

Sometimes our default is to say 'don't do that anymore', but as soon as you say that, you cap potential. One thing you can't do in the foundation phase is tell players what's not possible.

Pete Sturgess  
FA Technical Lead (5-11) & England Futsal Head Coach



# Reflections on a Conversation with a National Coach: The Learning Path from Novice to Expert

**Pete Vallance**

England Futsal, The Football Association

## Abstract

This article explores how a national coach engaged effectively with their professional development and implemented learning opportunities into a coaching context. It evaluates the effects of formal, informal and experiential learning on their progression from novice to national coach and their contribution to creative approaches to coaching. The learning journey of Pete Sturgess, The Football Association's (FA) National Lead Coach for The FA Foundation Phase (children from 5-11 years), is used as a case study and reviewed in relation to applicable coach development research. As well as a recognised expert in The FA's Foundation Phase, Pete is a renowned England and FIFA Futsal Instructor, a Coach Educator and has been heavily involved in developing the England DNA resources (which outline the playing and coaching philosophy of England football teams).

## Introduction

*"I still remember his name now - Nathan. He was in my son's U11s grassroots team and I was doing some work, coaching them. He turned around to me one night and said 'Pete, this is boring!' And I just thought - you know what, you're right."*

There are many learning opportunities in the pathway to becoming an expert coach. But can we always identify them? Or do we value some forms of learning more than others? I, and others, subscribe to the view that learning isn't linear. It is diverse, messy and often unexpected. Yet many of our formal coaching courses are based on progressing sequentially from the lowest qualification to the highest. In a quest to explore the effects of different types of learning on a development pathway, I interviewed, in 2016,

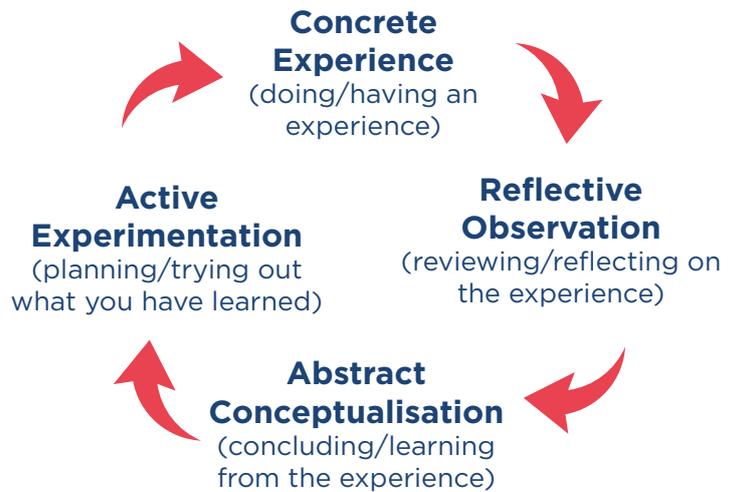
one of The FA's leading national coaches, Pete Sturgess, renowned for his work in what The FA terms the Foundation Phase (children from 5-11 years).

The social nature of learning means that we often develop through our interactions with others, gaining insight from their experiences. This article brings together reflections on my conversation with Pete Sturgess and follows his progression from his early coaching days to his current position as a leading national coach, discussing his learning journey alongside coach development research.

**Applicable coach development research**

To help make sense of Pete's learning, some coach development models are briefly described here so that they can be applied to aspects of his learning path.

Werthner and Trudel (2006) define three main types of learning that coaches engage with: mediated learning (formal qualifications and courses), unmediated learning (independently driven, where the coach chooses the type of information to consult), and internal learning (time spent in reflection)<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on Moon's (2004) work, the former can be understood by a 'building a brick wall' metaphor, during which the learner assimilates knowledge through an approved programme of content and is later assessed on the knowledge acquired<sup>2</sup>. This seemingly linear pathway towards expertise has been criticised for failing to prepare coaches for real-life contexts<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to a linear path, Moon (2004) promotes the idea of a network in which learning is flexible, unmediated and continuous, based on a learner's ever-changing cognitive structure (ie their knowledge and emotions)<sup>2</sup>. This view supports models of experienced-based learning, such as Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (Figure 1), which advocates a cyclical process in which the learner continuously reassesses their knowledge through experience, observation, conceptualisation and experimentation.<sup>4</sup>The success of experiential learning centres on the learner's ability to invest time in 'reflective practice' in order to help convert experience into expertise<sup>5</sup>. As Gilbert and Trudel (2006) suggest, "10 years of coaching without reflection is simply one year of coaching repeated 10 times"<sup>6</sup>. Studies have shown that appropriate reflective practice has a positive impact on coaching development, equipping practitioners to build their knowledge, initiate change, link theory to practice and prepare for the ambiguity of the coaching environment<sup>7</sup>.



**Figure 1 Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle**

**Sturgess' early coaching career**

As a talented young footballer, Pete Sturgess quickly rose through his local clubs, playing county standard for Staffordshire, then Football Combination league for Oxford, before joining several non-league teams such as Halesowen Town and twice playing in the first round of the FA Cup. At the age of 35 he began to transition into coaching at Rushall FC, recalling that "whilst still playing, I wanted to put on the kind of sessions that I wanted as a player, even though I was the coach". This suggests that his experience as a participant influenced the decisions he made later in his coaching style and strategy. When reflecting on his strengths as a coach, Sturgess admits that, "if I've got a choice between technical detail and enjoyment, I still choose enjoyment", suggesting that his overriding focus is on player engagement to underpin learning.

Despite having played to a high level, Pete recognised that he was still a novice in his coaching pedagogy, demonstrating that the key element to coaching effectiveness is an openness to learning and a recognition that past experience as a participant does not qualify the coach as an expert in the game<sup>8</sup>. His use of reflective practice demonstrates that practitioners need to access their tacit knowledge (the type of knowledge, often from experience, that is difficult to verbalise). This helps develop a deeper understanding of their practice<sup>5</sup>.

Pete's experience of being told that his coaching session was boring, by Nathan, was a pivotal moment in his development. Instead of reacting negatively, he used the episode to stimulate deep reflection to reassess and adapt his approach to

coaching, thereby using what Kolb (1984) refers to as 'abstract conceptualisation' (learning from the experience) in order to change his practice<sup>4</sup>. Pete refers to the event as an epiphany:

*"From that moment on I stopped working from a standpoint where I've got all the answers, I've got all the power, I've got all the knowledge and [realised that] unless I begin to reflect and respect the young people in front of me and try to meet their needs as well as the needs of football coaching, this ain't gonna work!"*

Pete's subsequent fascination in creative session design prompted a willingness to review his coaching practice, which soon became based on a player-centred approach. This approach centres on understanding a player's developmental needs and designing an environment accordingly: one that allows the player to take individual ownership over their learning and challenge the information they are being given, thereby resulting in more meaningful learning. This pivotal learning episode in Pete's pathway (courtesy of Nathan) resulted in a lifelong passion to become an expert in The FA's Foundation Phase, demonstrating the vital importance of reflection-on-action to coach development<sup>5</sup>.

### Experiences of formal education

During this time, Pete completed coaching qualifications, suggesting that as a novice coach he valued a formal development pathway for the career progression it offered. However, he found that these courses did not cover the information he sought regarding athlete/coach relationships:

*"There were still elements of it that didn't fit with me. Just the formality of it... it didn't seem to build the kind of contact or connection with players that you might need in order for them to listen to you and improve, so I tried to develop my own style."*

Pete's dissatisfaction with the course content supports findings that formal education programmes are inadequate in preparing students for the unpredictable nature of everyday coaching<sup>3</sup>. During linear progression dominated by formal education, the coach's role is a relatively passive one as they are only required to reproduce their accumulated knowledge during an assessment task<sup>1</sup>. This may explain why Pete was frustrated during these courses because he was unable to fully engage with the content. "The way the courses were structured, the assessment drove everything and you wouldn't ask a question and you wouldn't challenge anything." Therefore, despite providing learners

with knowledge, the system as described in Moon's 'brick wall' metaphor fails to take individual learning into account, and so the development opportunity is limited<sup>2</sup>.

Pete's enthusiasm for learning saw him return to education and complete a degree, followed by a PGCE teaching qualification and, later, a Master's degree in Sports Coaching. He became a lecturer in sport and recreation at Stafford College for six years, alongside a five-year coaching position at Walsall FC, and later was appointed as Assistant Director of Development for 7-14 years at Derby County FC. These roles cemented Pete's interest and expertise in the Foundation Phase.

He undertook extensive independent research in this age group, sourcing learning opportunities that matched his interests, which suggests a preference for unmediated learning. He professes, "because of my fascination with the child, most of my development around creating a playful environment or a creative environment has come from further reading". As Pete created these learning opportunities for himself, it can be argued that the meaningfulness of the learning, and therefore the effectiveness, was high<sup>1</sup>. However, he still recognised the need to combine his unmediated learning with formal qualifications and he completed his UEFA 'A' licence in 2001. So, despite his learning preferences, he was still aware of the regulatory expectations of the coaching profession, in which formal coach education is the social norm for those that want to progress.

In 2002, Pete was made redundant, yet he took this setback as an opportunity to establish his own coaching business. When discussing these three years of self-employment, Pete describes the pressure of his position. "I knew that if the kids didn't come back I couldn't put bread on the table and so I had to make the environment as fun and enjoyable as possible." This pragmatic reality was the second driving force in the creation of Pete's player-centred coaching philosophy, which acknowledges where the player is in their technical and physical development as part of the process of deciding the best way to help them improve.

Three years later, Pete became The FA Regional Football Coach for Yorkshire, which led to an unexpected opportunity of taking on the additional role of managing the England Futsal Deaf Squad for two seasons, taking them to the European and World Championships. Futsal is a FIFA-approved indoor format of five-a-side football, played on a hard court with a smaller, weighted ball. This was another

significant learning experience in Pete's coaching career, as it drew his attention to an emerging game (in England) that was beyond his current level of competence and forced him to adapt his coaching approach and communication style to deaf players. Pete relates that "it gave me a chance to be really out of my comfort zone. I was learning how to coach players who can't hear, but also teaching them a game I was pretty new to". His willingness to try new coaching situations and expand his skill set supports findings that expert coaches are prepared to step out of their comfort zone and investigate new and different ways of coaching.<sup>9</sup>

### From coach to developing people

In 2008, Pete was approached by The FA to take on the role of Head Coach of the England Men's Futsal Senior Squad. In the same year he also became Lead National Coach [developer] for the Foundation Phase.

In the role of Head Futsal Coach he spent time cultivating the athlete/coach relationship through developing his interpersonal knowledge of the players. He soon established a reputation of being an effective and approachable communicator. This supports evidence that "athletes experience positive psychological outcomes such as increased competence and motivation when coaches exhibit behaviours that are instructive, encouraging and supportive"<sup>10</sup>. This can arguably be seen in the uplift

that Pete achieved with the team, who at the time of his arrival had played 45 games, of which they had lost 44. His first goal when he took the role was to "get the players to believe they could win a match". Under his leadership, the team achieved a spectacular jump up the FIFA world rankings, from 106 to 56 in one calendar year, suggesting that coaching focused on relationships and rapport can play a vital role in team performance.

Mentoring is also a particularly effective tool in coach development through consistent guidance and encouragement<sup>11</sup>. Whilst Pete didn't have an official mentor, he sourced his own support: Mico Martic, a renowned international Futsal Coach. When Pete took over the England team management, he asked Mico to work alongside him in the role of guest coach, thereby embarking on an 'apprenticeship of observation', which added depth to his learning, through observing a more experienced coach<sup>7</sup>. The success of Pete's eight seasons with the team demonstrates the importance of learning with others and the significance of evolving from an independent mindset to an interdependent one<sup>9</sup>. A key take-away message being that Pete sought out the right person to help him at the right time.

Pete has clearly shown a preference for actively seeking out opportunities for his development pathway. For example, he attended a UEFA Futsal symposium in Santiago, which was delivered in



Spanish. He recalls the challenge of forcing himself to approach people who could speak both languages to help him:

*“I’m not the most forthcoming of people so for me to do that was a big step. I’m actually quite a shy person, but I thought I’ve got to do this for my own career and for the enhancement of futsal in England, so I think those uncomfortable periods were actually the best learning experiences I could have had.”*

This experience adds strength to the idea that some effective coaches turn challenging situations into learning opportunities. Furthermore, when Pete realised that language could be a potential barrier to deeper learning (due to the lack of high-level futsal material in English), he learnt to read and speak Spanish, demonstrating that a keen willingness to learn and an openness to collaboration are important criteria for experiential learning.

Another learning opportunity that Pete undertook was a trip to the north of Spain to spend a week shadowing a futsal club whose first team was fed by an academy. The pathway they had established greatly interested him and he spent time studying the stages of development they had put into place, recalling that “I thought as a model of development I need to know more about this”. The impact of this experiential learning has been significant as it forced Pete to evaluate the current levels of futsal exposure in English development programmes and informed the agenda he has championed through the Foundation Phase DNA resources. As a result, futsal is now being introduced to football players at a younger age, demonstrating how transfer can

occur once new ideas are trialled – similar to Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, moving on to his concurrent role as FA Lead National Coach for the Foundation Phase. This role established him as an expert on this age group, and within two years he created the Youth Module 1 Award that is still in use today. This position forced him to critically analyse his own learning and use it to refine and articulate his coaching philosophy, which focuses equally on character and connection alongside technical and tactical development. He recounts: “I was at a point in my coaching career and I wanted to galvanise everything that was important to me.” The material on the FA Youth Module 1 Award was inspired from Pete’s previous experiences of coaching, combined with his intuition that the current formal learning material wasn’t appropriate or relevant to how coaches should interact with young players. He combined his ideas about player centredness, open communication, relationships, creativity and developmentally appropriate practices. If we apply Moon’s (2004) ideas on learning we can view his development as a process of changing conceptions (the cognitive structure) and not simply accumulating knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

Pete’s commitment to challenging existing information and actively seeking out research to inform his own ideas highlights the value of unmediated learning and demonstrates that “effective coaches are lifelong learners committed to personal growth”.<sup>12</sup> He challenged the limitations that he found in his early formal learning and eventually was able to create a course that addressed those issues.



## Conclusion

Reviewing Pete's coaching journey alongside relevant research has illustrated three key conclusions:

1. An important element of coaching effectiveness is an openness to learning.

Whether a coach starts from being an ex-athlete or is a relative novice to the game, it is important to be aware of the different learning available and to seek out new opportunities that suit their character and context. Pete's learning path has particularly demonstrated the power of informal and unmediated learning, as he found that initially getting things wrong on the field motivated him to be self-regulated in his learning, and actively seek new and better ways of coaching.

2. Learning becomes more meaningful if a coach spends time reflecting on their experiences and making appropriate adjustments.

It was Pete's willingness to reflect on his experiences that was the catalyst for changing his coaching practice. His approach to accepting new challenges, such as the FA futsal roles, is an example of transitioning to a new context and being able to select the best coaching approach depending on the needs of the players in front of him. He was able to transition between different roles in his career because he continuously evaluated the needs of the athletes and the activity, reflecting on his ability to meet those needs and then taking steps to improve his knowledge and coaching practice.

3. Actively collaborating with others is important for expanding the depth and breadth of professional development.

Pete's eventual philosophy of designing an environment that encourages creativity was influenced at several key stages by his experiences, his research and his connections. By cultivating professional relationships with more experienced practitioners and actively engaging in collaborative social learning, Pete discovered new perspectives and practices, which greatly enhanced his professional development.

In summary, this conversation with an experienced practitioner has shown that if a coach is willing to continuously develop their knowledge, to adapt their coaching style according to their experiences, and to actively engage in collaborative learning, then their coaching career is more likely to be an effective one, with the potential to impact not just their own development but that of others.

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## Contact

Pete Vallance - [Pete.Vallance@thefa.com](mailto:Pete.Vallance@thefa.com)