

Strengthening the fabric, untangling the knots: a collaborative self-study involving coaching and teaching

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Context

Anne and Richard are teacher educators in an Irish university, lecturing in science education and physical education (PE), respectively. We are also volunteer coaches with the university's Gaelic football team. These endeavours provide us with a range of interrelated experiences that influence how we teach, and how we coach. Teaching and coaching have many common features (Bergmann Drewe, 2000). Both are complex social practices (Cushion, 2013), underpinned by a distinct pedagogical focus (Jones, 2007). Wikeley and Bullock (2006, p. 24) suggest "coaching needs to be seen as an educational relationship with the emphasis being on the relationship". In this regard, Light and Harvey (2019) propose the term *positive pedagogy* to describe learner-centred teaching and coaching approaches. A positive pedagogy facilitates dialogue, problem-solving and shared learning experiences within a "supportive socio-moral environment in which making mistakes is accepted as an essential part of learning" (Light & Harvey, 2017, p. 277). In our context, a desire to be learner-centred in our work with student teachers resonates with social constructivist theories of learning that underpin athlete-centred approaches to coaching (Kidman & Penney, 2014). Coaching in an athlete-centred way involves the adoption of inclusive pedagogies that prioritise questioning, decision-making skills and athlete empowerment within a supportive learning environment (Pill, 2018). In contrast, more traditional coach-centred approaches tend to be characterised as more directive, where athletes are told what to do, and expected to "listen, absorb and comply" (Romar et al., 2016, p. 380). Being athlete-centred "requires a coach to understand himself/herself and then understanding the athlete" (Kidman & Penney, 2014, p. 3). This aligns with Hamilton and Pinnegar's (2013, p. 75) definition of self-study as "the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the [other]".

Learning in teaching and coaching is an inherently social endeavour (Cushion & Townsend, 2016), understood through a constructivist theoretical orientation (Trudel et al., 2013). While some coach learning occurs in formal settings, much also occurs in non-formal and informal situations (Cushion & Nelson, 2013). Engaging in reflective practice facilitates learning in these varied situations (Hall & Gray, 2016; Jacobs et al., 2016), just as it informs practitioners' learning in teaching and teacher education contexts (Brookfield, 2017).

Despite clear similarities between teaching and coaching, the extensive range of self-study research on teaching and teacher education is not yet mirrored within coaching (Casey et al., 2018). While Mead and Gilson's (2017) study of leadership in collegiate basketball, and our own recent work (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2019; O'Dwyer & Bowles 2020), have begun to address this gap, self-study offers considerable potential to explore "one's personal and professional identities" (Casey et al., 2018, p. 55) through the interweaving of different experiences within the shared complexity of teaching and coaching.

Aims

This study responds to calls for the extension of self-study research into sport coaching settings (Brown, 2011; Fletcher & Ovens, 2015). By engaging in self-study as a means to "enhance collaboration and improve practice" (Richards & Ressler, 2016, p. 294), we explored how we learned to integrate a new pedagogical approach (athlete-centred coaching) in our volunteer coaching, and examined how this learning, in turn, informed our teaching. Consequently, we considered how our informal learning in the coaching domain intertwined with our teacher education practices, impacting our teaching and coaching identities, as we frequently engaged with the same students in these different contexts.

Methods

This paper documents our experiences over the course of two full seasons. Richard has been a teacher educator for 16 years, and has coached this team for 12 seasons. Anne, in contrast, has worked in teacher education for 4 years, and was still playing football at an elite level in the two seasons prior to the commencement of this research. During that time, she had begun to assist Richard at training sessions on an informal basis. This period is noteworthy because it enabled us to build up personal and professional relationships that are important to support collaborative practice (Hostetler et al., 2018). It provided us with opportunities to discuss issues relating to our teaching and coaching experiences, enabling us to build the trust that eventually underpinned our critical friendship (Fletcher et al., 2016). These informal conversations before or after training often focused on how to make our sessions better, and prompted us to examine our practice more systematically. Consequently, LaBoskey's (2004) guidelines for self-study guided our research design, which was self-initiated and self-focused, arising from those informal conversations about teaching and coaching. We sought to better understand and improve our pedagogical practices as we coached together. Specifically, we wished to explore the extent to which we were being athlete-centred, because Richard was familiar with the concept in the context of a PE module he taught. Our research was interactive and collaborative as we acted as critical friends for each other, and engaged with two other critical friends. These two layers of critical friendship, internally where we gave each other immediate and frequent feedback, and externally where two colleagues not involved in our coaching provided a more detached perspective, helped us gain a deeper awareness of our coaching. Our external critical friends, one with extensive self-study experience and another with coaching expertise, provided us with "supportive and challenging feedback" (Fletcher et al., 2016, p. 304) from methodological and pedagogical standpoints. We have explored the detailed workings of this process elsewhere (O'Dwyer et al., 2019).

Data generation included 80 weekly individual reflections, eight critical friend conversations, and 5 student-athlete focus groups. We each completed, shared and revised a coaching philosophy statement at the beginning, middle and end of each season, and developed 80 training session plans together. Validation of our research was based on trustworthiness, established through our use of a range of data sources, and supported by regular dialogue with others to challenge our interpretations (e.g. Bowles et al., 2018). Importantly, this process motivated us "to continue inquiring into [our] practice" (Casey et al., 2018, p. 59).

Ethical approval was granted by our university's research ethics committee. We were mindful that gathering data from our athletes could be problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, as positive and supportive coach-athlete relationships are important for the development of an effective team environment (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013), we did not want our research to affect these relationships. Accordingly, an independent research assistant recruited athletes for our focus groups, and conducted semi-structured interviews using questions we had prepared. She recorded, transcribed and anonymised the responses. Secondly, while self-study research can contribute to "a public knowledge-base", we are also conscious that this public sharing may place the researcher in a vulnerable position, dealing with sensitive or personal topics related to self and practice (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016, p. 100). In our context, we value the open, cooperative nature of our athletes' responses, and are mindful of presenting data in ways that protect their identities.

A critical incident is "an event that raises broad, sustained issues and serves to focus the practitioner's thinking in ways that lead to insights" about practice (Fletcher et al., 2018, p. 80). This definition, grounded in Tripp's (2012) work, guided our data analysis. We both carried out a broad inductive analysis of the data. Then, we each identified incidents that

highlighted connections between our teaching and coaching. We discussed these together and, subsequently, with our critical friends. This process prompted us “to reframe and challenge” our initial perceptions (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015, p. 259). Finally, we selected incidents that helped us gain a deeper understanding of our practice, and a lens through which to consider how we might improve it (Tripp, 2012). Illustrative quotes used in this paper are identified by year and reflection number. For example, ‘S1R5’ relates to the 5th weekly reflection during Season 1.

Outcomes

We share three examples of critical incidents here that illustrate the intricate ties between our volunteer coaching and our professional lives as teacher educators. Our engagement with the data through collaborative self-study helped us to untangle some of the ‘knotty’ aspects of everyday practice. Each incident is represented by a quote from our data, and an accompanying characteristic that exemplifies our discussions about it.

Relationship-Building: “I think our role as teacher educators is enhanced through the relationships we build up with players on the football field”

We acknowledge that our dual teaching and coaching roles placed us in a unique position. We suggest this context facilitates the development of relationships that enhance our practice in both. Firstly, our own internal layer of critical friendship facilitated the development of personal and professional relationships as we developed levels of trust and understanding through coaching together. As Richard noted at the end of Season 1, “I really enjoy the collaborative nature of what we’re doing. It is very motivating, challenging (in a good way) and prompts me to reflect deeply on my own coaching”. Offering a perspective from the outside, our Season 1 critical friend observed:

You’ve got shared understanding and shared expectations...at the beginning you weren’t sure...and now you’re so clear and confident...and assured and singing off the same hymn sheet

Richard also noted a significant change in his own approach to coaching. Having coached on his own before this collaboration with Anne, he believed that the developing coaching relationship had been positive for him:

I’ve always been most comfortable as a leader, not wanting to give too much control of the session to anyone else. On Wednesday, I felt very comfortable with our division of duties where we both work autonomously. This has been building over the past few weeks, but definitely this week was when I felt happiest with it – trusting that I didn’t have to do everything myself (S1R5)

Anne highlighted this productive rapport at the end of the season also, when she wrote: “both coaches have ownership and input...the mutual respect to ‘step in’ on each other without offence is evidence of trust in the relationship” (S1R10). Accordingly, we learned more about ourselves as coaches through collaboration, and our experiences reflect those of Hostetler and colleagues (2018, p. 161), where they describe how “trust in one another, willingness to be vulnerable, and bonds intensified over time”.

Our data suggest athletes were open to seeking our advice on academic issues, thereby positioning us in pastoral or caring roles (Cronin & Armour, 2019). This happened on the fringe of training sessions, travelling to games, and during incidental conversations that occurred on university corridors. In turn, this enhanced our teaching because knowing athletes from our team helped build a more positive classroom rapport. Building relationships is a key aspect of effective coaching (Shanmugam & Jowett, 2016); our experiences have made us more aware of the potential to enrich our teaching by extending these relationships into the classroom. Hearing about our students, and their lives on campus and away from it,

required us to engage in “receptive listening” (Noddings, 2012, p. 780) as we became a sounding board for their questions on, for example, how to negotiate particular aspects of university bureaucracy. Anne recognised that this prompted her to change her own demeanour as a coach: “I think I need to make myself more approachable to them - I have been trying to do the same as teacher educator” (S2R16). Later in the season, she concluded: “getting to know the players, as students also, has helped with my teacher education too” (Anne, S2R19). Richard expressed similar sentiments suggesting, “our role as teacher educators is enhanced through the relationships we build up with the players on the football field” (S2R15). Student-athletes have reported difficulties with managing academic, social and sporting commitments (Kim et al., 2016); in our dual positions as coaches and lecturers, we gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by our own athletes, thereby establishing a stronger rapport in the classroom, and on the playing field.

We became more aware, however, of the complex power relationships that exist across both contexts. North’s (2017) writing about power balances in teacher education sensitised us to this issue in both teaching and coaching. While we recognised we were supporting student-athletes on personal, academic and sporting journeys, and frequently discussed a range of issues with them, we were also conscious that our roles as teacher educators required us to maintain a certain distance. Despite the close ties that developed on the sports field, our professional duties necessitated the fair and equitable application of academic procedures. In discharging these responsibilities, we are conscious of the duty of care incorporated within our dual roles. Noddings’ (2012, p. 780) suggestion that “the other may sometimes be right, and we should be persuadable. Even when the other is wrong, however, we should respond with care to his or her need for human regard”, prompted us to reflect on our privileged connecting position between the coaching and teaching spheres, and we acknowledge this offers potential for further study.

In an overall sense, the words of Harkness and colleagues (2018, p. 382) resonate: “positive critical incidents have the potential to facilitate learning through the emotions of celebration, joy, connection, and affiliation”. For us, building productive working relationships, together as collaborating coaches, and with our student-athletes in class and on the playing field, fostered a more positive learning environment also.

Discomfort: “...if he roared at me in a match and then I have to go and sit in his 9 o’clock lecture...”

Because some of the athletes we coached were also students in our lectures, they had experience of us as teacher educators in a class setting, and as coaches in a competitive sports setting. Athlete feedback challenged us to examine if, and how, our coaching and teaching identities were different. Fenton-O’Creevy and colleagues (2015, p. 33) argue “identity is not just an individual attribute but is negotiated anew in each community we participate in”. Analysis of our coaching philosophy statements suggest certain commonalities with typical descriptions of learner-centred teaching. Anne stated at the start of Season 1: “my coaching philosophy is that all players have potential to improve and develop (irrespective of their beginning / current position)”. At that season’s end, traits of a supportive “socio-moral environment” (Light et al., 2014, p. 74) are evident in her updated philosophy reflection when she wrote: “I value the importance of creating a positive and encouraging culture where individuals can experience enjoyment as well as challenges in their learning”. For Richard, the connection between teaching and coaching stretched back to his time as a primary teacher as he commented:

Throughout my years teaching in primary schools, coaching after school was a central part of my own identity as a teacher: for me, school sport helped develop a sense of

community within these schools, had positive impacts on children, strengthened community links and...I liked doing it!

Accordingly, engaging in this self-study caused us to question our teaching and coaching styles. This questioning was prompted by student feedback because some athletes believed the reflective style they associated with a teacher educator was incompatible with a more vocal, aggressive manner that they expected from a sports coach. We wished to be student-centred teacher educators, and athlete-centred coaches – but struggled to reconcile these aspirations with player expectations grounded in a more traditional coaching style (Light & Harvey, 2017). Player focus group (FG) responses highlighted how our approach contrasted sharply with their prior experiences where coaches were frequently “giving out and being aggressive” (S2 FG, Player 2). Consequently, Player 1 (S2 FG) believed Richard’s role as a teacher educator constrained him from adopting a similar aggressive style on the football field:

So sometimes I think the whole thing that he’s a lecturer, everyone will have him [in class] at some stage, and you’ll see him in college and he can’t or maybe doesn’t think he can be in any way loud or aggressive from that point of view

When Penney (2006, p. 27) called for “a cultural as well as pedagogical shift”, she was arguing for a more learner-centred approach to coaching. In our context, we noticed that athletes, shaped by their previous experiences found it challenging to fully embrace those learner-centred approaches that we were trying to implement. This highlighted the importance for us to understand how these prior experiences impacted athletes’ receptiveness to new approaches. Jarrett and Harvey (2014, p. 90) report similar issues, noting how “a change in pedagogy may often be difficult to facilitate due to students’ preconceived notions of traditional, formal curricula”.

At times, however, this apparent resistance from athletes led us to question our approaches, and doubt our coaching efficacy. This is illustrated by one exchange captured in Anne’s reflection, and Richard’s response (S1, R14):

Anne: It feels at times we are on a rollercoaster, changing direction a rapid pace, and I feel the players are laying the tracks. In our efforts to be [athlete-centred]...I think the players have this week ‘steered’ my learning as a coach

Richard: Is this sense that players are ‘steering’ a positive or negative? Or neither - just a part of learning to coach in an [athlete-centred] way - ceding ‘control’?

We were quite uncomfortable with this situation. By trying to be athlete-centred, we felt we were not fully in control of the sessions; and the athletes were somewhat frustrated because they wanted us to be more directive in our style: “We’d rather be driven...more of a ‘do this’ rather than ‘what do you think’” (S1 FG). This underlined the importance of acknowledging our athletes’ and students’ prior experiences, and a blurring of our own identities. Our attempts to construct an athlete-centred environment, informed by our shared developmental philosophies of teaching and coaching, jarred somewhat with the realities of coaching in a team context, where players’ expectations were somewhat different to our own. This is particularly complex in a sports setting where a focus on winning can impact the underlying coaching process. This caused Richard to question, after a number of defeats, his own worth as a coach and educator in a similar way to the coach in Purdy and Potrac’s study who wondered “[Maybe] I’m just not good enough” (2016, p. 789).

In terms of resolving the discomforts associated with our teaching and coaching, the collaborative nature of our self-study, and the support provided by being “co-conspirators and critical friends” (Hostetler et al., 2016, p. 61) in this endeavour, helped us to navigate our way through these situations. The process helped us to understand our coaching selves in the context of what Ives and colleagues (2019, p. 13) describe as “the intersectional and fluid

nature of identities and their associated management”. In our case, our coaching and teaching identities were interwoven and, frequently, *tangled*.

Empathy: “It felt that following the plan was more important than personal interactions”

Engaging in self-study of our coach learning prompted us to reflect on our student teachers’ experiences too. As we struggled with issues relating to planning and implementation of our coaching sessions, our understanding of their struggles to plan and implement effective lessons as student teachers was increased. We documented difficulties with pedagogical strategies such as questioning. By exploring solutions to these problems in our critical friendship, we discussed how our students might encounter similar problems.

Early in Season 1, while attempting to incorporate questioning into his athlete-centred approach, Richard struggled to embed effective strategies into his practice: “On Wednesday, I think my questioning was a bit ‘machine-gun’ like – getting the questions out but not waiting for answers – I was anxious to keep everything moving” (S1R3). Likewise, the players were uncomfortable with the approach. As Player 3 explained in the final focus group that season, “It’s probably just easier if they just tell you what to do instead of asking because, like, everyone is going to have a different opinion”. As we reflected on this, Anne noted the value of the approach, and the potential for athlete empowerment (Kidman, 2005): “Many of the questions made the players reflect and then learn... Richard allows the players to set the intensity for the training” (S1R13). Anne wrote about her own pedagogical learning:

I again...found that I had to consciously hold back on coach-led feedback and instructions and ask the players more questions and scaffold their feedback to each other. When given the opportunity, they did this very well (S1R13)

Later, it became apparent that our coaching language was aligning with our teaching language:

Using questions, generating discussions and learning through small-sided games underpinned our approach to coaching this season. We tried to coach by posing problems (guided discovery?) and supporting players to find solutions (Richard, S1R21)

Likewise, the value of good planning (in teaching and coaching) became more apparent to us. Richard wrote: “because of our clear session focus, we knew what we wanted to achieve...we outlined our objectives clearly, and allowed time for some interaction with the players” (S1R13). We hoped our student teachers would adopt similar practices. This emphasis on planning, however, sensitised us to the need for reflection-in-action too, and we noticed that being able to deviate from the plan could be important as we gained expertise. In the same reflection, Richard noted: “because our session was so well planned...sometimes it felt that following the plan was more important than personal interactions”. We discussed how our student teachers can struggle to respond to the needs of individual children in a classroom context. The following season, Anne’s comment suggests we had improved this element of our practice: “our collaborative approach was responding to players’ needs as opposed to fitting our coaching plans (as has been the case managing large numbers in previous sessions)” (S2R13). As we learned how to coach, the discussions that followed between us caused us to reflect on the how our student teachers might also be struggling with pedagogical innovations as they learned how to teach. Consequently, we became more aware that “developing expertise in teaching is more about developing an appreciation of and a responsiveness to the learning that students are engaged in” (Garbett, 2011, p. 73). Our learning as coaches adopting a novel pedagogy deepened our empathy for students who encountered similar challenges. By developing our own expertise, and by reflecting on the needs of our students, we hope we are better placed to reflect Martin’s (2018, p. 267)

contention that “being a teacher educator...means supporting teachers to identify and act upon the connections between their work in a multiplicity of contexts”.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the course of two seasons, our collaborative self-study has provided us with opportunities to identify authentic, meaningful episodes from our practice (Callary et al., 2012). Fletcher and Ovens (2015, p. 217) note the potential for self-study to provide “glimpses into the black boxes of the professional contexts and situations in which practitioners work”. This exploration of our coaching practices facilitated a deeper understanding of how we coach and how we teach. A process of “reframing” (Bullock et al., 2014, p. 39) became embedded in these practices, and we became more aware of the “significant influence that socio-cultural and institutional contexts” (Curry & Light, 2014, p. 129) may have in the integration of a new pedagogy. This insight has implications for our approaches to teaching and coaching alike.

The notion of *tensions* has been explored elsewhere, and frequently examines the transition *from* teacher *to* teacher educator (e.g. Berry, 2008; Bullock & Ritter, 2011). For us, a central tension related to our identities as teacher educators and coaches *at the same time*, where we both taught and coached many of the same student-athletes simultaneously. Essentially, our teaching and coaching roles were intertwined. Jordan and colleagues (2016, p. 239), when describing their transition from teaching to teacher education, conclude “we will never disconnect from our teacher selves”; in a similar way, when we coach, we also connect to our teaching selves. Exploring our tangled coaching and teaching experiences has provided us with valuable learning opportunities already, and has the potential to enhance our future practices, aligning with Niesz’s (2010, p. 44) suggestion that “meanings made and identities constructed in communities are the creators of possibility”. Being teacher educators, and being coaches, create possibilities for us to form new understandings of both.

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