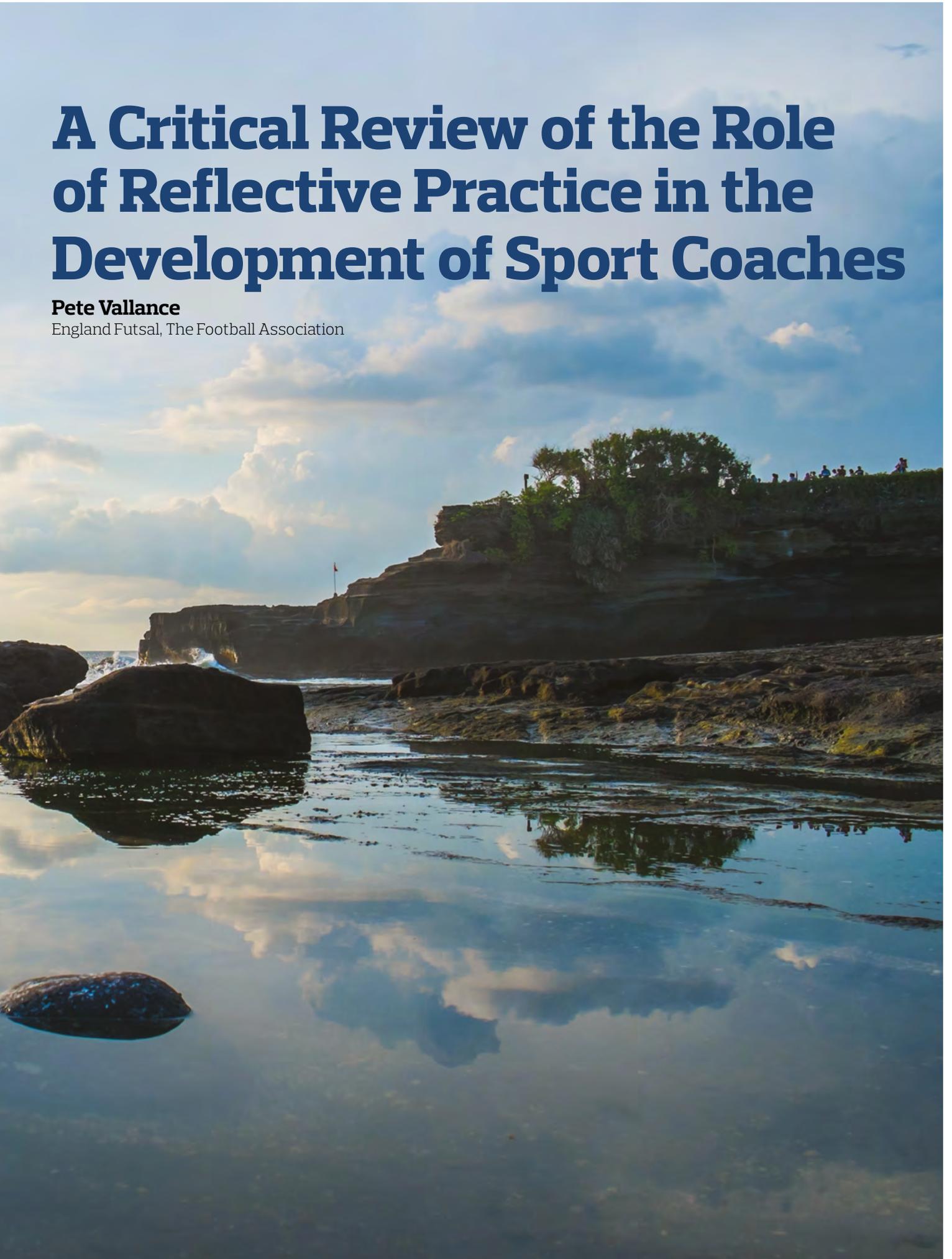




# A Critical Review of the Role of Reflective Practice in the Development of Sport Coaches

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### Abstract

The use of reflection in professional practice has long been considered beneficial and, indeed, central to converting experience and knowledge into expertise. The close relationship between reflection and experiential learning has been well documented in theories such as Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, which advocates a cyclical process of experience, observation, conceptualisation and experimentation. Reflection has since been explored in a wide range of professional contexts, including education, medicine and engineering. This article seeks to critically evaluate the use of reflective practice in the development of sports coaches, drawing on interpretations of reflective thought alongside contemporary research in coaching.

**Keywords:** reflective practice, learning, Schön, development, coach education.

### Introduction

Dewey (1933) established the principle that “reflection is central to all learning experiences, enabling individuals to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion...to convert action that is merely blind and impulsive into intelligent action”. This premise was instrumental in contemporary understanding of reflection as a catalyst for learning. The application of reflection in professional development is widely constructed around the work of Schön (1987), who coined the term reflective practice as “a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilful”. This theory addressed his previous concerns regarding models of professional training that failed to equip students for fast-moving practices, sending them into the workplace with limited technical knowledge. In comparison, Schön's model was designed to encourage novice learners to compare their methods with those of experienced practitioners, thus leading to professional progress.



Reflective practice has since become a prevalent model of development in many professional contexts, most notably education and healthcare, and gained prominence as a means by which practitioners can develop self-awareness regarding the issues and impact of their performance (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993). For example, trainee teachers study a range of established teaching methods in order to determine which will work best in their context, and nurses are required to complete formal reflective documents as part of their practice. The key rationale underpinning reflective practice is therefore that experience alone is not sufficient for learning, but requires intentional reflection in order to engage in continual and significant development (Peterson, 2016).



**Figure 1: Schön's (1992) model of reflection in and on action**

### In context

So, how relevant is reflective practice to a sports coaching context? Can the same benefits be applied to a profession deeply rooted in observation and experience? Research has suggested that the informal and unmediated learning that occurs in everyday contexts has a lasting and significant impact on coaching practice and is valued more highly than formal forms of education (Werthner and Trudel, 2006). However, it can be argued that simply acquiring experience does not guarantee coaching development and expertise. As Gilbert and Trudel (2006) suggest, "10 years of coaching without reflection is simply one year of coaching repeated 10 times". The success of reflective practice in a coaching environment is thus reliant on finding a suitable and contextualised medium through which to achieve a meaningful combination of experience and knowledge.

### Time

Recent studies have shown that reflective practice has a positive impact on coaching development, equipping practitioners to increase their elite knowledge, initiate change, link theory to practice and prepare for the ambiguity of the coaching environment (Cushion et al, 2003). However, there are several key issues to consider when exploring reflective practice in a coaching context. Firstly, the issue of time is a key factor in determining whether the level of reflection achieved is meaningful. Due to the increasing demands placed on their time, many coaches find it extremely challenging to reflect in a structured and effective way. Many coaches experience this difficulty in their coaching practice, in which the business of practical duties overwhelms the intention to spend time in reflective thought, thus promoting the view that reflection is an extra, rather than integral, part of development. However, the reality of a coach's timetable cannot be ignored, and so coaches must be encouraged to develop individual approaches to reflection that suit their learning styles and personal contexts.

### Motivation

The effectiveness of reflective practice is also dependent on the willingness and commitment of the coach to intentionally make time to engage with it (Cropley and Hanton, 2011). This highlights motivation as a second key issue surrounding the use of reflective practice in a contextualised environment. In a comprehensive study of sports coaches, most participants placed reflective activity as low priority on their list of responsibilities (Cropley et al, 2012). As such, their formal reflective material was often rushed and lacking in detail, which suggests that reflective practice is quick to be deemed superfluous. These findings are similar to an earlier study that found candidates repeating themselves when filling in a reflective questionnaire, sharing reasons such as, 'I didn't really know what to write and where to write it' (Cropley and Hanton, 2011). This issue forms part of a wider problem with formal and mediated learning courses, which have been found to be inadequate in preparing students for real-life coaching (Gilbert et al, 2006). Moon (2004) refers to this type of learning as 'building a brick wall', during which the passive learner accumulates concrete knowledge but is unable to engage individually, thus limiting the learning opportunity. Furthermore, if everyone is reflecting in the same way then it can be argued that individuals cannot achieve their full potential. The question to address, then, is how to achieve a standardisation of reflective practice in coach education whilst also retaining individual creativity and coaching style.

### **Creativity**

Schön's (1992) discussion on technical rationality refers to the limited approach of applying knowledge to decision making in order to eliminate surprises in professional practice. According to Schön, this systematic approach is inappropriate in the context of working life because an experienced practitioner's reactions are largely informed by tacit knowledge. Technical rationality therefore limits creativity in a coaching context and underestimates the coach's ability to respond reactively and to engage in critical conversation with the scenario; namely, 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1992). A distinction should be made here between the expert coach and the novice practitioner, whose learning needs are invariably different. It can be reasoned that technical rationality has its place in the education of the novice coach who has not yet gained the experience necessary to retain the relevant tacit knowledge and may benefit from guided reflection tasks. In contrast, the expert coach should be given the freedom to reflect in his or her own style and thus cultivate 'professional artistry', which is particularly essential if they have managerial duties.

As both a Futsal Coach and Manager, I have found that during matches I am forced to 'reflect-in-action' and make decisions in order to affect the flow of the game. These moments are often followed by a time out, during which I will convey a change of tactics to the players in order to combat the strategies of the opposition. Schön (1992) terms this the 'action present', as the outcome from reflection can still make a difference to the situation. Some studies have suggested that reflection-in-action is impractical for coaches to engage in due to attentional capacity and time restraints (Gilbert and Côté, 2013). However, empirical research for this theory is limited and my experience suggests that instant reflection is not only practical, but essential (Box 1).

### **Box 1**

When I deliver coach education courses I promote a learning cycle process to facilitate reflection tasks within large cohorts of coach learners. Coaches are asked to 'plan, do and review' a group delivery that includes reflection-in-action and to peer review in pairs in order to feed back to the whole group. I encourage open responses and opinions from the wider group to validate and consolidate their reflection. Giving coaches a reflective framework to work from which looks at specific areas such as the positive learning environment, planning and practice design, responsiveness and communication, helps to create structure whilst encouraging creativity within the framework. My personal reflection methods incorporate many of the same elements, individualised to my learning style.

### **Emotion**

Gilbert and Trudel (2001) expanded Schön's work by conducting a study of six coaches engaged in reflective practice and developed a new model of experiential learning that highlighted six key components as central to the reflective process: coaching issues, role frames, issue setting, strategy generation, experimentation and evaluation (Figure 2). According to their study, a reflective conversation is inspired by a tangible coaching issue, which is filtered through an individual's role frame (consisting of personal attitudes towards practice) to decide if it is worthy of reflection time. This process demonstrates that reflection is typically caused by uncomfortable feelings regarding an issue, which highlights a further consideration for discussion, as it suggests that reflection only occurs after negative experiences (Lynn, 2010).

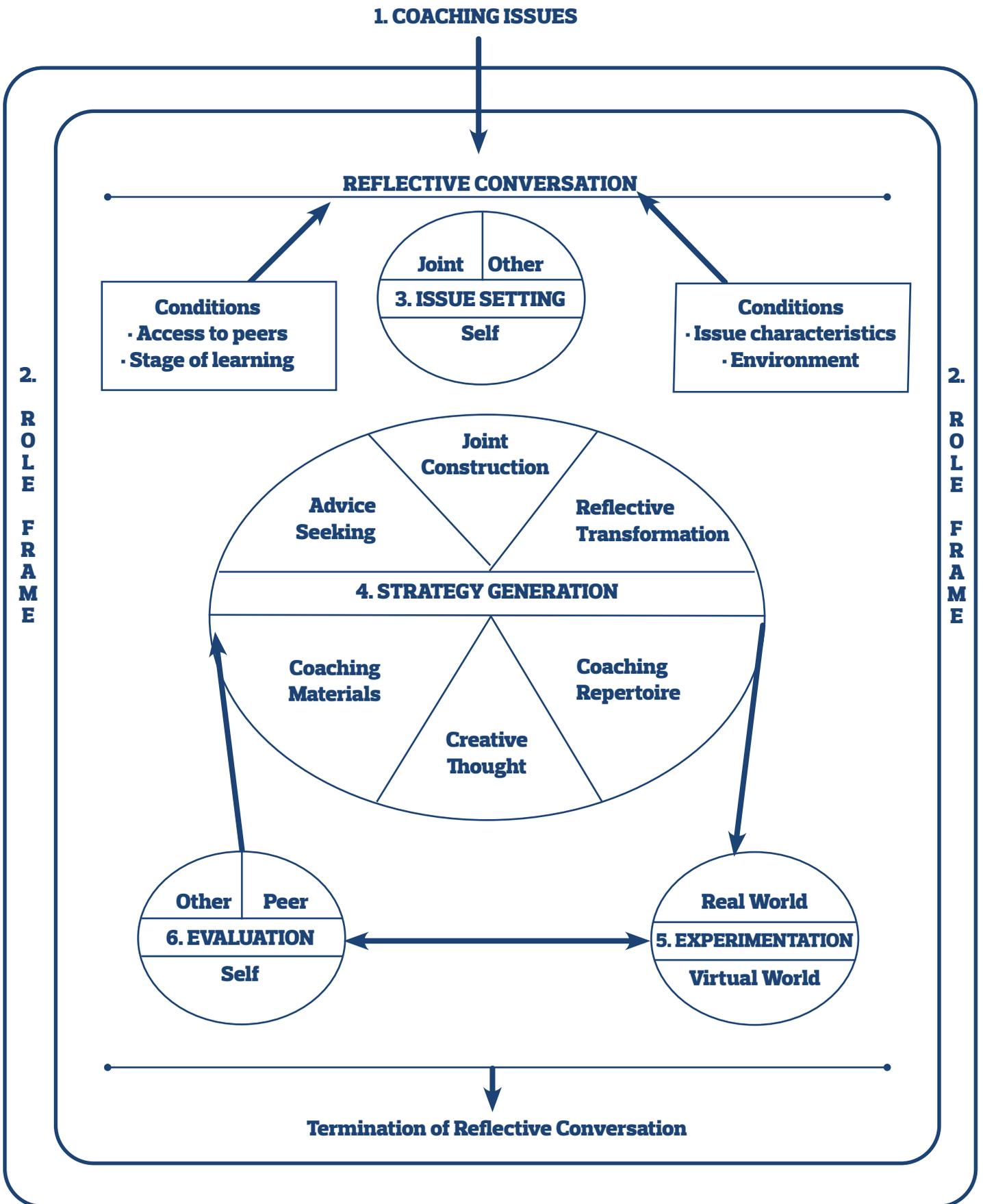


Figure 2: Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) model of reflection in sports coaching

**Box 2**

I recently delivered a futsal session as part of a community project for local college students. For the first few sessions, the students misbehaved and were disengaged with learning the game. I subsequently spent a long time reflecting on the session content, actively experimenting with new ideas and devising strategies to gain their participation, compliance and respect.

Box 2 demonstrates the fourth phase of Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) model, in which the coach 'draws upon a pool of resources in an attempt to generate a strategy that could address the coaching issue'. However, recent studies have shown that if a coach reflects only on negative outcomes, this can have a severe impact on their confidence and anxiety levels (Knowles et al, 2006). Emotion, then, must be taken into consideration when using reflective practice in sports coaching. Furthermore, due to the highly subjective nature of a coach's role frame, there is a risk of individual bias, which could lead to missed reflective opportunities (Abraham and Collins, 2011). Whilst this further supports the need for self-awareness, it also highlights that reflective practice can be enhanced and stabilised by collaboration with others, such as a community of practice or an experienced mentor (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993).

**Collaboration**

Many studies have advocated the use of mentoring as an effective tool in coach development, helping practitioners to improve motivation through consistent guidance and encouragement (Cropley and Hanton, 2011, Cushion et al, 2003). However, some critics argue that mentoring in the context of sports coaching does not provide coaches with a critical perspective on their coaching practice, being traditionally focused on passing on knowledge and values (Gilbert and Trudel, 2006). Conversely, my experience has shown that a mentor can do both, and can be a powerful motivation for engaging in deep and meaningful reflective practice (Box 3).

**Box 3**

In 2015, an FA Coach Educator filmed my first England U19s Futsal session at St. Georges Park and later sent me the footage, along with some written feedback, which initiated our mentoring relationship. His comments were structured as informal questions, challenging the rationale behind my decision making in a non-threatening manner, thus providing a structure and framework for me to 'unpack' the experience and consider the implications of what had taken place. This feedback prompted me to create a personal reflective document, which became the catalyst for my journey into the process of deeper reflective practice.

Schön (1983) contends that reflection is more likely to occur "in an environment that prioritises flexibility, acknowledges that multiple views exist, appreciates the complexity of issues, and is non-hierarchical". Further to mentoring, studies have also shown that having access to knowledgeable peers can improve the reflective process by adding depth and external understanding through a shared approach (Gilbert and Trudel, 2001). Whilst competitiveness amongst coaches has been found to limit the amount of information willingly shared, it is generally acknowledged that having access to knowledgeable coaching peers is crucial to achieving a well-rounded reflective process (Cropley et al, 2012).

**Box 4**

During the last few years of my coaching career I have engaged in shared discussion and debriefs with fellow coaches, both directly following a training session and continuing a week beyond. I have initiated reflective conversation using a simple structure of three questions taught on the FA Youth Award:

- What went well?
- Even better if?
- Changes for next time?

The quality of reflection that the questions elicit informs my understanding of the session, including environment, practical delivery, player progress, performance issues and approach to mistakes, which directly impacts my planning for the next session.

## Ten tips for getting started with reflective practice

### 1. Allocate time

Make your reflection time part of your session plan (not a bolt-on). Reflective practice should become a coaching disposition and a habit to develop; it shouldn't feel like a chore. Try to allocate some time straight after your coaching session so that it is fresh in your mind. If you have a co-coach then dissect the session together and talk through how it went before leaving.

### 2. Use a simple structure

Using a simple format to structure your reflective practice should help to make it manageable. For example – What went well? Even better if? Changes for next time? Structure your reflections into logical segments which will reveal the story of what happened and why, and what might need to be changed or kept the same for next time.

### 3. Find a mentor

Choose someone who you respect and trust and who understands your development needs. Often the best mentors are those who can be completely honest in a non-threatening manner and who can encourage you to reflect purposefully and candidly. Mentors are trusted advisors who can stretch our thinking, encourage us in our strengths and challenge us in our areas of development.

### 4. Video your sessions

Get into the habit of filming your delivery. You'll be amazed at what you can miss in the moment. Analyse your body language, position and disposition, even down to the intonation of your voice – were your actions open and engaging? Were your interventions varied? Were your questions open or closed? Look at the body language of the players – are they engaged? Do they look motivated? How do they respond to various interventions?

### 5. Personalise your method

Find a system that works for you and suits your preferred learning style, otherwise you won't keep it up and it will revert back to being a chore. For example, if you prefer to talk and share your reflections then speak to someone; if you're more of a visual learner then use video to watch yourself back; if you prefer to write your reflections down then keep a reflective journal and track your reflections over a few months to see if there are any thematic issues that keep recurring.

### 6. Recognise your emotions

Always consider your feelings and state of mind when you reflect. Be aware that your emotions can

often drive your reflective conclusions, so try to evaluate objectively and accurately. Think about how you felt first, then break down what actually happened, alleviating some of the emotional factors involved such as anxiety, disappointment, expectation, etc.

### 7. Reflect on both the good and the bad

It is easy to only reflect with intent when we have an awkward coaching experience or when something goes wrong. Make sure you reflect on both the positives and the negatives. Record the positive things that happen – we need to encourage ourselves and our coaching colleagues in order to build up confidence and expertise. Yes, the main goal is to improve, but it also reminds us why we are coaching in the first place.

### 8. Engage with shared learning

Start to use online learning and sharing platforms (such as Hive Learning). These resources are great places for coaches to upload sessions, discuss research and share reflections on best practice.

### 9. Develop support networks

Find a friend that you trust, or even better a group of coaching peers, who you can regularly share your experiences with – the good, the bad and the ugly. Coaching is a journey of ongoing development and we need that connection and continuous dialogue in order to keep up with the profession and sharpen our skills.

### 10. Have fun!

Enjoy the cycle of coaching and learning. View the awkward experiences as learning curves that all contribute to honing and refining your coaching practice. Think creatively and find approaches that work for you.

## Conclusion

In order to prepare coaches for a fast-moving environment, it has been demonstrated that different approaches to learning need to become more valued within formal education programmes. This attitude is becoming more prevalent in the coaching industry. I recently experienced this on a coach education course, when, alongside the formal learning tasks, candidates were asked to establish and lead regional CPD days that their fellow coaches could observe. This informal element to the course encouraged coaches to form communities of practice outside of the formal delivery days, thus reinforcing the importance of learning with and from others. However, even though the course encouraged shared conversation, there was a lack of guidance on how to effectively implement reflective practice into a broader approach to coach learning.

**Box 5**

I would like to see all coach education courses include a unit on contextual reflective practice, delving into the personal contexts of the candidates and supplying them with resources and ideas for putting these into practice creatively in a way that meets the needs of their environment – including ‘in action’, ‘on action’ and ‘after action’. For example, a practical demonstration of when reflection-on-action can happen in competition would be helpful to illustrate when the coach might view it suitable to change the session plan based on the needs of the players as they are progressing or regressing. I would also like to see courses incorporate a period of mentoring to enable candidates to experience the type of support that a good mentoring relationship offers and to explore the different learning options available. Lastly, it would be beneficial to set up a shared online group in which learners can reflect on and discuss their experiences, firstly of tasks set by the course leader to complete in their external coaching practice, but also with a view to continuing this dialogue after the course has ended.

The role of sports coaches has expanded to include managerial, administrative and organisational duties, which means that it is more important than ever that a coach is equipped to deal with the growing demands of the profession (Cropley et al, 2012). As one study observed, “for coaching to truly evolve as a profession, these reflections need to progress beyond the consideration of purely tactical and technical issues...rather, a much deeper level of reflection is required for coaching practitioners to develop an increased level of personal and professional awareness” (Gilbourne et al, 2013). Reflective practice has an important place in the development of contemporary coaches; yet, in order to attain that deeper level, coach education programmes need to consider the issue of standardisation versus creativity in order to effectively equip sports coaching practitioners with the tools and resources necessary to develop the highest quality of coaching.

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