Evaluation of the Coach Mate Connectors Programme

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Abstract
This article presents the key findings from the evaluation of the Coach Mate Connectors Programme, developed by Street Games in the West Midlands. The programme was developed to improve access to coach development opportunities, particularly for under-represented groups. This research has particular relevance for the implementation of the UK wide Future of Coaching Strategy (2016-2025) and the Coaching Plan for England, which highlighted the need to diversify the coaching workforce. An independent evaluation was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the programme. Several key strengths to the programme were identified. Of particular benefit to those coaches involved in the programme were: one to one mentoring; ‘little and often’ interventions; an inclusive approach to coach development and coach developing+, which incorporated wider support and career advice.

Background
Volunteers and coaches play an important role in providing sporting opportunities within the community and tackling inactivity, an aim at the heart of the UK wide Future of Coaching Strategy (2016-2025). Good coaching not only provides physical and mental benefits for the people that participate, it also benefits individual coaches in terms of personal development and well-being. In addition, research has suggested that effective coaching impacts positively on social, community and economic development. With the many benefits of coaching in mind, there is a desire to transform how good coaches are identified and how they are supported in order to grow and strengthen the coaching workforce.

The ambition to devise creative models to attract and engage a more diverse audience in coaching opportunities presents a challenge for providers of coach education and coach development. Diversifying the coaching workforce was identified as an important factor to ensure that people from all communities can participate: “to be coached by people who are empathetic to their needs and reflective of their social environment.” This is an approach that has often been referred to as ‘people like me’. Organisations were asked to consider a number of potential barriers when planning for coach education and development, such as: cost; lack of mentoring and opportunities for continual professional development; the format of assessments; and perceptions of the value of one off training opportunities. Tackling these barriers is essential if the vision for a more inclusive coaching workforce is to be realised.
Another key area of work identified in the Coaching Plan for England was improving the standard of coaching. In this area two strategic approaches were suggested:

1) To foster an improvement culture
2) To transfer learning into practice

The Coaching Plan for England emphasised the need for long term coach development models that include formal training opportunities alongside mentoring support, the establishment of communities of practice to encourage peer support, and digital learning and development. Plans to change the way that coaches are assessed were also mooted, with a suggested shift towards direct assessment in a delivery context, rather than assessment with peers on a training course.

The Coach Mate Connectors Programme
The Coach Mate Connectors Programme was developed by Street Games to test new ways of engaging volunteers and coaches in long term developmental opportunities. The programme was delivered in areas with high levels of social deprivation and aimed to attract a more diverse coaching and volunteer workforce. Coach Mate Connectors was targeted primarily at young volunteers and coaches aged 16-25 who were at various stages of their coaching journey. They were grouped as follows: ‘newbie’, ‘done a little and on the ladder’, ‘working towards or doing a qualification’, and ‘the ongoing journey’. This was important, as the Coach Mate Connectors Programme recognised that the developmental requirements are likely to vary across different stages of the coaching journey.

The ‘connectors’ in the project were locally trusted coach developers, who worked in the West Midlands network. Each connector worked with a cluster of individuals that were based locally to them with the aim of forging a positive working relationship and providing support at each stage of the coaching journey.

In order to tackle the common barriers that were identified in the Coaching Plan for England, the support offered through the programme was local to the volunteers and the coaches, and it incorporated formal and informal learning with self-reflection, as well as digital support to develop ongoing formative learning. The programme was developed and piloted in the West Midlands during 2016-2017.

This article presents the key findings from the evaluation of the programme, particularly focusing on the elements of the programme that participants highlighted as impactful, in terms of their development as a coach. These findings could be of interest to organisations with responsibility for coach development.

Aims of the Coach Mate Connectors Programme
The key aims of the programme were:

• To develop an inclusive and long term model of coach development that provides a positive coaching experience for young coaches and volunteers in areas of deprivation.

• To break down barriers to accessing qualifications through offering local training and support.

• To use one-to-one mentoring to help coaches build reflection and resilience.

• To utilise digital support individually and in clusters.

• To enhance the capability of the professional coaching workforce.

Evaluation
The Coach Mate Connectors Programme was independently evaluated by the University of Wolverhampton. Thirty coaches involved in the scheme in the Midlands area were contacted via email or over the phone. Of those, fourteen agreed to be interviewed for the research (male n= 8, female n= 6, white n=8, BAME n= 6 and disability n=2). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect rich qualitative data from the coaches about their experiences and the support they have received from the programme. All of the coaches had engaged in the programme during a six-to-twelve month period in 2016-17.

Results
Getting started
Coaches reported that local opportunities were important, particularly when getting started. Locating training and support in areas and venues that the coaches were familiar with, and that they could access easily, removed a barrier to their involvement. Coaches referred to their locality as being “safe”, accessible, familiar, and within their comfort zone. For many of the coaches involved,
taking the first step was daunting and the first point of contact was significant in keeping them on board. Some coaches reported that they had felt excluded from educational opportunities previously, which made them more reluctant to engage in any form of training. A warm welcome, that was relaxed, informal and personal, was seen as important in breaking down this barrier.

**Little and often support**
Little and often support involved smaller elements of support over a longer period of time. It combined formal learning, such as qualifications, with mentoring and work-based in situ support, digital communication, a platform for peer sharing practice, and access to digital and shared resources. This support was offered weekly, with the option of daily interaction if any specific needs were identified. The average duration of the programme was three to six months, from start to finish.

**Meet the coaches - Karen**
Karen, aged 37 comes from a Traveller family background and already had interest in health and belly-dancing when she became involved with the programme. A lack of confidence and juggling child care had previously hampered her plans to be a coach. The programme ‘opened the door’ for her to access opportunities at her own pace and in a flexible way. She is now a coach and involved with leading well-being activities in Wolverhampton.

>“The delivery was absolutely great. The deliverer was very humble, very confident, very respectful, very motivated indeed, and helped us with any queries, any problems, anything we wanted to know.” (Karen, aged 37)

A number of coaches discussed the benefits of the ‘little and often’ approach to the programme. They reported that it allowed progression to occur over a longer period of time and ensured that coaches didn’t feel ‘thrown in at the deep end’. This was particularly important for ‘newbies’ who felt that the little and often support gave them the confidence to continue to the next stage of their journey. All of the coaches interviewed reported that one-to-one support had improved their confidence. Although this programme might take slightly longer than a conventional coach education course, there was consensus amongst those involved that it built confidence and a more solid foundation on which to develop further.

>“It might take a bit longer but you get much more out of it from the support.” (Leanne, aged 21)

>“I’m totally confident. When you’re ready, they give you the confidence boost.” (Karen, aged 37)

Little and often support was also important to more experienced coaches who benefited from support ‘on the job’ and the transition to other roles, such as mentoring and course delivery. The support was complemented by regular connection through digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, Skype and Facebook Live. This allowed connection with their peers and mentors in a community of practice type environment.

>“It helped me develop confidence and helped me develop in terms of how I process information with the session going on.” (Leroy, aged 27)

During the evaluation, it was important to consider how the coaches compared the support they had received through the programme, to other programmes with little or no follow up support. Coaches that had previously attended other coaching courses highlighted a number of disadvantages with traditional ‘block delivery’ courses. They felt that those courses did not provide much opportunity to apply their learning, particularly if the qualification was in a new sport for them. In addition, once the course was over, they felt cut off from any ongoing or future support.

>“With a qualification (block delivery) because I knew nothing other than what I learnt on that course…. once you’ve finished the qualification they sort of wipe their hands of you.” (Ryan, aged 20)

>“I did a Level 2 qualification and I was there for three weekends. Since I’ve finished the course I’ve not heard from them. I haven’t really done much with it. As soon as I was qualified I didn’t even know like where to begin, whereas with this programme I was straight into employment.” (Lucas, aged 20)

In comparison, another coach discussed how she was able to draw together knowledge she had gained from formal course delivery, with the feedback she had received from her mentor in a range of coaching contexts.
“I think it makes more sense, so instead of doing it on a course and not knowing how to relate it back to different sessions, with the two courses mixed together I’ve been able to make more sense of it. Instead of turning up with the knowledge from the course and thinking ‘what am I supposed to do with this?’ It’s confidence and experience.” (Leanne, aged 21)

One-to-one support and mentoring
The one-to-one support and mentoring was seen as instrumental to the programme’s success. Feedback from their mentor allowed coaches to focus on their specific areas of need, and at a time to suit them. This feedback was often delivered in their place of coaching or work.

Meet the coaches – Leanne
Leanne, 21 from Smethwick found it hard to gain full time employment in the sport sector after completing her degree. She delivered in three roles within disability coaching, schools and social care work. After the programme, Leanne developed her coaching and by linking qualifications and her prior experience, she was successfully appointed to a full time role with Dudley Inclusive CIC as a deliverer for disability sport and respite activities for adults.

Building up rapport and trust with a Coach Developer/Mentor was important in the mentoring relationship and made the coaches feel they could ask for help.

“On a one-to-one basis you can say and focus on what I kind of need help on.” (Mark, aged 20)

“The support I’ve received is fabulous, just fabulous. It’s improved my teaching as a whole and it isn’t boring.” (Jason, aged 19)

“If there’s a course with loads of people, I wouldn’t be one to kind of ask my question so it’s nice to have a relationship with someone you kind of feel comfortable asking those questions to.” (Leanne, aged 21)

Another perceived benefit of the programme was the chance to be observed, supported and assessed in context. Being supported and assessed while delivering to peers was regarded as inauthentic and unrealistic. Working with a mentor or assessor in context allowed the coaches to relate theory to practice and to ‘make more sense of it’. It also allowed them to have support with other aspects of their role, such as behaviour management, which would not occur in a controlled environment.
"With the assessments, he’s made it so he came here and it was much more to do with what you’re doing and your session. Instead of just doing it on a course then not knowing how to relate it back to different sessions, the two are mixed together and I’ve been able to make more sense of it. It makes a massive difference because on some of the courses it’s not realistic, everyone kind of behaves well."

(Leanne, aged 21)

‘With the traditional courses it was very much skills focused, but then you would just be in a controlled environment…it wasn’t authentic. Whereas with this programme, what they’ve done is do them in our place.’ (Leroy, aged 27)

Inclusive coach education
Coach education has specific parameters or guidelines to address individual needs. However, sometimes individual needs are not disclosed, or are only identified part-way through a programme of delivery. It is only through building relationships with individuals, that any barriers to learning can be identified and suitably addressed.

Meet the coaches – Michael
Michael, aged 19, is currently at college studying sport leadership and he has just passed Level 2 of a multi sports coaching qualification. Michael has learning difficulties and all his life has needed additional support for literacy and understanding. Little and often input over time has allowed him to build confidence and find his style. Michael was allowed to utilise technology with an app to dictate and evidence knowledge. The use of technology and an awareness of his specific learning needs allowed Michael to demonstrate knowledge in an alternative way, aiding his development and removing barriers. Michael has since been offered work in a school as a coach, as well as going to Uganda on an exchange programme.

Two of the coaches in the sample had a disability, and for them the support they received had been particularly beneficial. Both of those individuals reported that the programme had taken their specific needs into account and had ensured that they could access the same opportunities as everyone else. The one-to-one support had allowed them to identify their developmental requirements and work towards overcoming the specific barriers that they faced.
One coach had learning difficulties that meant he found it difficult to read and write. In order to ensure that the environment catered for his specific needs, his mentor ensured that formal delivery and any follow up resources were more visual. This allowed him to participate fully in the training and practice confidently as a coach.

“I’ve got some learning difficulties so my biggest challenge is when things are written down. When I first met them I told them that I struggle with reading and spelling. A lot of the support I’ve had is less writing and more visual stuff. Being with this programme is absolutely brilliant. I want to become a coach even more now.” (Michael, aged 19)

Another coach first became involved with the programme after volunteering at a sports session for participants with intellectual disabilities. He knew that he wanted to work in sport but was unsure of how to progress as a coach, particularly as a full-time wheelchair user. He was aware that “there are a lot less disability coaches” than able-bodied coaches, but whilst involved in this programme he was able to start accessing training opportunities and support. He is currently working towards a HND in Sport Coaching and Development in order to develop his skills further.

“I originally started volunteering for about two and a half years and then I was put in touch with Street Games and went on a dodgeball activators course. That was about a year and a half ago now and then they put me on the multi-skills Level 2. The programme has given me confidence to say ‘look, I have a disability but I’ve still got the coaching knowledge’. It’s been fantastic as it has given me the same opportunities to develop a coaching badge and to get involved in sport.” (Sukhvir, aged 19)

Coach Developing+
In conventional coach education settings, there is limited opportunity for the coach to access support in other areas of need that might sit outside the remit of the training. Coach Developing+ (plus) aims to combine coach specific training with wider social factors to aide ‘life after’ learning, and support longer term relationships between coaches and mentors.

Meet the coaches - Donovan
Donovan, aged 42, is a dad, originally from Jamaica, who came to the UK to start a better life for his son. He has received support to help him start a football team and for good projects in West Bromwich. Donovan is passionate about making a difference in his community and has benefited from the support offered by the programme. In his words: “they help us help people. They support us and this community.” He aims to keep promoting positive development and education through coaching. Donovan is hoping to offer the Level 2 multi-skills training to his under-16s football team and outreach work to ensure the sustainability of the club.

Consistent with the aim of providing ongoing and progressive coach development, having continuous contact with the programme enabled the coaches to learn about other opportunities that were available to them.

“If they hadn’t opened the door for us I wouldn’t have the broad imagination that I’ve got now. This is just amazing. There are so many opportunities after that my head gets clouded. The amount of emails, numbers, connections and links. It’s just so overwhelming.” (Karen, aged 37)

For Karen, the connections afforded by the programme were important, and although seeing the vast amount of opportunities available appeared overwhelming at first it further fuelled her enthusiasm for coaching. There was a clear sentiment that the coaches felt valued and that their mentor believed in them. This in turn boosted their confidence particularly with regard to getting out of their comfort zone and taking on new opportunities.

“I remember when he told me ‘Karen you’re going there to help teach at the fitness academy. I know you can do it.’ When I was in the waiting room I had to take a deep breath and even though the boss was there I thought, ‘remember what he said’. ‘Karen, you can do it.’ I’m shy and a bit of a hermit lady, but even when you feel your cheeks go red you’ve still got to take that breath and think ‘I can do it’.” (Karen, aged 37)

“Recently he’s pointed me in the direction of different work like a couple of sessions of handball at a secondary school near me.” (Leanne, aged 21)
It was also clear that other areas of support were required in order to allow volunteers and coaches to further progress. Financial support, in particular, was seen as a major benefit of the programme. Those coaches who wanted to set up a club did not know where and how to access funding opportunities. One coach explained the importance of the support he’d received from the programme and the impact it had on the community.

“They created links and gave us the opportunity to educate through sport, helping us with funding and stuff like that. We have an initiative that we try to tackle where kids go hungry during summer.”

(Donovan, aged 42)

Mentors were also used by the coaches for careers advice and help with applications and interviews. From the perspective of a long term development approach, this level of support was essential in allowing coaches to progress to the ‘life after’ the programme.

One coach had decided to take a change in career direction and had sought support from his mentor. Although his training and initial support was around sport-based sessions with young people, he had developed transferrable skills that allowed him to pursue a career in the fitness sector, working with older adults.

“I’m actually still teaching but instead of teaching kids I’m teaching old people, delivering fitness sessions. I’ve learnt transferrable skills and it’s helped me fit in with my new job role.” (Lucas, aged 20).

As well as developing coaching specific competencies, the one-to-one support was also cited as being important in learning how to present yourself correctly in order to create a positive impression to potential employers. One coach discussed the advice she had been given by her mentor:

‘If the time you are supposed to be there is seven, then he would say that you need to be there at six. He showed me how to present myself correctly so the company respects you. I’m absolutely glad I’ve done this and I just want to go on.” (Karen, aged 37)

Conclusion
The Coach Mate Connectors Programme made it easy for people from a wide range of backgrounds to become involved in coaching. The hands-on and personalised approach at a local level helped to break down some of the barriers associated with traditional coach education. Factors such as varied usage of technology, communication groups and initial one-to-one support sessions,
were highlighted as important hooks in getting individuals involved in the first instance. The provision of training opportunities that were local, accessible and familiar, were deemed essential.

The programme emphasised the importance of ongoing improvement and recognised that gaining a qualification was the start rather than the end point of an individual's coach education journey. A learning culture was created where coaches were not only supported through a qualification but where they were also supported in accessing opportunities to put their skills into practice, to build confidence and to develop networks in the process.

The additional support the coaches received in terms of accessing opportunities helped them to make clear connections between the training they received and potential career pathways. Although there may be opportunities to be assessed and supported on a course that follows a traditional delivery pattern, these opportunities may be relatively limited and may not reflect the environment an individual works in.

Being supported and assessed in their workplace allowed coaches to tailor their skills to a particular environment and to their client group. Ongoing mentoring throughout the coaching journey played a central role in the success of the pilot programme. This has shaped how Street Games now run the Level 2 Doorstep programme, where every learner has a combination of coach education, coach development and mentoring in their context.

The personal and familiar approach of being able to ask for advice, being observed, being encouraged, and being pushed at the right time, allowed individuals to reach their potential at their own pace. The development of a sustained working relationship with a mentor was also important for the development of the coaches, particularly those who had specific needs. Overall the pilot programme offered an accessible, flexible and long term approach to coach development, which in turn helped produce competent, confident and appropriately skilled coaches. They felt supported and were able to set clear career goals.

Learning from challenges
Whilst the benefits of the programme have been outlined in this paper, the programme did face some challenges that will need to addressed to support future developments. A key challenge faced by the programme was the change of circumstance of some individuals (due to relocation or new employment, for example), which impacted on their time and availability. This could be resolved by widening the programme to other areas, and signposting those individuals to other coach mate connectors.

References


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