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Thinking On Your Feet: How Coaches Can Use Reflection-in-Action to Develop their Coaching Craft

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Abstract

This article aims to consider how coaching practice is influenced by a coach's craft (knowing-in-action). This craft determines what coaches know how to do and allows them to make decisions quickly and instinctively. This is influenced by the agreed ways of working or way things are done in a coach's social context (knowing-in-practice). The interdependent nature of knowing, doing and reflection is discussed, including the impact of different types of reflection

and how using these at different times can grow coaches' experience to inform future coaching. Specifically, the benefits of thinking about what you are doing, while you are doing it or thinking on your feet (reflection-in-action) are considered, including ways that coaches can begin to effectively use this practice in their coaching.

Keywords: knowing-in-action, knowing-in-practice, reflection, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action.

Introduction

Coaching is rapidly evolving and becoming a more holistic process, requiring coaches to understand and use more complex knowledge and skills. There is a move away from the traditional approach of ‘teaching’ technical and tactical skills to participants towards one that involves participants in the learning process with a view to develop every individual as a person as well as a performer. This approach expects coaches to learn more and become self-directed in their quest to improve and develop themselves in the knowledge and skills required.

Linked to this, within coach education there has been some movement towards self-directed learning, where coaches are encouraged to do their own learning and work things out for themselves. This movement has also seen a shift away from more formal education courses, and more emphasis placed on learning to coach through experience. The intended benefits of this approach include higher levels of motivation of learners, more individualised learning and more focus on what the coach is doing on an everyday basis. However, the expectation that coaches learn through experience just by coaching is misguided.

Coaches are often told they need to review or reflect as part of the plan-do-review model, yet they may not be shown how to do great reflection. Have you ever wondered how you should reflect... and reflect well, if you have not been shown how to do it? Reflection, after all, is not a simple process. If it was, it would be easy to learn how to do it.

This article aims to investigate why reflection is so important for developing coaching craft (knowing-in-action) and how this can impact on coaching practice. It will also examine how knowing-in-action influences and is influenced by different types of reflection, and how using different types of reflection at different times can grow our ways of knowing.

What is reflective practice?
 “The ability to reflect on one’s actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning.”
 (Schön, 1983)

Reflection is really just learning to coach from and through experience! However, it cannot be expected that simply by engaging in coaching that you will learn from these experiences. Learning to become a more effective coach from your experiences requires the magic ingredient – reflection!

Reflection builds ‘knowing’

Everything that coaches draw upon to help them to make decisions quickly and instinctively is their ‘knowing’ (Schön,1983). Therefore, the benefit of reflecting upon experiences is to build more ways of knowing – essentially giving a coach more experience or tools to draw upon when coaching.

As Schön suggests, it seems right to say that knowing is *in* our action.

Knowing-in-action
 “What we know how to do in everyday and professional life.” (Schön,1995)



Knowing in this instance is different to knowledge. Whereas knowledge tends to be static and about abstract facts that we possess (eg you might possess knowledge of the different types of coaching styles), the knowing is in the craft of how, when and which coaching style to use in the activity you are doing right now. Knowing is concrete because knowing is doing. Knowing is dynamic because it is never completed, it is always fluid.

Knowledge	Knowing
Static	Dynamic
Abstract	Concrete
About possession	About action
Is a tool for knowing	Uses knowledge to inform

Knowing is about action as it is an ongoing social interaction. Coaches repeat practical application of knowing in an experimental, sometimes improvisational and almost always in an incremental way. Knowing, therefore, relies not only on experience but thinking about those experiences to discover what you need, in order to do what you need to do.

This highlights the importance of doing in the reflection process. Until you try out the new thing you have learnt about in your coaching, you can’t increase your ways of knowing about how it can work best for your coaching practice.

Example:

Thinking about this article, some of the knowledge presented here might be new to you. Hopefully, having read this article, the knowledge that you possess about types of reflection will be increased. However, this knowledge does not automatically make you a skilled reflective practitioner. For this to happen, you need to experience those different types of reflection so you can work out whether they do or don't work for you, in what situations and what support you might need to enhance this process.

So what does all this mean?

Now you have some knowledge about your knowing! But as we have learned, knowledge is not enough to increase your knowing-in-action!

Your knowing-in-action should be put into practice regularly.

Example:

If you want to build your ways of knowing about questioning techniques, you need to **ask questions!** As you develop new knowledge about questioning techniques, such as different types of question, you should experiment with them in your coaching. If you discover a great way to ask a question, try it in different scenarios and with different people to test whether and how it works across contexts.

Your knowing-in-action should be reflected upon to grow and develop.

Example:

To build your ways of knowing about questioning techniques, as you **do** questioning, you need to reflect on the questions that you ask (and responses that you get!) to work out how to ask them more effectively. Consideration of what types of question you ask, how and why, to whom and when, to get what kind of response from different people, will inform your questioning skills.

Schön also suggests that an individual's knowing-in-action can be influenced by the shared knowing-in-practice – the social context in which it is taking place.

Knowing-in-practice

“The agreed **way things are done** in a coach's social context or community.”
(Schön, 1987)



This shared way of working within your sport, physical activity or coaching community is undoubtedly an opportunity to grow your own knowing-in-action. However, due to the pressure of conforming to these social norms, it can be difficult for a coach to reflect upon, and possibly critique, some coaching practices that are long-standing and taken for granted within their coaching context.

John Dewey, often considered the founder of reflection, proposed that we need to be open-minded before we can engage in reflective thought. Dewey defines this open-mindedness as:

“The active desire to listen to more sides than one and to recognise the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us.”
(Dewey, 1916)

This approach may be very difficult for some coaches, especially if much of their learning experience has been spent being exposed to views from within the accepted knowing-in-practice.

Think about how ‘things are done’ in your sport or physical activity, your club or circle of coaches. Are there any coaching practices you don't agree with? Have you ever wondered why something is done in a particular way? Why not question this practice by asking coaches or do your own research?

The next time you are reading, watching, observing or listening to something new, try to consider the alternate point of view or method – review it with a critical eye, rather than conform.

If, as discussed above, knowing is ‘situated in practice’, that same knowing cannot simply be transferred to work in all situations.

So, for example, if you observe a coach using a games-based approach, you cannot expect that it will work in your own coaching practice simply by copying that exact approach. The intricacies of the make-up of the group, the task, and the objectives for the session would need to be considered before you use them in your context.

This is not to say, of course, that you can't take aspects of their delivery to try for yourself. There might be some golden nuggets that could work brilliantly for you! Go through the process with a

critical eye and think about their context and your own context with a view to working out what might work best for you, considering any tweaks required.

Types of reflection

There are different types of reflection that take place at different times. Each has a different purpose and can benefit a coach's reflective practice in different ways. The article will now explore these different types of reflection and discuss ways coaches might use them to best effect.

Reflection-on-action

"Thinking back on what you did to review and inform how you can do something about it in the future." (Gilbert and Trudel, 2001)

This type of reflection takes place after a coaching session has finished and involves the coach making sense of their practice to improve future action, usually the next coaching session.

This is the traditional way that coaches reflect on their practice. It is worth considering when the most appropriate and effective time for you to reflect after a session is. A 'hot' review immediately after a session can be good for capturing thoughts and details about events that happened while they are fresh in your mind. However, a 'cold' review days later can also add value because you will have had time to remove yourself emotionally from the session and mull things over. A combination of the two could have multiple benefits.

Retrospective reflection-on-action

"Reviewing at a time outside the **action-present**, when the coach is not able to affect the process anymore." (Gilbert and Trudel, 2001)

This timepoint outside of the action-present is likely to occur following the conclusion of a coaching programme (eg at the end of a season). It is likely that this kind of reflection will involve a more holistic review with a view to improving the coach's practice across many areas in the future. This can be beneficial for the coach to review and evaluate the coaching programme as a whole, and start to plan and set goals for how they might want to develop the coaching programme and their coaching in the future.

Whilst both modes of reflection described above are considered to be learning from experience, there are also disadvantages of reflecting this way. For example, there is evidence to suggest that retrospective reporting of events can be affected

by reporting accuracy due to things like memory and bias. How we remember events unfolding, especially after the event, can be inaccurate and clouded by any subliminal biases we have.

Therefore, there is also thought to be value from coaches reflecting in the moment through reflection-in-action.

Reflection-in-action

"Thinking about what you are doing, while you are doing it." (Schön, 1983)

Reflection-in-action happens in what Schön (1983) describes as 'the midst of activity' - in coaching terms this is likely to be during a coaching session or game.

Reflection-in-action is a vital skill for coaches who want to be adaptable to the people in front of them, provide challenge to all participants and differentiate activities to suit everybody. This is because by definition, reflection-in-action occurs in a timeframe in which action can still make a difference to the situation unfolding in front of them.

Learning through experience

The other advantage of reflection-in-action for coaches is that this kind of thinking means learning happens through experience, rather than from it. This gives the coach the opportunity to try out and adapt in the present moment, constantly striving to improve what is happening in the session as it goes on 'live'. This rethinking of knowing-in-action can not only affect what we do in the current situation but in other similar situations in the future. The coach builds more ways of knowing!

The coach's reflection-in-action comes about through a form of an ongoing reflective conversation with the situation, where real-life problems arise on a minute-by-minute basis. It gives the coach multiple opportunities to practise a cycle of identifying and setting problems, generating strategies to solve these problems, and experimenting with these strategies on the spot.

Such problems often arise by 'surprise'. Something unexpected might happen and the coach (having noticed this) has to turn their attention to the problem in order to try to deal with it in a period of time that can still influence the situation.

Example:

In a face-to-face conversation with a participant, the coach picks up on an unexpected answer from them. This leads to the coach taking a different approach, whether in the questions they ask, what they say and how they say it, or their demeanour or body language.

It is worth noting that in order to reflect-in-action in this way, a coach must look into their knowing-in-action – to either produce a potential solution (eg “I need to soften my approach here...”) or indeed to challenge it (eg “that wasn’t what I thought she was going to say...what does that mean?”).

In the example above, the coach might also go away and reflect further on the interaction following the coaching session in order to change the way they approach the next time. This reflection-on-action could complement the benefits gained from the reflection-in-action to grow the coach’s knowing-in-action around this scenario. In fact, it could be argued that by reflecting-in-action, this can spark us to reflect-on-action more clearly.

Coaches who tend not to stray from their well-established routine are less likely to come across ‘problematic situations’ than those who tend to step out of their comfort zone. Some coaches might see this as a positive as the session ran smoothly. However, by avoiding these situations, coaches might miss many opportunities to reflect in their practice. By stepping out of their comfort zone, coaches are more likely to develop their knowing-in-action, reflection skills and therefore their overall coaching skills.

A potential disadvantage of reflecting-in-action is the perception that the reflective thinking takes the coach away from thinking about the coaching practice itself. This could be potentially dangerous if, for example, the coach took their eyes off safety. Secondly, if the coach visibly ‘stops and thinks’ too often, it could be seen by participants as uncertainty and put the coach’s credibility at risk. There could also be a danger that the coach over analyses the situation and becomes involved in a continuous spiral of reflection, reflecting on the reflection and so on.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of using reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action in coaching

	Reflection-on-action	Reflection-in-action
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can make use of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ reviews Can take time to gather feedback and consider Chance to mull it over Chance to take out emotions from the session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can spark further, more meaningful reflection-on-action Can deal with ‘live’ issues right then Improves ‘thinking on your feet’ skills By putting the doing into action straight away this can build knowing-in-action
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be affected by memory error Can be affected by bias Could forget some incidents that don’t grab attention as much 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don’t concentrate on coaching session (eg safety) By thinking, the coach might appear not interested in the session Danger of over-analysis

Therefore, coaches need to work out and make use of potential times and opportunities for reflection-in-action and also what to reflect on. It could look something like this:

First few minutes at the start of a practice	Next few minutes	Appropriate time
Check if instructions have been understood by participants, that they understand what they are supposed to be doing and that everything is safe.	To purposely find some time to step back and check, observe and notice to trigger reflection-in-action.	Make changes or act on reflections if appropriate.

Summary

Reflective practice can benefit coaches in many ways. As well as improving future coaching sessions, coaches can use reflection to learn, grow and develop their coaching craft. This article provides examples of different types of reflection and when they can be used to build this coaching craft from experience. The benefits of reflecting in-action or thinking on your feet during the event have been discussed, notably how this thinking and doing can have a positive effect on building a coach’s knowing-in-action. Examples of how reflection-on-action can enhance this process have also been considered. It is hoped that you are now ready to have a go at thinking on your feet in your coaching and putting some of this into action.

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