

## STARTING PAGE

### Chapter

Coach Education: (Re)conceptualising How Coaches Learn

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Developing the Practical Theorist

### **Abstract**

Research developments within sports coaching have stressed coaches as highly influential actors in shaping, creating and developing athletes' experiences. It is therefore unsurprising to see that coach education and development has been subject to considerable investigation (e.g., Chesterfield, Jones, & Potrac 2010; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Piggott, 2012, 2013; Townsend & Cushion, 2015). This chapter presents a brief insight to this associated literature, specifically concerning the conduct, experiences, and development of coach education. The discussion considers the location of sports coaching research, coach education and higher education provision. In doing so, a case study is presented that illustrates the educational and methodological possibilities for coaches to consider within their professional development. Specific attention will be paid to the future implications for coaches and their associated development in the form of 'action research' as a methodology; of which, the approach is presented as holding the possibility of both 'deconstructing' and 'reconstructing' coaching practice. The argument here draws upon Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac's (2016) recommendations of 'practical theorists' and, by way of example, the chapter concludes by offering the experiences of a Doctoral student engaging in action research as a live case study.

**Keywords:** Coach Education; Coach Development; Practical Theorist; Doctorate in Sports Coaching.

### **Coach Education: Learning to be a Practical Theorist**

In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the examination of coach education (e.g., Chesterfield et al., 2010; Adams, Copley, & Mullens, 2016; Alison et al., 2016). This chapter presents a brief insight into this literature, specifically concerning the conduct, experiences, and development of coach education. The principal purpose is to further locate sports coaching as a discipline of study and, in doing so, critically review coach education and development. Specific attention will be paid to the developmental principles and methodological possibilities of postgraduate education for coaches in the form of a case study. In terms of the chapter's structure, the opening section provides a brief overview and insight into the conceptual and empirical developments within coach education literature. Following this, the chapter attempts to locate the discipline of sports coaching before presenting a case study of an existing doctoral programme that stands as a complementary 'pathway' to coach accreditation. The recommendations discussed are underpinned by Cassidy et al., (2016) assertion of coaches as 'practical theorists' and the associated value of 'action research' as a methodology. The chapter concludes by offering the experiences of a student engaging in the doctoral programme as a live case study.

### **Coach Education: Conceptual and Empirical Developments**

Research developments within sports coaching have highlighted coaches as highly influential actors in shaping, creating and developing athletes' experiences. It is therefore unsurprising to see coach education and development has been subject to considerable investigation (e.g., Chesterfield et al., 2010; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Piggott, 2012, 2013; Townsend & Cushion, 2015). According to Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac (2006), the learning experiences of coaches can be categorised as being formal, non-formal, and informal. Formal learning has been defined as taking place in an "institutionalised, chronologically graded and

hierarchically structured education system” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). Coach education programmes resemble these formal situations, occurring only in short blocks at a time with significant months or years in between teaching sessions (Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Neville, 2001). To date, the academic attention towards coach education has concerned preparing coaches through these educational structures (e.g., Chesterfield et al., 2010).

Building upon this line of inquiry, Piggott (2013) described three fundamental assertions drawn from this (growing) body of literature: (1) coach education has been synonymously used with formal education; (2) coach education is a sub-category of coach learning and; (3) coach learning is a sub-category of coach development. Despite consensus that the education of coaches is a critical component, Cushion and colleagues have previously criticised the effectiveness of formal learning on these courses as ranging from genuine ‘education’ to ‘indoctrination’ (Cushion et al., 2010). The accusation, according to Nelson et al. (2006), is that National Governing Bodies (NGB’s) hold some flawed assumptions about coaches and coaching which position the courses towards ‘indoctrination’ (Piggott, 2012).

From this perspective, despite limited critical analysis, coach education courses have typically operated from competency-based assessment. Yet, there remains no evidence to directly link coach education certification (accreditation) to coaching competency, suggesting the competencies achieved by coaches cannot be attributed to the courses on offer. Thus, despite recognising an exposure to sports science (e.g., physiology, biomechanics) and sports specific content, coaches have tended to value their informal ‘in-the-field’ experiences (Adams et al., 2016). Similarly, Townsend and Cushion’s (2015) interrogation of elite cricket’s haphazard culture illustrated a tension between the highly individualised legitimised knowledge and the prescribed body of knowledge provided in cricket coach education. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s work, the scholars identified a gap in our understanding of the power-ridden, socially political, and constructed reality of coach education (Townsend &

Cushion, 2015). Such a finding resonates with Chesterfield et al., (2010) description of the ‘studentship’ (Graber, 1991) and ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959) that coaches engage in to satisfy course expectations. In doing so, the content has thus been accused of largely ignoring the pedagogical and socio-cultural aspects relating to the coach’s role (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009). Such attainment of qualifications has been further problematised by Blackett, Evans, and Piggott (2015) study of sporting directors’ perception of coaches’ dispositions, coaching knowledge and ability to maintain respect. Here, recruitment of ‘fast-tracked’ head coaches often occurred earlier in the coaches’ playing careers, resulting in some candidates generating more cultural and symbolic capital, and consequently, positioned more favourable for the positions. The nepotism illustrated in this paper further adds to the concerns of reproducing taken-for-granted bodies of knowledge, valorising playing styles as ‘coaching’, and the pitfalls of mere accreditation.

However, in spite of such criticisms levelled at coach education, Jones and Allison’s (2014) examination of candidates’ experiences on an elite professional preparation programme identified that periodic course gatherings provided participants with a ‘community of security’. The findings proposed that the value of the course was not in developing competencies, but rather, to provide coaches refuge from their everyday workplace anxieties. Such a finding echoed previous work calling for more peer-based learning opportunities to better support coaches; for example, problem-based learning (Jones & Turner, 2006); Communities of practice (Culver & Trudel, 2008); and Theory-to-practice (Jones, Morgan, & Harris, 2012). In doing so, many professional development programmes have responded to accusations of ‘decontextualized’ and ‘divorced’ knowledge by including ‘in-situ’ mentoring programmes across their accreditation (e.g., The Football Association).

Taking lead from nursing, education, and business, Jones, Harris, and Miles (2009) reviewed the literature concerning the formalised role of mentoring. A subsequent body of

research has emerged placing an emphasis on the role and value of the coach educator, particularly relating to ‘mentoring’ as an opportunity to challenge, legitimise, and recreate coaching practices. Indeed, Adams et al. (2016) recommended that, alongside reflective practice, mentoring can better combine the informal with the formal learning (i.e., seminar course delivery) on such courses. The proposed justification underpinning mentoring has been to enhance the skills, knowledge, and understanding of employees at all levels through a “formalised process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role” (Roberts, 2000, p. 162). Yet, despite the ostensible merits, Jones et al. (2009) identified several potential pitfalls and unfounded claims to mentoring. Such criticisms included: (1) an impartial picture of what ‘tends’ to happen and what potentially ‘could’ happen; (2) overly simplistic accounts of the mentor-mentee relationship that ignores the relationality of pedagogic interactions (e.g., Cushion et al., 2017); and finally (3) an anaemic analysis of the power dynamics, legitimation and conflict the participants must negotiate to ‘buy-in’.

In an attempt to address such pitfalls, Potrac (2016) investigated the subjective experiences of mentors working within The FA Grassroots Club Mentor Programme. The findings from the project highlighted the tensions and challenges mentors faced and further alluded to the contested nature of club football settings. Similar to previous research (e.g., Piggott, 2013; Potrac & Jones, 2009; Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, 2015), the mentors were subject to a rite of passage that required they ‘prove’ their knowledge and skills. In doing so, the mentors described the need to understand the ‘person’ they were working with, which often lead to persistent difficulties in ‘shifting’ the coaching beliefs and practices. As such, Potrac’s (2016) recommendations for coach education included a more (critical) consideration of coaches, coach educators, mentors and significant others’ network of interrelationships.

Building upon this line of inquiry, Cushion et al. (2017) explored the myriad of power relations and interactions of coach educators working in clubs and with academy managers. The argument here asserted that coaching practice is situationally tied to both the emergent and historically bound practices of coaches and thus, the social structures that educators are subject to must be examined (see Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007). The subsequent findings from the study placed coach educators as structured by, and structuring of, the context they worked within. Indeed, the coach educators' practice and learning required negotiation and legitimation within each 'field of struggle', resulting in a controlled and maintained body of knowledge (Cushion et al., 2017). Coach educators thus remained central to influencing and reshaping the protected language, rhetoric and ideology of coach education.

The value of such work has illuminated the dispositions and assumptions underpinning coach education and the experiences of coach educators. However, despite appropriate criticism, to tarnish all coach education as 'divorced from reality' would be an injustice to the courses, with coaches often citing particular elements as useful (e.g., Jones & Allison, 2014). For, as Piggott (2012) identified, some smaller NGBs have been cited as generating more meaningful interaction between coaches through task orientations that have been deemed more useful by attendees. For example, McCullick, Belcher, and Schemp (2005) investigated the perceptions of 30 participants (25 course candidates and five coach educators) from a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) coach education course. Here, the findings illustrated that coaches recognised and enjoyed the presence of 'knowledgeable' others as useful and important for their development. Similarly, Leduc, Culver, and Werthner (2012) examined coach learning on a formal coach education programme that was grounded in a constructivist approach to learning. Drawing upon Jarvis (2006, 2007, 2009) and Moon's (2001) theoretical frameworks, the authors reaffirmed the difficulties coach education faces in moving the beliefs and practices of coaches. On one hand, some coaches were able to engage with the material,

resulting in cognitive, emotive and practical changes. While, on the other hand, some participants cited confidence, time and an unease to change as explanations for limited engagement. The concerns raised here resonate with the work of Partington and Cushion (2012), who observed an ‘epistemological gap’ between coaches’ knowledge, action and explanations.

The literature highlighted and considered thus far has shed light on the contemporary issues raised within coach education literature (and some wider). By way of answering some of the prominent issues within coach education, Allison, Abraham, and Cale (2016) presented The Football Association’s (FA) commitment to supporting the coach developer, educator and consequently coaches: better coaches; better players. Here, Allison’s (2016) introduction provides a refreshing recognition of, not just traditional ‘functional’ and ‘applied’ research that dominates courses, as reported by Adams et al. (2016), but knowledge that grapples with the ‘complexity’ of coaching; innovative learning and assessment that values theory and practice. Valuing the former to inform the latter, the development of better synergies between NGBs and Higher Education (HE), therefore, provides the platform for developing coaches as ‘practical theorists’ (Cassidy et al., 2016). That is, demanding that coaches deliberately think about their values, beliefs, dispositions, objectives and intentions as a precursor to action (Flyvberg, 2001).

However, the implication of this argument for coach education is twofold. Firstly, the initial idea raises concerns about the depth and scope of sports coaching research more generally, and to what coaches on education courses are currently exposed (e.g., Adams et al., 2016). Questions akin to: What is defined as relevant sports coaching ‘knowledge’? Where do coaches go for ‘new’ knowledge? And, ‘what’ do coaches find? Fundamental to this assertion, then, is sports coaching research must aim to generate clear, considerate and critical ideas that resonate with the coaches’ experiences. Indeed, placing the emphasis on ‘insightful’ research,



Jones (2019) recognised the importance of ‘quality’ research that both informs and enhances the work of sports coaches, and thus, avoiding “valuable knowledge being left on the table” (p. 157). Consequently, rather than solely taking issue with the ‘levelness’ of coach education, the second interrelated implication of this argument relates to debating the purpose and integration of such (often contested) coaching knowledge. That is, paying attention to the relationship between coaches, HE courses, coach education and industry expectations. Here, in keeping with Jones (2019), we take issue with the creep of ‘accreditation’ in HE courses, by calling for coach education and development to embrace the spirit of ‘practical theorists’; an argument centred on working with the coach and their way of ‘being’. Therefore, rather than viewed as parallel, embedded or even alternative, the essence of educating coaches lies in developing a ‘quality of mind’ that holds the potential to combat the ‘academic vs. practitioner’ debate; an argument more recently reproduced by Ewing (2019). In turn, better preparing coaches to manage their everyday complexities, make informed (and critical) judgments on the knowledge they are exposed to, and mapping a pathway grounded in the experiences for coaches to genuinely develop.

In terms of the remainder of this Chapter, while it is hoped the content stimulates professional practitioners, researchers and coaches to carefully examine their role in educating coaches, the purpose stretches beyond critical ‘discussion’. The subsequent sections focus on locating and presenting a doctoral programme that encapsulates the role of combining theory and practice to develop sports coaches as ‘practical theorists’. Attempting to address the concerns above, the course is presented as an example of illuminating how coaching research can be coupled with increasing use and exploitation in practice. Here, the Doctorate in Sports Coaching (DSC) was designed as a high-level, leading-edge knowledge and skills training for coaches ‘in-the-field’ and ‘on-the-ground’. The content outlined below stands as a ‘live’ example that combines the academic study of coaching (i.e., research informed practice),

pedagogy (i.e., consideration of learning and teaching) and the ‘practice’ of coaches (i.e., ‘on-the-field’ activity). Viewing these structures as interconnected, rather than separate entities, the chapter presents ‘action research’ as a design that holds the potential to complement both the ‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ of coaching; of challenging the taken-for-granted and evolving the processes and practices of coaches’ work.

### **Locating Sports Coaching: Research and Education**

Despite coach education aiming to be developmental, such courses are often criticised for being detached from the reality of coaching practice and of failing to develop new and progressive knowledge for practitioners (Jones & Turner, 2006). Coaches’ learning, in these situations, are restricted by having to engage with existing knowledge and limited opportunities to interact in critical thought and subsequent depth of learning. Notwithstanding the acknowledgment by many researchers and practitioners that coaching is a complex process (Cassidy et al., 2016), the notion that at the heart of coaching lies mechanical reduction and sequential ‘models’ continues to exist (e.g. Lyle & Cushion, 2016; Robinson, 2014). This persistence to strive for linear functionality has been evident throughout coach education programmes where coaching ‘toolkits’ and ‘effective’ practice models are prevalent (Piggott, 2012). Thus, prior to presenting the practical case study, it is our intention to outline our ontological (i.e., assumptions concerning nature of reality) and epistemological (i.e., assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge) position for sport coaching. The purpose here is underpinned by Jones’ (2019) consideration for quality research that can inform coaching practice, and the subsequent education of coaches.

In line with Jones, Edwards, and Filho (2016) we locate coaching within the interpretivist and critical paradigms, guided by a relativist and a subjective, interactive epistemology. Viewed from this perspective coaching knowledge cannot be taught a priori

(Flyvbjerg et al., 2012) and develops principally through in-depth familiarity with context, and shared understandings of practice. In these settings, the coaching self is not an independent and self-contained individual but is located firmly within social and cultural arrangements (e.g. Jones et al., 2016; Santos, Jones, & Mesquita, 2013). This allows for the pursuit of an interpretive and critical agenda whilst not denying the existence of an agreed target goal. As highlighted by Jones et al. (2016) this perspective aims to move beyond critiques of modelling and rationality as related to coaching and to present a practical epistemological reality.

As alluded to previously, positioning coaching in such a way provides a direction for educating and developing coaches as ‘practical theorists’ whereby cutting-edge content is made relevant, accessible, and can be immediately integrated into practice (Cassidy et al., 2016). This is an approach focused on the transformative acts of coaches; creating clear ideas for coaches to think with as opposed to being firm directives (Jones, 2019). As an example, we present the ‘Doctorate in Sports Coaching’ as a way of fostering the notion of ‘practical theorist’ to educate coaches. The point made here is not to be considered as a recommendation that all coaches must achieve level eight qualifications to practice, but rather, that coach education (and development) structures should harness the sentiment of working with the coach and their way of ‘being’; informed and underpinned by high-quality ‘coaching’ research.

### **Practical implications: Doctorate in Sports Coaching (DSC)**

The development of the DSC in 2016 arose from a demand for high-level, leading-edge knowledge and skills training, coupled with increasing the use and exploitation of coaching research in practice. In line with the first UKCGE Report on ‘Professional Doctorates’ (Hoddell, Street, Deborah, & Wildblood, 2002), the DSC qualification can be defined as;

A programme of advanced study and research which, whilst satisfying the University criteria for the award of a doctorate, is designed to meet the specific needs of a professional group external to the University, and which develops the capability of individuals to work within a professional context (ibid, p. 62).

Consequently, the DSC intends to improve the relevance of postgraduate degrees to the profession of sports coaching. In doing so, the programme aims to develop ‘practical theorists’ with an appreciation of the symbiotic and synergetic relationship between theory and practice. Echoing the words of Macdonald et al. (2002, p. 149) it seeks to take theory “off the table and into the field” providing a deeper critical understanding of coaching and a more realistic learning programme for coaches that reflects the complexity of practice (Jones Potrac, Cushion, & Ronglan, 2011). The distinct emphasis lies in nurturing further the direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Participants are required to become ‘practical theorists’ through rejecting the traditional distinction between academic and practitioner knowledge (Cassidy et al., 2016). Hence, coaches develop themselves through possessing considerable knowledge of theory or theories and cultivating the courage to experiment with these ideas within their own coaching practice. In line with the recommendations of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the purpose is to develop individuals’ “professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge” (QAA, 2008, p. 25). It offers a unique opportunity for professional and career enhancement in sports coaching through critical analysis and innovative practice.

In terms of design, the overall structure of the DSC programme consists of three elements: taught modules, a professional development report, and research project. The DSC starts with completion of a taught component comprising of four compulsory modules designed

to (1) generate critical thought and creativity akin to transformative learning, and (2) to encourage such insights' application to practice. Running alongside the taught component students complete a 'professional development report' where participants' engage in critique and interpretation of 'evidence informed' professional practice to inform continuing development. Following the completion of both these elements, students conduct a research project where they are strongly encouraged to carry out a piece of action research for their study of coaching practice.

An example of the 'theory to practice' aim of the DSC and the consequent development of 'practical theorists' is illustrated within 'The Pedagogical Foundations of Coaching' teaching module. Similar to the use of educational theorist by other coaching scholars (e.g. Jones Thomas, Nunes, & Filho, 2018; Nelson, Groom, & Potrac, 2016), the work of Lev Vygotsky is explored and applied to better understand and inform coaching practice. The module consists of ten three-hour seminars conducted fortnightly over a period of two academic terms of ten weeks. The number of participants each year varies from three to six students dependent on the amount of individuals enrolled on the programme. During the first seminar, the initial focus is on the aims, learning outcomes, assessment procedures and teaching method. In the second part, a Vygotskian concept is introduced to students, and they are set a task of considering this idea in relation to their coaching practice and to produce a reflective written log by the next seminar. A structured whole class and small group discussion on the implementation into practice of the concept given in the first session forms the first half of the second seminar. During the second half of the seminar, students are presented with the next Vygotskian concept and the process continues as in the previous class. The remainder of the seminars in the module follow this fortnightly pattern covering Vygotskian concepts, discussions groups, and student presentations, with a final session to formally evaluate the unit.

The Vygotskian concepts given to students on the module include an introduction to cultural historical theory, mediation, psychological tools, conceptual formation, higher mental functions, zone of proximal development, more capable other and perezhivane. Students engage, for example, with Vygotsky's dialectical ideas on concept formation (Vygotsky, 1987) in their coaching practice, which he considered to result from an interaction between everyday (spontaneous) concepts and formal scientific ones. Vygotsky proposed this dialectical view of reality to overcome a traditional Cartesian dualism vision (Liu & Matthews, 2005). He focused on combining opposing views into a continuous whole to enhance the development of new knowledge and understanding. For students on the DSC this means acknowledging that understanding results from experience of direct interaction with the environment (e.g. informal learning); alongside knowing mediated by given scientific concepts (Jones et al., 2018). In this way, scientific concepts mediate individual thoughts, providing structure to everyday thinking and problem solving (Vygotsky, 1987). Hence, knowledge given (i.e. scientific concepts) is gradually embedded in everyday coaching practice and vice versa (Jones et al., 2018).

Through challenging the taken-for-granted practices of coaches, then, the DSC holds the promise to enhance the processes and practices of coaching enabling sports coaching education to take a step forward as a whole. As research has recently established, the main knowledge source of both novice and experienced coaches are interactive experiences within practical coaching contexts (Chesterfield et al., 2010). In this regard, the DSC adopts (but not exclusively) an early conceptualisation of 'action research' as a research design for coaches to combine theory and practice (Carr, 2006). Here, it is proposed that 'action research' holds the potential to complement both the 'deconstruction' and 'reconstruction' of coaching research to support the development of careful, critical and considerate practitioners. In doing so, such an argument moves beyond Alison's (2016) appreciation of research in coach education by attempting to address theory–practice inconsistencies among practitioners.

## **Action Research**

In recent years, there has been a significant growth in the use of action research as a form of inquiry into social and educational issues (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). The introduction of the phrase ‘action research’ is commonly attributed to Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) to describe a way of investigating allowing “the significantly established laws of social life to be tried and tested in practice” (Carr, 2006, p. 423). Lewin is also recognised as the creator of the action research method, which includes a spiral of steps, each composed of “a circle of planning, action and fact finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946, p. 205). In its initial guise, the growth of action research was stifled by the positivistic culture within the social sciences that was prevalent in the United States during the mid-twentieth century (Carr, 2006). By the 1950s the inability of action research to conform to positivistic methodological requirements led to its decline as form of investigation (Sanford, 1970).

The re-emergence of action research as a form of inquiry took place in the context of educational and curriculum investigation in the United Kingdom (UK) during the 1970s (for example, Stenhouse, 1975). Action research in the UK differed from the American version through its adoption of an interpretive stance and its rejection of a positivistic research methodology, shifting attention to the perspectives of social actors (Kemmis, 1988). Through adopting education practice as its focus, action research became an approach whereby “practitioners could test the ‘educational theories’ implicit in their own practice by treating them as experimental hypotheses to be systematically assessed in specific educational contexts” (Carr, 2006, p. 424). This was a step taken to where a pedagogic professional could and should be researching his or her own practice as opposed to the more traditional research-development-diffusion model (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

In the development of our own coach education courses, to ensure critical reflection of social theories in practice, we have drawn on an initial conceptualisation of action research (Carr, 2006). This is an interpretive position whereby students have to make sense of and share their pedagogical experiences (Jones et al., 2012). By encouraging participants to engage with both new knowledge and what they already tacitly know, the main aim is to advance knowledge (Carr, 2006). Students are encouraged to question their own assumptions while also placing importance on critical reflective engagement with new theoretical knowledge in practice. Such an approach upholds several important fundamental characteristics associated with action research. The aim is to generate understanding and knowledge through cycles of action and critical reflection (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). By engagement with recurring iterative and cyclical processes of planning, action and evaluation the students focus on relevant issues in order to produce knowledge that is actionable (Coghlan, 2019). As such, primacy is given to the relational, with individuals involved working collaboratively in seminars and towards creating knowledge in action throughout the cyclical processes (Bradbury, 2015). Within the classroom and on the practice field inter-subjectivity is crucial whereby people continuously interact socially, culturally, and historically within relationships. Acknowledging the interconnection and history of these social structures allows participants to identify and challenge existing patterns while critically considering potential emergent and developmental solutions within their own context (Bradbury, 2015). Knowledge is constructed through transformative action by building on the past, interacting in the present with the aim of shaping the future (Coghlan, 2019). The practical knowing that emerges from relationships within complex emergent systems allows for students to contribute for the self and others. Hence, within action research social action has a practical and emancipatory focus (Bradbury, 2015). Within the next section a case study of an existing doctoral programme, underpinned by this



action research methodology, will be presented; as an example of a complementary pathway to coach accreditation.

### **Key Points**

The principal purpose of this chapter has been to further locate sports coaching as a discipline of study and, in doing so, critically review coach education and development. In questioning the conduct, experiences, and development of coach education, the subsequent issue raised is that of the need to develop coach education courses that reflects the complex socio-political landscape of coaching. Central to this argument is the academic study of coaching, and the associated branch of knowledge, must be viewed as part of, rather than separate to, the (practical) activities (i.e., Academic Vs. Practitioner). Indeed, we have argued that by transforming the representation of coaching (i.e., how coaching is portrayed), we can start to (re)conceptualise what we strive for coaches to learn and manage within their respective contexts. Consequently, taking lead from Flyvberg (2001), Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac's (2016) recommendations of coaches as 'practical theorists' holds the potential to develop coaches that deliberately think about values, beliefs, dispositions, objectives and intentions as a precursor to action. To further bring these key points to life we offer the experiences of a Doctoral student engaging in 'action research' as a case study:

#### ***A Doctorate in Sports Coaching Case Study***

At the age of 31, coaching volleyball has been a defining part of who I am. For 14 years I have been coaching volleyball, from beginners to adults, both male and female squads. Thus, undertaking a degree in sports science (that contained a specialisation in coaching volleyball), and a master's degree focused on pedagogical practice was a logical step to further my education and 'coaching' knowledge. Of course, embodying principles of 'life-long learner'

and ‘continual professional development’, I found some anxiety concerning ‘how’ and ‘where’ to go following MSc study. In addition, I often shared the frustration of coaches that felt the disconnect between academics and coaches, theory and practice, while my frustration to improve my coaching practice was not satisfied by professional development opportunities (such as NGB-led coaching qualifications). I felt ‘beyond’ the professional development I received (level three qualification), and yet, I also found myself criticising those coaches, or ‘theorists’, that preferred to ‘sit at the desk’ rather than join me on the court. I was at a crossroad; I had the skills to learn but not the accessibility or support to engage with ‘new’ material. I was searching for new knowledge that resonated with my practice and beliefs about ‘what’ coaching is.

Looking back, my experiences reflected an episode described by Cassidy et al. (2016) in which a coach demonstrates dissatisfaction with the language employed by a ‘theorist’ whose terminology did not reflect my everyday struggles. This ‘policy guru’, despite an espoused educator, did not share my vocabulary. After many years struggling for ‘new’ knowledge, I decided to undertake the Doctorate in Sports Coaching. While my contribution in this chapter is a first-person account, the purpose is to bring-to-life the connection (and gap) between theory and practice. Specific attention will be paid to the impact that action research had (and still has) in shaping my coaching practices.

As alluded to above, merging the (perceived) gap between theory and practice remains a crucial challenge for educators of coaches; one that mainstream research, higher education institutes and coach education courses are still debating. The major appeal of undertaking the doctoral degree, then, related to the innovative, cyclical nature of the modules. Here, the cycles attempted to interweave theory and practice by introducing one (or several) theoretical concept(s) in a progressive manner that allowed for experimentation in my coaching practice. Unlike a typical research-based doctoral degree, the bouts of theory and practice are followed

by insightful discussions based on the application of theory in our coaching contexts. These cycles of applying theory into practice allowed for a deconstruction and deeper understanding of practice, followed by a critical reflection (and reconstruction) on the process that further informs practice. Such a process is based upon Lewin's proposed cyclical structure of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). In turn, the structure provided an opportunity to tie theory and practice in a way that moves "theory from the table to the field" (MacDonald et al., 2002, p. 149). For instance, as part of the Vygotsky-inspired module, I was challenged to experiment with Vygotsky's ideas on concept formation, which ignited a cultural-historical analysis of my coaching context. Here, the focus was on comprehending how my pedagogical practices (and consequently, athletes' learning) were influenced by volleyball in the UK lacking any cultural and historical roots. Further examples of theoretically inspired action research projects have also been disseminated and published (Pritchard, 2019; Santos, 2019; Santos & Morgan, 2019).

Here, claims that coaching is an inherently complex endeavour are addressed by using an action research design to make sense of practice, and therefore, living the complexity and messiness of the coaching field through a theoretical perspective. Yet, the cyclical nature of this process allowed my coaching practice to be underpinned by a theoretical lens, examining the laws of social life in a real-world context (Carr, 2006). Rather than treating theory and practice as two separate entities, the living of theory in practice takes lead from Apple's (1999) call for 'connected theory', practice, and issues. Thus, such entanglement between theory and practice combines a curiosity for theoretical underpinning, while encouraging considerate practical experimentation; that is, living the theory to provide opportunities to critically appreciate real-life context. Indeed, following this line of inquiry and development, I more recently wrestled with notions of creativity (inspired by jazz musicians), which have been translated in publication (See Santos & Morgan, 2019). This study, underpinned by

pedagogical principles, positioned creativity as a shared collaborative process. The findings illustrated how players developed a curiosity for experimentation, enhanced appreciation of the game and, consequently, impacted upon their communication and solutions (Santos & Morgan, 2019).

While ‘mainstream’ coach education programmes have been accused of ignoring the emergent power differences and ‘legitimised’ knowledge (e.g., Cushion et al., 2017), the course clearly defines coaching as ‘contextually-bound’ activity, shaped by social and cultural rules, and underpinned by the assumptions and values of those involved. Thus, rather than protecting a body of knowledge that has been accused of being ‘divorced’ from reality, the purpose has been to challenge some of these values (and assumptions), bringing to the forefront what may previously have been implicit (Flyvberg, 2001). As alluded to in the previous examples, this reflective endeavour is based upon a premise to better analysing practice through embodying the idea of the practical theorist; of continually (and critically) engaging within new knowledge, while respecting existing structures and practices. Returning to the roots of what Hemmestad, Jones, and Standal (2010) described as the ‘practical wisdom’, my coach development experience is based upon the ‘backwards-and-forwards’ between theory and practice. It is a position I believe can be embraced by practitioners and educators to necessarily and appropriately propel coaches’ practice forward; of which, can be facilitated by the action research design adopted in the DSC.

### **Conclusion**

The field of sports coaching has come to recognise the multi-faceted relationships and interactions between coach, athlete and context (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2016). It is therefore unsurprising to see that coach education and development has been subject to considerable investigation (e.g., Chesterfield et al., 2010; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Piggott, 2012, 2013; Townsend & Cushion, 2015). Despite recognising the relevance of an exposure to sports

science (e.g., physiology, biomechanics) and sports specific content, fundamental to the critique offered, is the value that coaches place on their informal ‘in-the-field’ experiences (Adams et al., 2016). Consequently, recent literature (e.g., Blackett et al., 2015; Cushion et al., 2017) has gone some way to illustrate that coaching and coach education are socially and politically driven, which cannot be viewed as linear processes. This chapter has sought to present a brief insight into this associated literature, specifically concerning the conduct, experiences, and development of coach education. More generally, the discussion considered the location of sports coaching research, coach education and higher education provision.

While the principal aim of this chapter was to further locate sports coaching as a discipline of study, we argue that by transforming the representation of coaching (i.e., how coaching is portrayed and conceptualised), we can start to (re)conceptualise the education of coaches; of what we strive for coaches to learn and manage within their respective contexts. Indeed, taking lead from Flyvberg (2001), we suggest coach development must encourage coaches to deliberately think about their values, beliefs, dispositions, objectives and intentions as a precursor to action. Using examples from a Doctorate in Sports Coaching (DSC), the discussion moves beyond criticisms of coaches as technical experts to consider coach development in the form of ‘action research’. Grounded in theory, it is proposed the methodology’s general character provides scope for both ‘deconstructing’ and ‘reconstructing’ coaching practice. This chapter, then, builds upon, and echoes, Cassidy et al. (2016) recommendations of developing coaches as ‘practical theorists’.

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