

**Becoming a mentor: An exploration of ‘how’ student-coaches negotiate mentoring  
practice**

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**Abstract**

A growing body of research has investigated the virtues and complexities of mentoring in sports coaching (e.g., Bailey et al., 2019; Leeder & Cushion, 2019; Sawiuk et al., 2017, 2018). Yet, a paucity of research exists to consider ‘how’ both mentors and mentees come to understand their respective role(s). Attempting to redress this gap in research, the aim of this project was to examine the developmental experiences of mentors (and mentees) while participating in a mentoring programme within a University undergraduate sport coaching module. In doing so, this study specifically attended to the critical experiences of mentors and mentees in order to determine how, over the course of the module, mentors and mentees were able to operationalise their role within the coaching context. Data were collected through a series of focus group interviews with 10 mentors and 12 mentees, which were repeated over multiple time-points throughout the mentoring programme. The data were subject to a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to yield three interrelated themes; initiating meaningful mentoring; the relationality of mentoring; and finally, putting ‘mentoring’ to work. The findings demonstrated the ability (and inability) of learners to develop the reflexive awareness required to negotiate and align their identities within the pedagogical context under study. Drawing upon the explanatory work of Goffman (1981) and Crossley (1996), the study contributes to the deconstruction of mentoring practice more specifically, and the wider understanding of complexity of socialisation in coaching and education more generally (Corsaro, 1992; Hodkinson et al., 2008).

**Key words:** Mentoring; Sports Coaching; Negotiation; Identity; Coach Education; Coach Development; Mentor; Mentee

## **Introduction**

Despite a long history within education, business and management (Passmore et al., 2016), recent years have seen a proliferation of research attempting to understand mentorship within sport coach learning and education. In 2009, Jones, Harris and Miles published a review of literature examining mentoring across nursing, business and education, before locating mentoring within the field of sports coaching. The overriding consensus of the paper asserted that sports coach mentoring remained an ‘ill-defined activity’, resulting in little understanding of how mentors ‘actually’ develop (Jones et al., 2009, p.280). Yet, despite the potential pitfalls associated with a lack of conceptual clarity, mentoring is consistently advocated as an experiential and contextually appropriate tool for developing sport coaches (e.g., Nash & Sproule, 2009). For example, Adams et al.’s (2016) review of an elite youth coach education programme highlighted mentoring as a pedagogic strategy to support both the formal and informal learning of sport coaches. Such a sentiment reflected McQuade et al.’s (2015) recognition that mentoring holds the perceived potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice by supporting learning ‘in-the-field’. It is, then, perhaps unsurprising that mentoring programmes infiltrate both sport coach education pathways organised by the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and those offered by Higher Education (HE) Institutions (among other organisational settings; see Jones et al., 2009).

Responding to Jones et al.’s (2009) criticisms, a growing body of research has investigated the virtues and complexities of mentoring in sports coaching (e.g., Bailey et al., 2019; Leeder & Cushion, 2019; Sawiuk et al., 2017, 2018). For example, refined to volunteer sports coaches, Griffiths and Armour (2012) examined how a group of coaches and mentors both participated in, and made-sense-of, their espoused mentoring process. Drawing upon the work of Bourdieu (1990), the authors positioned mentoring practice as conditioned by personal interplay, the volunteer context, and cultural learning. Doing so moved beyond dualistic conceptualisations of mentoring (i.e., mentor/mentee; learner/context) to highlight the

importance of embodied engagement, actions and interpretation in shaping the learning process. Similarly, Sawiuk et al. (2018) identified that, despite recognition of ‘learning’ as an overarching theme, formalised mentoring in elite sport coach contexts was subject to organisational agendas, micro-politics, and an increasing audit culture. Again, drawing upon the work of Bourdieu, the authors illustrated how a number of stakeholders (e.g., NGBs, mentors), who often held contrasting agendas, used the mentoring programme as a ‘form of social control’ to influence and determine the career development of the mentees (i.e., coaches) (Sawiuk et al., 2018, p. 627). Such a sentiment reflects Leeder and Cushion’s (2019) analysis of NGBs coaching culture, which presented sport coach mentors as sources of cultural reproduction. Here, mentors actively attempted to shape the disposition of their mentees to align with the ‘doxic order’ of the context (i.e., the taken-for-granted acceptance of how things are done; Bourdieu, 1990).

The picture of mentoring that emerges from this work is one characterised by power and contestation, where mentees are ‘expected to conform to their mentor’s way of doing things’ (Zehrtner & McMahon, 2019, p. 78). For Armour (2015), such problems with mentoring are likely to occur when ‘the nature and purpose of the activity [mentoring] are not wholly clear’ (p.19). Furthermore, Chambers (2015) highlighted that mentors rarely receive professional development and, for those that do, mentor ‘training’ may merely function as a mechanism to reproduce organisational beliefs about ‘good’ mentoring, which, in turn, may be based upon reproduced assumptions about ‘good’ coaching (Leeder & Cushion, 2019). Attempting to redress this criticism, Bailey et al.’s (2019) analysis and interpretation of mentors’ experiences led them to present a pedagogic framework that they suggested *might* serve to support the conceptualisation and development of mentoring practice within future work. Yet, except for a few notable examples (e.g., Zehrtner & McMahon, 2019), there remains a paucity of work within sport coaching examining ‘how’ both mentors and mentees fulfil and understand their respective roles. Therefore, the aim of this project was to examine the

developmental experiences of mentors (and mentees) while participating in a mentoring programme within a University undergraduate sport coaching module. In doing so, this study specifically attended to the critical experiences of mentors and mentees in order to determine *how*, over the course of the module, mentors and mentees were able to operationalise their role within the coaching context.

The originality of this endeavour lies in exploring how both mentors and mentees were able to *actually* develop over the course of a mentoring programme. Although we recognise that the site for this study (i.e., HE) has not traditionally been seen as a form of coach education, over the last few decades an increasing amount of research has been devoted to exploring HE coach education and development programmes (see Trudel et al., 2020). While claiming that HE promotes rich and authentic learning experiences for coaches, this site should not be considered *the* way, but rather, drawing inspiration from Bailey et al.'s (2019) recommendations to 'reconstruct' mentoring practice, the context presents an 'open' reading that can help refine the development of future sport coaching mentoring practices. In doing so, furthering previous work using HE Institutions as a site for coach development (e.g., Jones & Turner, 2006; Trudel et al., 2020), the article examines the interplay between the 'socio' and 'pedagogic' performances of those enacting mentoring. The significance of this analysis relates to the participants' abilities (and inability) to influence coaching practice, while appreciating how the temporal nature of such experiences were framed within the pedagogical design of the mentoring programme. Such work builds upon previous power-laden, discourse orientated studies of mentoring in sports coaching (e.g., Leeder & Cushion, 2019; Sawiuk et al., 2017, 2018) by deconstructing participants' struggles to develop an on-going reflexive awareness of their mentoring (and coaching) practice. Such deconstructive work also holds the potential to understand mentor-mentee relationships in disciplines and contexts beyond sports coaching (see Passmore et al., 2016).

In terms of structure, the next section outlines the pedagogic design of the mentoring programme that formed the site for the study. Following this, the research design, data collection techniques, and data analysis are discussed, before presenting the results of the study. The paper concludes with a critical discussion of the findings.

## **Methodology**

### ***‘Coaching the Coach’: The mentoring programme in question***

The mentoring programme was delivered as part of a final year (Level 6) module on an undergraduate University sport coaching degree that aimed to develop students’ critical understanding of the development and education of sport coaches. In doing so, whilst the mentoring programme resembled the structures previously studied in voluntary settings (e.g., Griffiths & Armour, 2012) and the formal mentoring in sport governing bodies (e.g., Leeder & Cushion, 2019; Sawiuk et al., 2017, 2018), the students were also encouraged to (critically) consider the relationship between HE (i.e., their course of study) and NGBs. Such considerations attempted to raise the students’ understanding of the formality of the learning (Nelson et al., 2006), while more broadly positioning coaches’ learning as contextual, complex, and idiosyncratic (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). In terms of delivery, the format included weekly seminars and a lead lecture, alongside the 16-week mentoring programme. Specifically, the focus of mentoring practice, which formed the site for investigation of this study, aligned to a compulsory introductory sports coaching module for first year student-coaches (Level 4). What’s more, the student-coaches’ coaching practice on this Level 4 module was not decontextualized (i.e., student-coaches coaching peers; see Lyle, 2018 for a fuller critique), but rather, facilitated an authentic coaching scenario that involved the neophyte student-coaches designing, planning and delivering weekly coaching sessions for primary school children. In doing so, the respective first year module aimed to develop the student-coaches’ appreciation of theory when fostering creative learning environments through a combination of seminars

and practical coaching sessions. The cross-curricular nature of the design allowed for each final year students (i.e., mentors, Level 6) to be assigned three first year student-coaches (i.e. mentees, Level 4), resembling a traditional prescribed mentoring programmes (e.g., Bailey et al., 2019). In sum, this hierarchical design mirrored the coaching and mentoring experiences of mentors and mentees undertaking traditional NGBs coach education programmes.

Responding to claims that mentoring lacks conceptual clarity (e.g., Chambers, 2015; Jones et al., 2009), the purpose of the mentoring was to develop positive change in the thinking, knowledge and practice of their mentee counterparts (Bailey et al., 2019; Gilles & Wilson, 2004). Rather than over-sanitising or simplifying the relationship, mentors were encouraged to help the mentees take greater responsibility for their learning, actions and consequences (Maier & Seligman, 1979). Following Bailey et al.'s (2019) recommendations, this involved a series of tightly scaffolded tasks that attempted to provide students with an 'ontological foundation' to mentoring and, consequently, develop a 'shared, conceptual understanding of the process' (p. 76). As a result, the mentors were encouraged to conceptualise their roles as a 'more capable other' (Vygotsky, 1978); that is, an educator who embraces (and guides the learner through) the complexity and uncertainty of learning.

Asserting that the module was not merely experiential, the mentoring programme was supported through a range of activities, this included: (1) a supportive 'guidance document' that contained reflective questions, tasks and suggestions regarding how the mentors could direct and develop their mentoring practice; (2) content-specific seminars, which encouraged students to reflect on and make-sense-of the unfolding context; and finally, (3) a written reflective log that would contribute to a summative assessment at the conclusion of the module. Collectively, the supportive activities were not designed to be a catch-all for the students' experiences, but to encourage the mentors to engage with their understanding of coaching and mentoring practice and how best to guide and support the learning of their respective mentees.

### ***Research design: Participants and sampling***

The focus of this study was on the experiences of both mentors and mentees within the respective modules that comprised the mentoring programme. In turn, the sampling procedure followed a combination of what Sparkes and Smith (2014) described as ‘purposive’ and ‘convenience’ sampling; that is, the study consisted of both mentors and mentees on the respective undergraduate modules deemed information-rich and willing to participate. In total, the participants included 10 mentors (final year students) ranging from 20 to 23 years old, who had between 2 and 6 years of coaching experience, and 12 mentees (first year students) ranging in age between 18 and 31 years old with 1 to 6 years of coaching experience. Prior to any data collection, ethical approval from the host University’s ethics committee was secured. Although minimal harm was anticipated, we recognised the hierarchical power influence of the staff members recruiting students from the respective modules (i.e. Charlie and Andrew planned, taught and assessed on the module). Thus, the third author (Daniel), who was not a member of the teaching team, facilitated the recruitment and data collection with potential participants. Specifically, the participants were invited to voluntarily ‘opt in’ to the study via an online platform. The platform included details of the study, outlining the risks and potential benefits of participating, the voluntary nature of the project, the participants’ ability to withdraw at any point, and described the anonymity and confidentiality procedures to help the students make an informed decision about self-selecting into the research project. In turn, all names used in the subsequent representation are pseudonyms.

### ***Data collection procedures***

Adhering to the principles of an interpretivist paradigm, the principal method used throughout this study was focus group interviews. In keeping with Lindlof and Taylor (2011), we acknowledge – and bore witness to – the ‘cascading’ effect focus groups can achieve in and through the interactions between participants. Such interactions offered group members the



opportunity to react or respond to the articulated experiences of others. In this respect, the richness of focus group discussions, beyond the aggregation of individual interviews, lied in the elicitation of new and unforeseen ideas between the participants; insights which may otherwise have been left unprovoked (Morgan, 1996). Therefore, following Tracy (2013), the purpose of the focus group interviews was to explore the participants' co-constructed experiences of the mentoring programme. Here, the participants that comprised the study were not part of a specific mentor-mentee pairing and, consequently, were randomly allocated a group for the data collection, with each group restricted to mentors or mentees only. In keeping with the aim of the study, the focus groups were not treated as an isolated point of data collection, but rather, were repeated over multiple time-points throughout the mentoring programme. This culminated in a minimum of three focus groups for the respective mentor groups and a minimum of two focus groups for the mentees. The time-points of the focus groups spread across a three-month period; the first series of focus groups occurred 8 weeks into the module, the second series occurred in the final few weeks (e.g., week 12 to 14) and another shortly after the completion of the module and subsequent mentoring programme. The focus groups lasted between 30-90 minutes, depending upon the vagaries of the participants mentoring experiences. As a result, the data comprised over 20-hours of recorded data between both mentors and mentees.

The focus group interviews were initially informed by 'loose' (semi-structured) guide(s), which contained questions devised to explore the participants' on-going understanding of mentoring. In the initial stages of data collection, the guides were more structured while in the latter phases of data collection the focus groups were more exploratory in relation to the unfolding events. In particular, the line of questioning concerned two main areas; firstly, the participants' conceptual understanding of mentoring, which included assumptions concerning mentoring practice and the respective roles of mentors and mentees. The second area focused on the mentoring experiences more specifically, exploring the various

mentoring decisions undertaken. The staggered nature of interviews afforded a greater sense of 'depth' to the data; that is, the line of questioning not only explored the mentoring experiences 'during' the programme, but also gave a sense of 'after' once the accompanying assessment points were complete and the mentoring activities concluded. This sense of time and development within the dataset was crucial to developing a sense of rigor among the research design.

### ***Data analysis***

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) description of *Reflexive* Thematic Analysis. In doing so, the general aim of the analysis was to ensure the principles and procedures appreciated the research team's subjectivity through 'deep reflection on, and engagement with, data' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.593). Taken as such, our findings are not merely 'what there is', but are the outcome of the 'relationships' between researcher(s) and researched. The overall goal, then, was not to assign data to particular 'domain summaries', which may share a topic but not necessarily shared meaning, but to co-construct 'patterns of shared meaning [themes], underpinned by a central meaning-concept' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). In order to do so, the procedure followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) original description, moving from familiarity towards writing up through a rigorous process of arriving at some inter-subjective agreement between codes (i.e., the unit or tool for analysis) and themes (i.e., the patterns or combinations of meaning). This recursive process recognised how the context, the researchers' roles, students' roles, and teaching content intertwined to co-construct the experiences explored; for example, the competing interpretations of how mentors and mentees came to understand their respective roles over the course of the module. What made this procedure reflexive, then, was the continual revisiting and challenging of assumptions between the research team; what Berger (2015) described as laying bare our associations. We did this by recording all data analysis discussions so that the research team could review the

codes and developing themes, but also, to scrutinise our competing assumptions, explanations, and ‘naïve curiosity’ within the project. Rather than claiming absolute validity or reliability between codes or themes, such a procedure is in keeping with Braun et al.’s (2018) description of a cross-examination of ideas, particularly between semantic and latent conceptualisations, that focused on not only the actual words spoken, but also deeper, implicit meaning.

## **Results**

The principal aim of this study was to examine the developmental experiences of mentors (and mentees) while participating in a mentoring programme and, by doing so explore *how*, over the course of the module, mentors and mentees were able to operationalise their role within the coaching context. The various extracts presented were the result of how the mentors and mentees managed the interrelationships between mentoring, context, and module design. In terms of structure, the first theme highlights the initial practices of mentors in relation to understanding the context in which the mentoring took place. The second theme reveals the relationality of *how* mentors and mentees negotiated their shifting identities and roles. The final theme shares the participants’ perceptions of mentoring content.

### ***Initiating ‘meaningful’ mentoring: ‘Finding their feet’***

The experiences of the mentors and coaches presented below reflected the underlying uncertainty and insecurity over what *should* be done. Although such ‘insecurity’ resonated with Bailey et al.’s (2019) call for mentors to manage an ‘element of disequilibrium’ that is conducive for coach learning, the insecurity participants reported resided in both understanding and actively contributing to the pedagogical context (i.e., the respective modules). This was reflected in the first instance where both the mentors and mentees recognised the ill-defined, idiosyncratic, and often misconceived purpose of mentoring: James (mentor) noted: ‘I didn’t

know anything about it [mentoring]. I knew what mentoring was, as a thing, as an idea, but I didn't have an opinion on it, I'd never really experienced it'. Furthermore, Irvin (mentor) said: 'I couldn't say how I would enact my role as a mentor before and, in previous seminars, everything was theoretical'.

Additionally, while mentoring was initially positioned within the module as acting in the capacity of a 'more capable other' (Vygotsky, 1987), the mentors and mentees' roles and identities within the learning context were contested and negotiated. The first meeting between mentor and mentees, then, acted as a 'status meeting'; that is, an initial assessment and application of the mentoring arrangements. For Alys, a mentee, mentoring was described as a 'strong word' that should not just be 'thrown out there'. Thus, the responsibilities of the respective participants were contingent on how the mentoring arrangements were defined. The capacity of mentoring was therefore not dependent upon a pedagogical assessment (i.e., ability, or course content), but a realisation of the 'space' mentoring occupied within the learning context. The function of the first 'status meeting', then, involved the struggles of the participants to establish some consensus in their respective role(s). For example, Adam (mentor) described the specific concerns involved between participants to generate 'buy-in':

I had the idea that we would develop them as a person, as a student... holistically, rather than just coaching... I spoke to them [mentees] about their Moodle and things like that – "I've helped you, so you can help me later on" sort of thing.

However, initiating sustained and meaningful practice was not a linear alignment between the mentor and mentee regarding the function, roles, and expectations. For example, Liam (mentor) stated:

I think my process was slowed down by that first meeting, so I came out worried and it put them – not put them off, but it gave them the impression that "he doesn't know what he's doing". It was clear you don't have only one type of mentor.

Any preconceived idea of ‘defined’ or ‘types’ of mentors was quickly replaced with assessing how a meaningful relationship could be achieved. Indeed, while the relationship was underpinned by learning and support, Kirsty (mentee) described the importance of recognising the expectations between mentor and mentee:

My mentor tried to be a bit jokey, but came across more childish! His demeanour was a bit more ‘laddy’... it wasn’t like he didn’t care, it was like he was trying to be more of a mate, but ‘down for having a drink’ kind of mate, rather than ‘I want to be your mate for doing work’.

Importantly, then, the mentors and mentees’ understanding of the ‘mentoring relationship’ was not only related to pedagogy (i.e., ‘learning incidents’ or ‘content’), but also recognising the establishment of functioning roles and identities that would ‘allow’ for subsequent learning interactions. In this way, a misrecognition to combine the social expectations resulted in the mentors and mentees disengaging with the mentoring experience; for as Kirsty explained, her mentor’s initial ‘status meeting’ negatively impacted upon her perception of the mentor’s roles and responsibilities. In the following section, we build upon this analysis to show how crucial the development of reflexivity among participants was within the mentoring programme.

### ***The relationality of mentoring***

Building upon the initial ‘status meetings’ described above, the mentors and mentees were required to define how, in relation to the module and learning expectations, mentoring would function; to set some boundaries on the mentoring programme. What the participants were learning in the context, then, was not directly related to the knowledge and understanding of coaching practice, but how to manage the ‘insecurity’ of their roles. That is, the mentoring programme required both mentors and mentees to ‘shift’ responsibilities and roles to ensure functioning relationships. Rather than being merely content-driven, such shifting resulted in an insecurity that included the management of learning (i.e., what should I/they be learning?), the

doubt concerning ‘doing’ mentoring (i.e., am I doing this ‘right?’), and becoming a valued mentor/mentee (i.e., what does the other think of me?). The two (sub) sections below present how the participants negotiated their respective participants, context, and coaching practice. Although presented in two parts, the findings should not be considered as discrete sections.

### *Becoming a ‘mentor’*

Throughout the dataset, the mentors described a certain ‘insecurity’ about each mentee and the learning context that was not refined to coaching practice, but rather, managing their respective roles, identities and performances as ‘mentors’. By describing mentoring as ‘insecure’, the mentors recognised the need to shift their identities from a ‘coach’ to ‘become a mentor’. The success of doing so, however, was entangled with each mentor’s conceptualisation of the role and, importantly, how they were able to realise this conceptualisation in relation to their mentees. In this regard, the mentors demonstrated varying awareness of their roles, particularly relating to their insecurity of ‘being’ a mentor, rather than ‘doing’ a mentor. For example, Ryan described the importance of not ‘being another lecturer’. Likewise, Sean described the repercussion of gaining the appropriate ‘buy-in’ by stating, ‘if you don’t connect at the start, then you’re not going to get the mentoring process that you should’.

A failure to achieve alignment between participants within the context inhibited any chances of engaging with potentially more fruitful pedagogic relationships. Mentors were thus required to search for and enact an appropriate characterisation of their role within the learning relationship. For instance, when reciting her initial experiences, Rebecca (mentee) described her dissatisfaction with the espoused mentoring: ‘My first mentor was like, “You can just turn up, it doesn’t matter...it’s only first year; you only need 40% to pass.” Tim and I were sitting there saying, “Is he being serious right now?”’. Such mentoring meetings involved the struggles between learners to negotiate who would assume responsibility for ‘developing’ the coaching practice. In this respect, the subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the perception of mentoring could

be observed. For example, Henry (mentor) described his difficulty ‘responding’ to mentees: ‘I wanted to start talking about these different theories. I’d be like, “Right! I’m going to start having good conversations about coaching!” But then every week I’d just respond to what I’d seen in their practical’.

In further uncovering the ‘responsive’ nature mentioned above, Alexandra (mentor) described her frustrations that ‘I knew what I wanted, but they didn’t know what they wanted’. Consequently, while recognising the context framed the mentoring conversations (i.e., student-coaches, familiar experiences, more knowledgeable others, module learning outcomes), the successfulness of the mentoring resided in overcoming the disparity between the mentors ‘realising’ their role and ‘doing’ their role. The following quotes captured this developing reflexive awareness among some mentoring relationships:

Sean (mentor): It’s about finding a balance between being supportive so you can challenge them [mentees] and then being too much of a mate... Supportive enough so that they can take risks, but they also respect you and they take mentoring seriously.

Lucy (mentee): He [mentor] wanted to sit down and speak to me... He actually wanted to be there to help me, instead of just turning up and saying, “You’ve got to do this because it’s for progression”. He wanted to be there to help you.

In this way, the differences in *shifting* of mentors was relational to the mentees enacting mentoring with, rather than on, the coaches. Thus, the next section builds upon this analysis by considering the required consensus between the learners to construct mentoring.

### *Becoming a ‘coach’*

The complexity of the mentors’ struggle to ‘become’ a mentor was further muddied by the required ‘shift’ in the identities of the mentees to ‘become’ coaches. In this regard, while searching for a coherent characterisation of mentoring, one mentor noted, ‘at every meeting we had, it was as if they [mentees] couldn’t get away quickly enough’ (Liam). Here, a feature of

‘becoming a mentor’ required a reflexive awareness of the mentees’ relationship to that very characterisation; that is, the mentors were required to move (some) students to ‘become’ coaches (mentees); to ‘act’ like coaches and be ‘open’ to the idea of support. For example, Alexandra (mentor) recited the following scenario:

Every time I observed my mentee, she took the assistant coach role essentially. I said, “Look, try to take the lead; try and take some responsibility; maybe introduce the session and get a bit more hands-on”. It was an important step.

On the one hand, the learning that took place within the context related to both mentors and mentees searching for authentic learning experiences ‘about’ coaching (i.e., the participants’ behaviours and learning). Yet, on the other hand, the crucial development for both mentors and mentees related to generating a reflexive awareness of their roles. Indeed, for Rebecca (mentee introduced earlier), the disparity between the ‘expected’ role of the mentor and the ‘actual’ role-played illustrated a ‘vulnerability’ involved in the mentoring programme; that is, a willingness to ‘expose’ their coaching practice to a peer in readiness for critique:

He missed the first week then just came up to me and said, “I’m your mentor”. I was like “OK, thanks”. He said, “Enjoy the rest of your session and I’ll probably see you around”. I was like “Fuck you!”

A failure to ensure credibility on behalf of Rebecca’s mentor lead her to find a ‘new’ mentor. For Rebecca, then, any vulnerability to engage in the mentoring was not only bound to generating meaningful learning, but aligning credible mentor/mentee expectations and performances.

Further building upon this disparity between the mentees’ perceptions of mentoring, the negotiated nature of the content added to the ambiguity of the mentors’ task. Consequently, it is imperative to note that mentees, despite being recognised as (potentially) having ‘less experience’, were not passive recipients of the content. Rather, in the process of negotiating



their role 'with' the mentor, were also negotiating the contested nature of 'what' content they were exposed to (a topic explored further in the final theme):

Tim (mentee): I've come back to it so many times with my mentor, "How do I deal with that [misbehaving] kid?" My sister teaches at a really poor state school, and she's all about opportunity. She spends time with the kids who are struggling...even potentially more focused on the kids who aren't working as well as the other kids... But my mentor was just like, "You need to just leave him alone". I thought, "Whoa! That's just not fair". ...But then again, I sort of understood that I'd focus on that one person and that's not necessarily being fair to the group.

In addition to the contested characterisation of mentoring, and how this was 'done' by coaches, the experiences of the participants included the varying interpretations of 'what' mentoring knowledge was credible.

### ***Putting 'mentoring' to work***

What has been presented so far has focused on *how* the participants were able (or unable) to generate consensus amidst the mentoring relationship. Such practices also required the mentors to balance their pedagogic relationships concerning content found in the mentee's module, content in their respective module, and managing the pastoral relationships. This combination was espoused in the following mentor's quote, who attempted to challenge the learner while supporting them as a fellow student-coach:

James (mentor): For Sara, she was absolutely fine, so for her to get that extra challenge, it was "Right, I probably need to start talking to her about theory". So I think I moved from being much more like "OK, I've got this curriculum to cover" to being "What do they actually need in these instances?"

Yet, despite Harry's recognition of 'challenge', among the mentors was a common belief to search for the 'right' way. That is, the mentors often described mentoring (and learning) to be

a 'skill': 'responsive skills'; 'initiatory skills'. The consequence of this assumption was that, while the mentors were searching for authentic learning experiences, the learners often relied on searching for common ground to generate conversation about practice. For example, a concrete 'session plan' became an artefact of the relationship; that is, the documented session plan allowed the mentors to pursue 'responsive skills' and 'initiatory skills' concerning mentoring practice. In this way, the mentors could 'hook' themselves into the relationship to find some common ground that would be conducive to more specific pedagogical discussions. However, the consequence of this attitude was, at times, a functional conceptualisation of mentoring content. For instance, Adam, a mentor, described the process as, 'What are the quick fixes? What can we talk about? Right, there's not much connection between all their activities, so let's talk about learning outcomes'. Similarly, the following quote captures Henry's (mentor) description of 'effective' coaching:

I was helping based more upon practical stuff, like positioning, organisation... like cones, bibs, structured sessions, utilising the space and stuff like how they speak, where they speak, are they organised as a group, all the things they don't necessarily think of, but make that session that bit more effective and smooth.

Although Adam and Henry's descriptions resonated with playing a role in the process of the mentees' (self) identification with coaching (i.e., feeling and behaving like a coach; becoming a coach), this was based upon assumptions of 'correct', 'right' and 'what works' coaching processes. Indeed, whilst the mentors were positioned as 'more capable others', they were less inclined to engage with contested conversations that challenged, progressed, and emancipated practice. Such assumptions were encapsulated in Rian's (mentor) explanation that, observation 'is where you get most of your information from; it's those physical tells when somebody's a little bit stuck. Those are the kind of things when you can visibly see'. Thus, despite the mentors accepting their roles as negotiated and relational, the same assumptions were not afforded to the content of their mentoring conversations until after the official mentoring programme had

ceased. Here, Tim (mentee) illustrated this point when describing a retrospective realisation of how theory connected to his practice (and mentoring experience):

It took me a while to realise it [module content] actually relates to so much. I think it would have made my coaching so much better if I'd thought about that from the start... I would have had a better understanding of them towards the end if I had started on them earlier.

## **Discussion**

From the outset of the mentoring programme, both mentors and mentees negotiated the multiple and often competing roles inherent in coaching (Blackett et al., 2020). Although the findings resonate with previous literature depicting mentoring as a relational, complex and situated activity (e.g., Griffiths & Armour, 2012; Leeder & Cushion, 2019; Sawiuk et al., 2017, 2018), rather than assuming experience as a prerequisite for coaches to mentor, the coaches found themselves managing their ideal expectations and identities against the reality of mixed agendas and values. In order to theorise the negotiations of mentors and mentees arising from this context, we draw specifically upon Goffman's (1981) writings on 'footing' and Crossley's (1996) work on inter-subjectivity. The discussion concludes by placing such experiences within the wider context of socialisation and peer culture.

According to Cushion et al. (2003), mentors are integral to socialising coaches into the respective context. A point recently reiterated through various studies of mentors' dispositions (e.g., Leeder & Cushion, 2019), mentors as mediators of the organisations (e.g., Zehrtner & McMahon, 2014), and consequently, mentoring leading to a form of social control (e.g., Sawiuk et al., 2018). While such studies have been vital to understand the power(full) and symbolic relations woven into the mentoring context, the findings from this study illustrated how students were shocked by the insecurity and uncertainty of their roles. On the one hand, this resonated with Bailey et al.'s (2019) claim that insecurity is a catalyst for subsequent

learning; that is, the mentors recognised the need to ‘respond’ and ‘initiate’ new content for their respective coaches. Yet, on the other hand, the insecurity mentors (and mentees) experienced concerned ‘doing’ mentoring right; that is, negotiating an agreeable arrangement with the student-coaches that would fulfil the purposes of the mentoring relationship. Such results resonate with Gomes et al.’s (2018) assertion that, despite the espoused benefits of ‘authentic’ workplace learning, what students often encounter are the entrenched ‘institutionalised texts’ of the workplace.

From this perspective, Goffman’s (1981) writing on ‘footing’, specifically the ‘participation framework’, can help to theorise the experiences of the students. Extending from his 1974 writings on frame analysis, Goffman (1981) referred to footing when describing how individuals shift (or alter) the alignment between one another within social interaction; that is, where individuals ‘figuratively’ stand in relation to each other (Wine, 2008). Thus, individuals engage in shifts of footing to affect their status, roles and social distance, which came to be known as ‘participation status’ (Goffman, 1981, p. 137). Despite the concept originally being used to describe focused interactions, its character can be used to observe how Rebecca aligned to the mentoring relationship; that is, the fleeting comment of the mentor to embed her status as a ‘first year’ failed to extend the enactment of their wider ‘mentoring’ role (i.e., a genuine learner interested in coaching practice). In this regard, Goffman (1981) recognised that even minor shifts in statuses could have considerable consequences to conversation. For Rebecca, then, the (mis)alignment with her mentor had an enduring impact, transforming the relationship, and even whole events (i.e., finding a ‘new’ mentor). Consequently, in presenting Goffman’s (1981) description of the footing, the dialogic organisation between mentor and mentee was central to the organisation of the mentoring relationship.

Despite the module(s) espousing a proposed ‘focused’ participation framework (i.e., the expectations of mentoring), the findings illustrated the fluid negotiation of how learners understood (and enacted) their respective roles. In this regard, the mentors and mentees were

required to negotiate the necessary shifts in footing (i.e., their figurative position in relation to each other) to arrive at some form of alignment (i.e., accomplishing some agreement of their roles). The experiences of mentoring therefore necessitated the students engaged with a form of intersubjective reflexivity. For, as Crossley (1996, p.55) described, the mentors and mentees were continually ‘turning back upon themselves (through time)’ to view themselves as another would view them (i.e., the mentor / mentee). Rather than experience functional classifications of mentors (see Mullen & Klimaitis, 2019), the idea of achieving clarity in their role was manifest in the wrestle between various identities, such as being another ‘lecturer’ in Ryan’s case, or ‘more of a mate’ for Kirsty. This is not to claim the mentors (and mentees) were merely subject to the mentoring relationship, but rather, the findings highlighted the relationality of how the mentors and mentees, over the course of mentoring interactions, developed a way of ‘handling’ each other in relation to the *structures/ institution* (e.g., HE or NGB setting). That is, the participants were in a continuous struggle to (reflexively) establish common ground that would allow for pedagogical discussions about coaching, which, paradoxically, was the learning that was taking place when ‘putting mentoring to work’. Collectively, then, the idea of ‘becoming’ emphasised the need for mentors and mentees to play an active role in deciding, however tacitly, how each would shape the learning experience and negotiate some agreement about the conventions of the mentoring contact. For example, Liam inadvertently giving his mentees the impression that ‘he doesn’t know what he’s doing’ constrained his ability to ‘do’ mentoring from that point forwards. He, like the other participants, had to constantly attend to the negotiation of who did what, who knew what, and what was seen as valuable or not in order to work with one another to create a functional/fruitful pedagogical relationship. Therefore, the successfulness of the relationship was dependent upon how the mentors (and mentees) were able to reflexively manage their relations to arrive at a mutual understanding and agreements of the mentoring interactions.

Furthermore, the development of a reflexive awareness reflected the participants' struggles to influence others' practice, which included the stripping away of identities (i.e., to become a mentor), the building up of identities (i.e., to act like a coach), and alignment between individual's ideas and practices (i.e., the contested nature of practice). Drawing upon Goffman (1963), the participants were therefore continually negotiating how to 'pass' as knowledgeable and legitimise their role(s). This point was encapsulated in how the mentors used the session plans as an 'artefact' to help them carry out their role(s). Indeed, this superficial 'artefact' of coaching practice was consistently used to provide mentors and mentees a sense of security; in the words of Haas and Shafir (1977), such actions provided a 'cloak of competence' to legitimise their knowledgeability. The problem, however, lies in mentoring practices adhering to an overly superficial reliance upon functional features of coaching that, not only ignore the complexity of coaching (i.e., power, micro-politics, learning), but underplay the entanglements between the mentor, mentee, practical experience, and theoretical content required to generate meaningful mentoring practice (i.e., aligning individuals and ideas).

Although we recognise the idea of 'becoming' in learning has been presented previously (e.g., Hodkinson et al., 2008; Leeder et al., 2019), the analysis helps understand how the mentors and mentees entered 'a social nexus and, through interaction with others, established social understandings that become fundamental social knowledge on which they continually build' (Corsaro, 1992, p.161). From this perspective, the analysis contributes to the socialisation literature by examining the relentlessly social negotiations required of mentors to perform their roles as individual, collective and interpretive processes (Everitt & Tefft, 2018). Here, following Becker et al.'s (1961) explanation of how newcomers are shaped and defined by interaction and group culture, the mentors and mentees' reflexivity to 'become' and enact their roles was both enabled and constrained by the social structures. In this way, viewed as a productive-reproductive process of reorganising knowledge and shared understanding, mentoring must appreciate the developmental relationality involved in co-constructing

meaningful pedagogic relationships (i.e., the desired culture of mentoring) from which to engage in mentoring practice (Hodkinson et al., 2008).

### **Concluding thoughts and recommendations**

Constructed from the repeated focus group interviews with mentors and mentees, the analysis presented has moved beyond a dual relationship between learners towards understanding ‘how’ mentoring is a dynamic relationship between contextual nuances, personal identities and the influence of relevant structures (e.g., HE course, profession of mentoring and coaching). The findings from this study provide mentors, mentees, and organising bodies a critical discussion about how mentors and mentees ‘become’; that is, the stripping away, wiping away, and (re)building of roles that enable (and inhibit) learning. In this regard, while we recognise the critiques of coach development in HE (e.g., Lyle, 2018), we claim the findings have value beyond the context under study (see Passmore et al., 2016). It is therefore hoped that the ambivalent experiences described in this study evidence the importance of understanding the ‘social’ ties, relationships, and roles that impinge upon to the pedagogical context that underpins mentoring. Future research across coach development and learning should strive to appreciate the intricacies of the socio-pedagogic nature inherent to coaching and mentoring.

From this perspective, the contribution sheds light on ‘the riches of the micro world where the immediacy or ‘thisness’ of coaching takes place’ (Jones, 2019, p. 364). Thus, in making the educational practices of mentors and mentees explicit, a number of suggestive questions are raised that mentors, mentees, and organisations might find helpful to consider. For instance, organisations preparing to construct meaningful mentoring programmes must encourage both *mentors* and *mentees* to critically consider their role(s) and work(ing) relations within their respective context. Developing reflexive capabilities would explore questions akin to: ‘Who is the mentee to me and who am I to them?’; ‘What assumptions do I have about what the mentee needs?’; ‘Who do I/they need to ‘be’ so that we can engage in meaningful practice?’

and ‘What is going to influence the unfolding mentoring/coaching practice?’ Similarly, mentee questions include: ‘Who is this mentor to me’; ‘Who am I to the mentor’; ‘What insecurities do I have about my coaching practice?’ and ‘How can this person help with my learning and development as a coach?’ It is therefore proposed that such reflexive understanding can promote meaningful mentoring relationships that are driven by pedagogy, while appreciating the complex and dynamic nature of coaching (Sawiuk et al., 2018; Leeder & Cushion, 2019).

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