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Effectiveness of Coach Learning and Development Activities for the Performance Foundation Stage

Nicky Proctor, Dr Julian North and Dr Bob Muir

Research Centre for Sport Coaching, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University

Introduction

Criticism of the appropriateness and effectiveness of much coach education practice (eg Chesterfield et al, 2010; Nelson and Cushion, 2006; Trudel et al, 2010) has since led to recommendations for coach development practice to align with the recognised complexity of learning and coaching (Paquette and Trudel, 2018). An emerging body of literature now supports the principle of learner-centred programme design, facilitation, and coach engagement (Deek et al, 2013; Morgan et al, 2013 in Paquette and Trudel, 2018; Muir, 2017) and empirical studies are now needed to understand and assess the implementation of these programmes.

This PhD study focuses on evaluating and understanding the effectiveness of the Performance Foundation Coach Support (PFCS) programme, funded by UK Sport and delivered by UK Coaching. The programme provides a package of support for coaches working with athletes developing the foundations for potential world-class performance (ie coaches working with promising athletes often via a national governing body of sport). Primary aspects of the programme are one-to-one coach developer support *in situ*[1] to stimulate reflective practice and facilitation of peer-coach communities of practice. Figure 1 provides an overview of the programme.

[1] *in situ* - Taking place within the coaching or competition environment.

Performance Foundation – VMOST

UK COACHING

Vision
World–leading environments for athletes to transition into world–class programmes

Mission
Help coaches to maximise their potential and impact within the Performance Foundation level

Objectives	Strategies	Tactics/Tools
Improve the quality of coaching practice	Provide opportunities for self, external and peer review of coaching delivery	In-situ observation (training & competition) Video review and feedback (CD and self) Peer observation and discussion
	Explore, articulate and evolve coaching philosophy, values and behaviours	Coaching conversations Peer coach and group discussions
	Check and challenge existing coaching practice and planning	Coaching Practice Planning & Reflective Framework Workshop delivery (Coaching Practice) Systematic observation of coaching practice
	Explore the quality and effectiveness of the coaching and learning environment	In-situ observation (training & competition) Coaching Communities of Practice
Plan and prepare coaches to understand and travel their own learning and development journey	Develop self-regulated and autonomous learning coaches	Reflective practice (variety of formats) Social learning spaces
	Support coaches to become better reflective practitioners	Workshop delivery (Connectivity & Learning) Critical reflection skills Individual Development Plan (IDP) process IDP case reviews (NGB/Coach/Coach Developer)
	Enhance professional judgement and decision making	Coach Developer one-to-one conversations Thinking Tools & Think Aloud process Coaching Practice Planning & Reflective Framework
	Develop increased self-awareness and emotional intelligence	360 online review Spotlight profiling Video review & feedback Reflective Practice (log process and journal use) IDP process
	Facilitate bespoke learning and development, embedded within NGB plans	IDP process IDP case reviews (NGB/Coach/Coach Developer)
Generate new expertise and insight	Enable connection and learning from peers across a range of sports and non-sport environments	Coaching Communities of Practice Peer observation and discussion Virtual learning portal and network
	Engage with key experts from fields relevant to Performance Foundation coaching	National events Regional workshop sessions
	Explore, make sense of and apply coaching research	Virtual learning portal Thinking tools WhatsApp groups
Develop more meaningful coaching relationships	Utilise systemic coaching methods to improve understanding of people and contexts	Constellations work Sport & coaching network discussions
	Explore the effective functioning of their inter-disciplinary team	360 online review IDP case reviews (NGB/Coach/Coach Developer)
	Check and challenge the quality of their relationships and leadership style	Spotlight profiling Coach Developer one-to-one conversations

Coach Developer Support and Communities of Practice

Figure 1: A summary of the component parts of the Performance Foundation Programme

The PhD is in the second year of study, and this paper presents some of the preliminary results that were presented at the 2020 UK Coaching Applied Research Conference.

Method

A realist evaluation approach is being used (North, 2016, 2017; Pawson and Tilley, 1997) and involves two stages:

1. Through document review and stakeholder discussion, an initial 'programme theory' was developed. The programme theory captures *how* the programme is understood to work: the resources and processes through which it will generate its intended outcomes in context. This stage of the research is complete and comprised five, three-hour interviews with programme design and delivery teams.

2. Observation and interview data are being collected to capture emerging outcomes (such as improved reflective practices or better professional networks) and the resources and processes involved in generating them. The programme theory then acts as a reference point for evaluating the programme implementation as data is analysed to test and refine the theory. Nine group event observations and 14 interviews have been completed to date. Further interviews and observations will be completed over the duration of the research.

Preliminary results

In this study, the programme theory is found to be heavily informed by 'modern principles of adult learning'. Such principles adopt a constructivist approach, which place the learner at the centre of the learning experience as they construct their meaning by making sense of events in context (Muir, 2018). Each coach brings their own biography to a programme that offers the space to explore ideas, building upon and disrupting existing knowledge to stimulate deeper reflection (Jarvis, 2004, Moon, 2013). The skills of the coach developer are critical in adapting to individualised situations and contexts.

The current fieldwork involves continual testing and refinement of the initial programme theory. Early findings from observation and interview data confirm the highly complex and integrated nature of the programme.

Surface level data often obscures what it is that may lead to a particular outcome in a given context and this introduces complexity and difficulty in attribution of causal influences (North, 2017). For example, when a highly-motivated coach participates in a stimulating peer discussion about a coaching topic introduced by an expert speaker, exactly how the coach is influenced is not explicitly clear. Ongoing fieldwork seeks to better understand this interplay of multiple factors for coach development.

Tentative implications of research for coaching

By critically evaluating a complex coach development programme, this research intends to contribute to the evidence base to inform and enhance practical design and delivery of coach learning and development programmes. While the research is at an early stage there are some tentative implications for coaching.

The initial programme theory suggests that the appropriateness of design, facilitation and delivery of coach education seems to have developed significantly since the more critical empirical studies of a decade earlier. In this case, learning and development practitioners exhibit an improved understanding of learning practices and alignment of appropriate development support.

The constructivist underpinning to 'modern principles of adult learning' upon which this programme is based, not only allows for a learner-centred approach, but perhaps also places greater expectations of engagement on the learner. In fact, this is deemed of such importance that the objectives of the programme are couched as: "for an engaged learner the programme aims to…" The implications of this are that the selection and recruitment of coaches for development programmes appear to be an important element influencing programme outcomes.

However, placing high expectations of engagement upon coaches requires consideration of their roles, resources and contexts. Even at the performance development level, there is a significant voluntary aspect to the coaching role and wide variation in the responsibilities, demands and opportunities offered within those roles.

It is tentatively suggested that it is in the interests of national governing bodies to understand the barriers and enablers to engagement in professional development faced by coaches so that they might adapt their systems and practices to positively influence coach engagement.

Next steps
The PhD is in the second year of study and fieldwork is underway. It is expected that the fieldwork will be completed in August 2020 and the final results of the research will be published at a later date.

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Contact
Nicky Proctor – N.Proctor@leedsbeckett.ac.uk