The Role of the Coach Developer in Supporting and Guiding Coach Learning

A Commentary

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As people concerned with the development of coaches (one with 10 years’ experience, the other with over 30 years’ experience) we recognise the importance of an effective coach development system. It is important to state that the authors have provided a good overview of the situation as it pertains in the UK, and the endorsement nature of the UKCC. The identification of the roles within the coach development system and the questions to be considered at each stage of a coach centred programme is also helpful. Many of the topics and questions raised are familiar.

For this commentary we feel that it is important to divide the various coach developer roles into two main sections — those at the programme development end (the qualification designer and the learning programme designer), and those at the programme implementation end (the facilitator/tutor, assessor, mentor, internal quality assurer).

When you consider those operating in the area of programme development it is not surprising that the authors have identified a major deficiency in the training of learning programme designers. Very few (if any) of our academic institutions equip graduates with any skills in this area, focussing instead on developing their students’ skills as a coaching practitioner (e.g. sport science programmes) or on generic managerial skills applied to the sporting context (e.g. sport management programmes). Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, as coach development structures have largely been absent from the research concerning coach development. A chapter by Trudel et al. (2013) and papers from Abraham and colleagues (2013) and North (2010) might be the sum total of the published work dealing directly with this subject, while coach educators were part of the research process in some other studies (e.g. Cassidy et al. 2006; McCullick et al. 2000, 2005). So the commentary by McQuade and Nash is to be welcomed, as it brings the coach development system to the forefront.

Trudel et al. (2013) argue that those individuals in charge of providing adequate learning contexts to coaches (whom they term Coach Development Administrators) should try to design and nurture the best learning context for coaches. This argument builds on Jarvis’ (2006) commentary that “the person, the learner, the social situation within which the learning occurs; the experience that the learner has of the situation; and the process of transforming it and storing it within the learners mind/biography” (p. 198) are central elements for the CDA to consider in designing and nurturing the best learning context. To achieve these requirements, consideration must be given to:

- The time commitments: the majority of sports coaches are voluntary, it is not possible to expect prolonged contact time
- The scheduling of education opportunities: coaches might have more time to attend coach education programmes during the off season, but it is through opportunities to practice in real coaching situations that coaches can fully engage with new knowledge and behaviours
- What assessment methods are most appropriate?
- Delivery methods: technological advances now make it possible to deliver aspects of coach education online, but some coaches will expect that the coach

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educator will ‘teach’ new tricks of the trade to make their roles easier to accomplish, and show them the ‘right’ way to coach.

We know from both experience and research that coaches learn in many different ways and at their own pace. Coaches tell us that they enjoy watching others coach, that they pick up information in a variety of ways and from a variety of sources. We want our coaches to reflect on their practice, we encourage coaches to be independent and self-directed in their learning, to engage in applied lifelong learning; yet we largely only accredit the formal learning that coaches engage in. There exists a challenge for those of us involved in coach development to verify, validate, accredit and certify the learning that coaches engage in; does it really matter where, when or how a coach learns?

We do not necessarily need rigid standardisation in this – the nuances arising from specific sports, cultures and contexts are what make this field intriguing. However, we do not have any agreement in approach, or terminology and precision in language that will facilitate collaborative learning within the coach developer community.

Programme implementers fulfil a key role in learning situations experienced by coaches. Often the delivery of the content is conducted by individuals who have not been involved in its development. Coach educators have a huge impact on how the schemes are delivered and upon the coaches in attendance. The coach educator’s own experience and biography will influence how they interact with both the material and the learner coaches. Therefore, it is the profile of the coach educator, as opposed to merely what he says or does, that plays an important role in the development and facilitation of coaching knowledge and practice. According to Jones and Santos (2011), to have influence over others, both credibility and presentation of authentic self are crucial. How these and other attributes can and should be developed in coach educators remains very much open to investigation.

Historically, like many other NGB’s, we chose our coach educators in an ad hoc fashion. Often development personnel were trained to become coach educators as part of their job. Others, operating on a volunteer basis were good coaches who might be interested in helping out. If they had a background in education or were teachers all the better. Eventually, we undertook formal training under the National Coaching and Training Centre (now Coaching Ireland). While the process became more structured, often participants were not fully aware of what they were getting into. This was a ‘coaching thing’, maybe it would help them to become better coaches? These people typically either dropped out during training, or didn’t practice a whole lot as coach educators. Others became dedicated and experienced coach educators, who supported coaches in a variety of ways, some eventually getting involved in programme development.

In order to learn more about our coach educators we are researching their practice, development, and learning with a cohort of novice coach educators. We hope to learn more about who these people are, how their background influences their development and practice, and how they progress through our coach educator development programme and their initial practice.

We feel, however, that there is a key missing ingredient and that is the provision of an overarching conceptual framework that sets forth the vision for coach development. This vision permeates through the system, guiding the programme implementers and helping to scaffold the learning situations for coaches. Within the GAA, we have spent the last three years developing such a framework, which we hope to fully launch later this year. While there are a variety of conceptual models for coaching within the literature, most focus on a particular aspect of coaching, such as leadership or the coach-athlete relationship. The overarching framework that we are developing provides for the implementation of a learning framework, and weaves together the personal, interpersonal and sports specific aspects of coaching.

The Coach10/MVA model identifies the core capacities—what, how and why—required by a coach (practitioner) and by players (participants). Within the Coach10 model, coaching is not taken as an unproblematic simple application of an instructional model, but resulting from the complex interaction of coach, athlete and context (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2006; MacPhail, Gorley & Kirk, 2003; Potrac & Jones, 2009). These are reflected in the three inter-related aspects of Coach10—the Motivation & Vocational Attributes (MVA) i.e. the dispositional, operational and relational ingredients that combine to produce the core capacities.

As this conceptual framework is being rigorously refined, reviewed and defined, the next task for the GAA is to begin a mapping process whereby coach education inputs can be developed based on the framework and delivered in a manner that gives expression to the conceptualised, actualised and reflective process that underpin applied lifelong learning. In the absence of these component elements, instructional design will continue to be something of an enigma and it is virtually impossible to build in the core components in this context: critical thinking, communication, collaboration & creativity.

In this commentary we highlight that, while the degree of research concerning coaching and coach development is increasing, and the coach development system is coming to the forefront, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed at both the programme developer and programme implementer ends of the spectrum. As practitioners within the field, our experiences have guided our practice. The development of the Coach10/MVA model—for us—provides conceptual clarity, backbones operational impact and stimulates deep reflection. Coaching science itself is a relatively new discipline, and therefore is still ‘finding its feet’ within the broader world of academia. Through collaboration between academics and practitioners we can develop a better understanding of coach development, and implement learning centred coach development programmes that will improve the experiences for our coaches and athletes.