for the loss, the coach should constantly strive to improve.

As coaches develop, they can more easily identify the competencies needed to be successful, but the competencies become more elaborate which lead to the realization that there exists a large portion of coaching that the experts still needed to understand. The novice coaches were taking steps to increase their competencies, but still placed much of the responsibility on the head coach to guide and direct the skills, understanding, knowledge, attitudes and values which would help most. The intermediate coaches on the other hand, had a clear understanding of the competencies required to successfully coach and took the necessary steps to increase their competencies, but did not fully grasp the complexities of those competencies like the expert
Proficiency Assessment

Once the competencies are identified, individuals should assess their proficiency in each of the competencies to determine their performance level and their gaps in knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and values (Chalofsky, 1990). The novice football coaches had a moderate (N1) to high (N2) assessment of their proficiency levels, but they also placed some responsibility for their limitations on either the head coach or the caliber of athlete. N1 declared he is “definitely not excellent, I would say right now, just competent, early stage,” but some of his limitations were perceived to come from the head coach. Having to learn the “new playbook is why I would say at this point just competent.” This illustrated the lack of personal responsibility N1 placed on his limitations as a coach, as well as, the continued theme of having a low sense of control over self-development.

On the other hand, N2 was quick to discuss his successes as a young assistant coach, as well as, his successful coaching strategies, but gave a lot of the credit to the caliber of athletes he worked with. He commented that “I had great success with our guys” and many of his coaching strategies worked so well that he was told that “you have to get an award for best new coach this year because you got more out of this kid than anybody ever did.” N2 later explained that although he believed he was a good coach, he also had the opportunity to work with some talented athletes. Despite the confidence N2 demonstrated with his abilities as an assistant coach, he also believed he had a lot of areas that he needed to improve upon as well, but looked for guidance from the head coach in those areas.

The intermediate coaches could assess their proficiency levels with a relatively high degree of certainty with an emphasis on what they have already determined to work and less emphasis on what they can learn. Both intermediate coaches understood that they had much to learn, but I1 explained that “I know what I am doing because of my own experience.” When he was asked about ways to improve his coaching, he replied that “I’ve got a lot of learning to do,” but was uncertain about what he needed to learn. I2 attempted to minimize his lack of knowledge in other areas of the game by utilizing a simplified game plan. He explained “the Wing-T is one of the first formations in football” and “it ain’t that complicated, so we try to fit schemes to kids instead of fitting kids to schemes.” I2 could therefore devote his time to improving upon the fundamental skills of his athletes in a system that had been proven effective for him, rather than filling in the gaps of knowledge by creating new and complex strategies.

Antithetical to the intermediate coaches, the expert coaches had a higher importance placed on the lack of understanding of certain aspects of the game rather than what they do know. E2 commented he was “always trying to learn how to do something differently, recruiting or a better way to do something with recruiting, high school relations with high school coaches, and conditioning at the end of practice.” While E2 perceived his coaching to be fairly effective, he knew he must constantly learn in an effort to create new strategies with the
aim of increasing the success of his team. E1 stated he could study for the rest of his life and still wouldn’t know half of what he needs to know about football. With this in mind, he said “the thing that I would say that I’ve done is mostly study film.” He could therefore use the mistakes made in game play to increase his knowledge of why those mistakes were made in order to decrease the likelihood they will happen again.

The novice coaches’ dependence on the head coach was evident even in their assessment of their own proficiency. While they had moderate to high perceptions of their abilities, they still had an enormous reliance on the head coach to determine their gaps in understanding and knowledge. Intermediate coaches had a slightly lowered assessment of their performance than the novice coaches and relied heavily on their strategies that had already been proven successful rather than creating new strategies which might work even better. Expert coaches understood they would never know all there is to know about football, but they could continually seek to better understand the aspects of their coaching which had caused failures and correct those mistakes to increase performance.

Specific Learning Objectives

Chalofsky (1990) referred to specific learning objectives as the gaps in knowledge and what the individual needed to learn to increase performance. The perception of dependence on the head coach also related to the novice football coaches’ ability to specify learning objectives. Although N1 understood he should continually learn, some reluctance in learning new information came from his perception “you are kind of limited in what you can do when you get this information unless you’re the head coach.” He further tied this perception with listening to speakers at clinics as a challenge because “a lot of times you’re limited to what your head coach wants you to do.” Similarly, N2 acknowledged the need to continue learning as he stated “you can’t quit learning just because you’ve gotten good at one thing,” but then made reference to the fact that when he does attempt to increase his knowledge by observing other coaches “a lot of times, the things that they’re doing is what I’m doing, so I’ll use that stuff I have already gotten out of the kids.” It is therefore unclear if N2 was gaining new knowledge by observing other coaches, as he simply continued to use the same strategies and techniques after his observations.

The intermediate coaches, however, identified self-perceived gaps in their coaching knowledge and what they perceived they needed to learn. I1 commented while he had “a good rapport with the kids” and a “good relationship with the head coach,” he wanted to increase his knowledge of game strategy. I2 on the other hand perceived his learning objectives pertaining more to the enhancement of personal relationships with his coaches and athletes. When discussing his assistant coaches he stated “I want them to have fun, everyone’s working better if they’re having fun.” He also stated that he wanted to learn to not be so harsh to the other coaches and although “I expect a lot out of them, I am questioning them in front of the kids and that’s not good coaching.” Regarding the interactions with his coaches and players, I2 commented he is constantly thinking about how he can better approach them.
Likewise, E2 identified gaps in his understanding and knowledge as it related to the effective communication with others. He explained a lack of communication could sometimes stem from “frustration from a loss and having to address the media directly afterwards” and while that was part of coaching, coaches must think before they react and say something they might regret. He further stated “you’re always looking for ways to improve yourself” and “once you’ve got all the answers, you’re ready to get out.” E2 also commented on the diversity of coaching at the collegiate level and the need for assistant coaches to specialize in specific areas. He said it is not possible for him to learn everything about coaching, and although he continued to read, observe other coaches, and discuss strategy; he relied heavily on his specialized assistant coaches. He remarked, “I’m a delegater, I’m not a micromanager in my management style” and “I’m paying those guys to find out the answers to our problems and if I have to find out for them, I could just pay myself.” E1 also described himself as a manager, and perceived the gaps in his knowledge and what needs to be learned as coming from the need to increase his abilities in communicating with others.

As coaches develop, their specification of learning objectives developed as well. The novice coaches were interested in learning, but made excuses such as time and financial constraints that prevented them from addressing what they needed to learn. This is not to say that the novice coaches do not believe they should continue to learn, they just had the perception that their knowledge was adequate and if it was working, there was no point in making a change. Intermediate coaches identified their perceived gaps in knowledge and detailed areas to improve, however did not give specific ways in which they would accomplish this. Expert coaches equally understood their knowledge limitations and while they were continually seeking to fill in the gaps in knowledge they must also contend with encouraging their assistants to increase their knowledge and understanding.

Professional Development Plan and Perform Activities

The professional development plan and the performance of activities were two of Chalofsky’s (1990) constructs which were closely related and as such they are combined in this study. The professional development plan referred to employing the best strategies to meet the learning objectives and reduce gaps in knowledge, while performing the activities referred to the implementation of the professional development plan, such as reading and attending clinics. As was the case with the other constructs, novice football coaches also perceived it as the head coach’s responsibility to create a professional development plan to meet their learning responsibilities and then the novice coach would perform the activities that were established. For instance when asked why he was attending the clinic, N1 responded the team was in the process of “trying to build that program up, so head coach really wanted all the coaches to go learn more about it.” Similarly, N2 responded that his “head coach sent an email to us all, and he thought we all need to go over here to see what all we can get out of it.” While N2 attended the clinic because his head coach “thought we all need to go over here and see what all we can get out of it,” the head coach did not necessarily require additional activities to increase knowledge and apparently N2 did not utilize other opportunities. While N2 commented he had observed other coaches (but they were coaching the same way so he didn’t change anything), he did not have the time or financial resources to travel or go to many clinics. As the activities to increase knowledge pertained to reading, he stated “I really haven’t
gone into the whole book part of it or anything like that.” This further illustrated the dependence N1 and N2 place on their head coach for guidance as they continue to learn and develop as coaches.

While the two intermediate coaches had different reasons for attending the clinic, both of them attended for professional development purposes. I2 placed a large amount of emphasis on bonding with his assistant coaches and talking with other coaches from around the region while I1 attended because his coordinator said to go and they “were all going up there as a staff.” Although I1 perceived the clinic as being beneficial, he also believed that he could gain an equal amount of information by reading or researching strategies on the internet. Likewise, I2 recalled that during his younger coaching days he thought that there was nothing more to attending coaching clinics than sitting around listening to “some guys just talking about football,” and only attended because he was required to by his head coach or athletic director. He has since realized he learned as much or more about coaching while talking to other coaches before, between, and after presentations during the clinics. It was because of this and his strong belief in the bonding and indirect information gained from coaching clinics that I2 required his entire coaching staff to attend at least two clinics per year.

I1’s reasons for attending the clinic further demonstrated the conclusions of Tan (1997) that expert coaches have developed the skills to “objectively and honestly assess and identify their shortcomings and knowledge deficiencies with a high degree of precision” (p.33), while intermediate coaches have not. Intermediate coaches may therefore attend clinics because of the expectations of others, while they are unaware of their participation in activities which prove useful for self-development. I2 demonstrated a high level of expertise development as he was fully aware of the direct and indirect knowledge that can be gained from coaching clinics as well as his shortcomings and knowledge deficiencies. With continued efforts to increase his knowledge through attending clinics to learn from the speakers, as well as, bonding and discussion with other coaches, I2 commented he has messed up on numerous occasions, but “just like any other sport or profession, if you screw something up, you’ve got to hang good, and figure out a better way to do it.” Thus, he acknowledged that the clinics were appropriate paths to figure out better ways of doing things.

E2 perceived communication with other coaches and reading a variety of books were the most viable options for self-development and those were the activities he performed. He felt it is up to the individual to pursue self-development and as a coach he was constantly learning and trying to improve himself in order to help his athletes achieve success. This directly correlated with the findings of Ericsson & Charness (1994), who suggested individuals who strive to attain expert performance will undergo long periods of active learning to refine and improve their skills and knowledge. With a high degree of personal responsibility for self-development, the expert coaches made a conscious effort to continue learning at every opportunity through all available sources. While E1 noted his self-development as a young coach was attributed to watching and talking to other coaches, as well as, reading mainly football oriented books, he now perceived his self-development and much of what he is able to accomplish with his team as a “continual growing process until you get out and look back.” He also described himself as constantly focused on self-development through the reading of military and spiritual books along with constant communication with his coaching staff. He attributed his readings to increasing his ability to be a great leader as he commented the carryover to football
can be seen as “you have to put the team first and people have got to sacrifice to win; they have to sacrifice their life and their discipline and all that and then you have the teamwork, depending on each other and all that interaction.”

Comparably, E2 made a point to read a variety of books not often associated with football or even sports, such as the Bible and political biographies. Just as E1 read a variety of literature, E2’s readings apparently allowed for the accumulation of information from other sources which could be utilized in the coaching profession as experts “recognize similarities across contexts and make applications from one situation to the other” (Bell, 1997, p.36). Notably, other opportunities for self-development included talking with the coaches on his team, as well as, consulting other head collegiate and NFL coaches. E2 explained that “I go on a Nike trip every February with about 25 other coaches and we’ll share ideas down there, sit down at dinner and discuss how different coaches do things including standpoint, game preparation, and those types of things.” While E1 occasionally talked with coaches outside of his team for knowledge, he commented “coaches are not close. I’m not going to pal around with a guy in Miami. I’ve gotta whip them.”

Once again, the strict reliance of novice football coaches on their head coach was evident as they expected the head coach to devise a professional development plan for the novices and then they would perform the activity, with no feeling of responsibility to perform other activities on their own. Intermediate coaches, however, not only created their own plans for professional development, but they diversified their activities to increase their knowledge of the sport in different areas. Expert coaches took it a step further as they devised their own professional development plans, as well as, initiated opportunities for their assistants to learn and develop. The expert coaches also incorporated sources outside of the “football world” to increase their knowledge and understanding of the game.

Performance Assessment

The final construct in Chalofsky’s (1990) process of self-development involved the assessment of performance to determine whether or not activities performed from the professional development plan were successful in increasing performance. In this case, the novice football coaches were unsure of how the clinic would help increase their coaching performance. While N1 perceived the clinic to be helpful and he would like to take “bits and pieces of different people’s philosophy and try to adapt that to our system”; it remained the decision of the head coach as to whether or not the new strategies would be implemented. N2 on the other hand did not perceive the clinic as very helpful at all. N2 wanted to see more presentations by defensive coaches that would pertain directly to his role, and less about how great some of the teams were. He explained “you go to clinics to learn, more than likely we know how great they are and you don’t need to sell yourself like you’re Johnny TV.” It appeared the novice coaches were looking for a “secret to success” from the clinics and therefore did not perceive the clinics as meeting their expectations.

The intermediate coaches felt that they were able to take new ideas from the clinic which would benefit their teams during the season next year, and therefore, it was a worthy endeavor. With this in mind, I1 felt he could
now create new ways to implement some of the strategies learned as he tried to increase athlete performance. I2 perceived the clinic as offering him more of an opportunity to bond with other coaches which would strengthen his working relationship with the coaching community and allow him to work more effectively with his assistants. He commented “it’s time to get away and have some fun and still really feel that your job is improving.” The intermediate coaches ultimately chose to attend the clinics to aid in their professional development, and both coaches perceived the clinics as effective in accomplishing that goal.

Considering it was the off-season, it was truly difficult for the coaches to accurately determine how much of the information gained in the clinics would be utilized. There were differences in the levels of expertise and the perceptions of the benefits of the clinics however. While the novice coaches generally perceived the clinic as only slight beneficial, the intermediate coaches felt they gained solely from the experiences at the clinic. The novice coaches viewed the clinic as less beneficial due to the absence of direct information that could be used in the upcoming season, as the intermediate coaches could observe the indirect benefits of bonding and adaptations of strategy as significantly benefiting them as professionals. The expert coaches on the other hand were not involved in this construct, simply because they were paid to speak at the clinic and were not using it to increase performance.

Practical Implications

Coaches could use this information to help future coaches understand the progression from a somewhat restrictive responsibility perception by novice coaches that will soon lead to more creative opportunities as they gain experience. It is possible that this will allow novice coaches to show initiative to develop on their own and not depend so heavily on their head coach for development. Not only will this allow more experienced coaches to better understand their role as a leader for novices, but it will allow novice coaches a step-by-step guide of information based on the eight constructs of opportunities to take control of their self development as they gain experience. It can also help intermediate football coaches to attempt new and innovative strategies to improve daily practices as the experts expect this from up and coming coaches. The process of maturation within the football coaching profession involves increased knowledge and experience that allows for the gradual transfer of decision making power from the head coach to the assistant coach based on evolving trust in the assistant’s ability to be effective. With this in mind, coaches of all levels can use this manuscript to better understand the perceptions of each level of experience as it pertains to self-development and take the necessary steps to improve themselves and their colleagues based on those perceptions and how they relate to the different levels of expertise throughout the eight constructs.

Coaching educators can enable novice coaches to better understand that they should be self-reflective and it is their responsibility to find ways to improve. Coaching educators can also stress the importance of not only improving on knowledge of the specific game strategies, but to improve upon personal skills that are equally important in developing relationships with athletes. Future coaches need to realize that self-reflection is an ongoing process that never ends and even expert coaches that are considered experts continue to reflect in order to improve. If novice coaches are aware that they might have the erroneous tendency to blame the head coaches...
for their inadequacies, they can take ownership of those inadequacies and develop ways to improve themselves rather than waiting for the head coach to suggest a way.

As it pertains to proficiency assessment, experienced coaches can help novice coaches understand that they are responsible for their performance and should continue to increase their knowledge of the sport. The novice coaches appear to have an over-inflated sense of their coaching abilities and their tendency to perceive the head coach as taking control could enforce the belief that the novice coach doesn’t need to learn anything new because it will not matter. If the head coaches are aware of this, they can emphasize the important role assistant coaches play and encourage them to continue learning and take responsibility for the outcomes of all coaching staff decisions. Once the novice coaches discover that there is a gap in knowledge and they are responsible for eliminating those gaps, they should strive to learn from all available sources. The head coach can be instrumental in this area by demonstrating that they value the contributions of the novice coach and recognize the increase in knowledge and understanding of their assistant coach.

Much of this can be cleared up through effective communication between the novice, intermediate and expert coaches. Each coach should discuss their plans for increasing their knowledge and understanding and then follow through with those plans to see if they help. If they do help, the coach can implement into their scheme of effective coaching. If they don’t help, the coach can look to incorporate new ideas that will benefit their coaching and more importantly benefit their athletes. The key is for coaches to understand that no matter what your level of coaching is, you can always learn more.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study could be observed in the small sample size of participants. While the qualitative nature of the study lends itself to a small population sample, the two participants in each level don’t necessarily portray all coaches within that level. It should also be addressed that football coaches could have different perception of self-development than coaches in other sports. The different coaching levels (high school and college) could also create limitations where the pressures are different, finances and athletes are different, and the general coaching operations are slightly different. Further, the fact that the coaches were attending a conference was an indicator of their desire to develop or their head coach made the clinic attendance mandatory; in which both cases could affect the results.

**Conclusions**

Conforming to the framework presented by Chalofsky (1990); the novice, intermediate and expert football coaches utilized the constructs of self-development to increase professional knowledge. Novice coaches felt slightly responsible for their self-development with a high dependence on the head coach, the intermediate and expert coaches constantly strived to improve as they experienced what Chalofsky (1990) referred to as an ethical responsibility to be as effective as possible. As it related to daily coaching practices, the rule-bound novice coaches simply disseminated the information and skills pre-established by the head coach with low
perceptions of control, while the intermediate coaches had developed an increased perception of control which enabled them to use their own style of coaching in an effort to develop the skills of their athletes. Expert coaches basically served as a manager and while they were fully aware of their daily coaching practices, they essentially functioned to instruct the assistant coaches on the most effective daily practices to increase performance.

The prioritization of activities also changed as coaches developed. The novice coaches had a perception the head coach was responsible for their successes and failures and would inform them of areas to improve upon, while the more experienced intermediate coaches relied on their personal reflection to discover areas to improve. As the seasonal responsibilities changed for the expert coaches, they agreed it was their responsibility to improve as coaches and although they had a difficult time prioritizing their activities to improve upon, they emphasized their need to continue to learn and develop in all areas of coaching. As coaches develop toward expertise, they can more easily identify the competencies needed to be successful, but the competencies became more elaborate leading to the realization there was a large portion of coaching the expert still needed to understand.

Dependence on the head coach remained evident for the novice coaches even in their assessment of their own proficiency. While their perception was slightly inflated, they relied on the head coach to determine their gaps in understanding and knowledge. Intermediate coaches relied heavily on strategies that have been proven successful rather than creating new strategies while expert coaches on understood they would never know enough about the sport but they continually sought to better understand ways to improve. As coaches develop, their specification of learning objectives developed as well. While the novice coaches were more content with their knowledge and lacked motivation to increase knowledge unless directed by the head coach, the intermediate and expert coaches constantly strived to increase their knowledge and understanding through clinics, reading, talking with other coaches, and observing other coaches. As coaches progress from the novice to the expert level, their increased knowledge and experiences serve to provide them with an enhanced perception of their personal responsibility for self-development from a variety of sources.

This study can aid coaches at all spectrums of expertise to better understand the relevance placed on self-development depending on expertise level. As Bell (1997) suggested that novices are rule focused and highly dependent upon those specific rules, experienced coaches can enhance the development of novices by giving them more control over their athletes and allowing them to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. This could detract from the novice perception they are confined by the head coach and not responsible for successes and failures. Further, Bell (1997) believed that proficient coaches and teachers are less rule-focused than novices and can therefore take control of the learning environment and create new ideas and strategies based on their own experiences and personalize those strategies. This study corroborated those findings as applied to the coaching profession and illustrated the need for coaching clinics to allow opportunities for coaches to interact and learn from each other, implement what was learned into daily coaching, and assess the effectiveness of what was learned.
Lastly, the coaching education process can be enhanced by providing specific sessions and guided interactions that can be recommended to participants based on years of experience. This would eliminate categorizing coaches by expertise and subsequently grouping them according to experience instead. This process would allow coaches of similar experience levels to more freely express their opinions and issues regarding coaching without the intimidation factor of more experienced coaches or perceived experts judging their comments. Feltz et al. (1999) and Sullivan et al. (2005) suggest that coaching education programs be designed under the assumption there is a homogenous group of coaches present at the educational clinic and the individual learning programs should be based on experience and level of the coaches. The separate sessions based on years experience can better equip the coach to take control of their development without the perception of someone watching over them (novice) or the perception of needing to guide another coach (expert). The results of this study support this notion as the different perceptions of self-development vary based on level of expertise.
References


