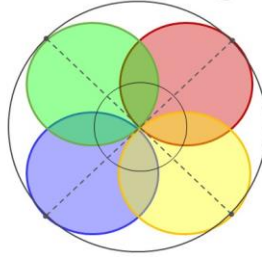


Blended Intelligence



Unlocking potential in performance support teams

Free thinking coaching in a discursive paradigm – can coaches think ‘in between’ the spaces?

A discussion using:

Denison, J., (2010) ‘Planning, practice and performance: the discursive formation of coaches knowledge’, *Sport, Education and society*, Vol. 15(4), pp. 461-478

Denison (2010) frames his points using middle and long distance running coaches to discuss the roles of (1), the sports social and political context and history, (2) sports science and (3) coach education to challenge our thinking of where coaching knowledge comes from, how it is informed and developed and how it can be limited in its effectiveness. He argues that coaching practise is heavily influenced and dictated by improvement in performance and that this is underpinned by the clear, sequential and logical concepts set out in the quantifiable world of sports science. He goes on to question coaching practise arguing that it is largely driven by 'an unknowing knowledge' that is rarely questioned or its 'unsaid rules' challenged or broken. In questioning current coach education's usefulness in equipping coaches with the ability to solve problems and think in 'out of the box' ways he makes the point that sport has a discursive self-fulfilling social set up which is culturally driven and that this limits our coaches ability to think freely in a coaching context.

Although Denison talks about planning as a main theme in his paper, it could be argued that his points are less about concepts of periodization and much more about short falls in our sporting bodies, coaches and coach education. A recognition that opportunities exist in innovation, problem solving and free thinking could break a vicious cycle of win at all costs; a point well made through Denison's 'unknowing bodies'. If we consider for a second sport at the highest level, where funding cycles are decided on medal success, the stakes and the costs of failure is high, the pressure on our coaches is significant (Mallett 2010). The coaches ability to challenge recognised, tried and tested systems and processes is diminished in favour of the safe route and yet, if we are to support Denison's view that discourse limits coaching innovation, then the high performance arena could be the catalyst for prompting change in how we prepare our athletes because at this level, it is recognised

that high performance institutes can be great centres for learning (Rynne, Mallett & Tinning 2006). In these environments the coach has the interdisciplinary-disciplinary team. This team of scientists will quantify all aspects of the athletes, sport and performances (Hughes and Bartlett 2002) feeding back reams of data to the coach and recommending numerous interventions and training. In this environment we have the opportunity to understand all the physical aspects of the sport at a level never seen before. If used correctly, the coach could be supplied with technical data that could inform decision making with a new level of sophistication and yet, perhaps we have to question a coaches ability to manage the team, assimilate the data and utilise the knowledge in an effective manner.

The usual format of coach education (Cushion, Armour and Jones 2003), where 'the sciences' are modularised into neat bundles fails on a number of levels in that it attempts to give coaches knowledge and expertise of the practitioners in an abstract, condensed and stand alone way, this cannot compete with the depth of knowledge and understanding or time on task that the practitioners have and nor should it. If we are to continue to be 'coach led' then our coaches need to have skills in managing the holistic process (Lyle & Cushion 2010) and pull on expertise as and when is required to solve the issues that arise. As Denison points out, control (or power) is an important element that the coach will not wish to devolve and in recognising he does not possess all the knowledge and therefor cannot make all the decisions exposes him within his community and with his athletes. Power is a source of conflict (Potrac & Jones 2009) that may well arise if the sports scientists and coaches processes and opinions do not marry (Jones 2007) throwing up questions of uncertainty or ambiguity. As Denison points out 'coaches will impose a degree of coherence around any situation they encounter that allows them to believe they know what to do or

how to act' (2010, p465). In our neatly planned, science based approach it is reasonable to assume conflict could arise.

In this, I believe we get to the issue with sports science support, science needs process, planning and quantification to measure effectiveness and as a recognised element of world-class support systems, our coaches must engage with the language and direction it provides. This is problematic as it fails to acknowledge the social (Cushion, Armour & Jones 2006), context specific (Cote, Salmela, Trudel, Baria & Russell 1995) and inter-personal nature of a sport and the coaching knowledge imparted (Jones 2007). It is in this point that Foucault's discursive analogy becomes more vivid.

There is a body of literature that acknowledges coaching expertise (Cote & Gilbert 2009) and knowledge (Cote 2006) is developed through formal and non-formal educational paths, time on task as an athlete, neophyte coach and then through reflection (Gilbert & Trudel 2006). This reliance on knowledge and expertise being formed as a result of being 'in the system' must support the notion that coaches will pass on the knowledge that was given to them in the way that was imparted on them. Researchers are acknowledging that our coaches are ill equipped to cope with the problems that arise in the field, they will look to their peers and alternative places to find solution to issues they encounter, devaluing formal education and coaching workshops in their on going development (Gilbert, Cote & Mallett 2006). In one sense this contradicts Denison's point as it shows that coaches are prepared to break away from recognised sport led education but to do this, they require the threshold knowledge identified in Cote's paper (2006) which is gained through the usual

structures. Another relevant point worth elaborating on is the importance of peers in sharing problems and developing knowledge.

If coaches pass on knowledge to athletes that they gained from their coach/mentors and share their problems with peers and colleagues, then is it likely that due to the effects of discourse, which pervades at all levels of sport, that the creativity and innovation Denison argues for will produce much of the same? It is recognised that mentorships (Jones, Harris & Miles 2009) and apprenticeships (Cassidy & Rossi 2006) now have to be carefully planned and managed to allow the learners to situate their experiences and understand the 'why's' and 'how's' of their practise and yet, communities of practise still recognise at their core, the usual way of doing things (Culver & Trudel 2008). To be accepted into the coaching and athlete community where 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire' are essential characteristics, there must be a general acceptance of a commonality of practise which safeguards against true innovation. This, I believe hints at the long-standing political self-fulfilling prophecy of the sporting systems.

In summary Denison's paper sets out to question the planning practices of middle and long distance running coaches but in doing so questions the formation of coaching knowledge and the context in which it is formed. The idea of '(un)knowing bodies' and Foucault's 'Discursive' explanation of planning are for me, terms encapsulating issues with sports science led practise, coach development and education and our sporting systems that stifle and flatten progress and coaching practice. I would argue that the points made are relevant and would suggest that modelling all facets of sporting performance through research and in Institutes of Sport needs to be cascaded down and through each sporting structure to be

'adopted' into its communities. Only then, can the knowledge become context or environmentally relevant as it is seen to be 'the done thing'. If we agree that coaching is an inter-personal pursuit between athlete and coach then science, sociology and psychology must dovetail with coaching knowledge in a way that has not perhaps yet been developed or truly explored.

Summary thoughts: -

1. It is recognised that sports science (all adjuncts) has a role to play in developing the athlete and performance. Can the sports coach have the depth of knowledge to manage all facets of the holistic process or should they become experts of the technical and tactical development specifically?
2. The implication for coach education and development is that coaches are prepared and trained to work with a multi-disciplinary team (enough knowledge to understand, apply and integrate interventions). Managing the biological and adaptive processes of training alongside technical, tactical and the inter-personal nature of the athlete-coach relationship needs significant exploration and perhaps cannot be 'encapsulated' in planning and periodization models.
3. High performance sport, with its pressure driven, result orientated and outcome based reward structures leaves little room for dove-tailing of sport science with a free experimental coaching approach. The ideals of sport science with its logical, sequential and measured interventions lend itself much better to this sporting context.
4. Coaches would like to be innovative and creative but perceive (1) their standing within their coaching community and (2) the perceptions of the athletes under their charge to perhaps limit their agency to do so for fear of a loss of credibility.

5. The threshold knowledge that is required to operate as a coach is gained through experience, formal and non-formal routes. I would argue that through Foucault's 'discursive' analogy those experiences are deeply influenced to the point where the knowledge gained and shared is in essence institutionalised and thus protected through communities of practise
6. For me Denison's paper could have dared to be braver and less overt. It is very critical whilst never being openly so. I had to read it 4 times to get my head round it and even then, I think there is depth to his argument that is slightly beyond my grasp. I think many sports coaches would miss the points raised because they are unwittingly 'institutionalised'.
7. As an S&C coach (an adjunct of sports science) I think a very relevant point is made in the nature of high performance support services. Our ability to measure, manipulate and quantify our interventions is in managing the variables and organising the process. Science fails to account for the culture of a sport, the inter-personal dynamics that are at play and environmental factors, all of which can limit our impact.
8. As a final point, I would state through observation of some sports and high performance coaches, planning is considered a weakness. I personally struggle with the notion of creativity, innovation and thinking 'in between' the spaces until you have bottomed out the basics of good practise, have clear and considered direction and goals and a well thought through plan of how this is to be achieved.

References

Cassidy, T., & Rossi, T., (2006) 'Situated Learning (RE)examining the Notion of Apprenticeships in Coach Education', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, Vol. 1(3), pp. 235-245

Cote, J., (2006) 'The development of coaching knowledge', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, Vol. 1(3), pp. 217-222

Cote, J., & Gilbert, W., (2009) 'An integrative Definition of Coaching Effectiveness and Expertise', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, Vol. 4(3), pp. 307-323

Cote, J., Salmela, J., Trudel, P., Baria, A., & Russell, S., (1995) 'The Coaching Model: A Grounded Assessment of Expert Gymnastic Coaches' Knowledge', *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, Vol. 17, pp. 1-17

Culver, D., & Trudel, P., (2008) 'Clarifying the Concept of Communities of Practice in Sport', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, Vol. 3(1), pp. 1-10

Cushion, C. J., Armour, K. M., & Jones, R. L., (2003) 'Coach Education and Continuing Professional Development: Experience and learning to Coach', *Quest*, Vol. 55(3), pp. 215-230

Cushion, C., Armour, K. A., & Jones, R. L., (2006) 'Locating the coaching process in practice: models 'for' and 'of' coaching', *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, Vol. 11(1), pp. 83-99

Denison, J., (2010) 'Planning, practice and performance: the discursive formation of coaches knowledge', *Sport, Education and society*, Vol. 15(4), pp. 461-478

Gilbert, W., Cote, J., & Mallet, C., (2006) 'Development Paths and Activities of Successful Sports Coaches', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, Vol. 1(1), pp. 69-76

Gilbert, W., & Trudel, P., (2006) 'The coach as a reflective practitioner', in Jones, R. L., (eds) *'The Sports Coach as Educator: Reconceptualising sports coaching'*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 113-127

Hughes, M. D., & Bartlett, R. M., (2002) 'The use of performance indicators in performance analysis', *Journal of Sports Sciences*, Vol. 20, pp. 739-754

Lyle, J & Cushion, C., (2010) 'Sports Coaching: Professionalisation and Practice', *Churchill Livingstone Elsevier*, China

Jones, R. L., (2006) 'The Sports Coach as Educator: Reconceptualising sports coaching', *Routledge*, Abingdon

Jones, R. L., (2007) 'Coaching redefined: an everyday pedagogical endeavour', *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 12(2), pp. 159-173

Jones, R. L., Harris, R., & Miles, A., (2009) 'Mentoring in sports coaching: a review of the literature', *Physical Education and Sports Pedagogy*, Vol. 14(3), pp. 267-284

Mallett, C. J., (2010) 'Becoming a high performance coach: pathways and communities', in Lyle, J., & Cushion, C., (eds) *'Sport Coaching Professionalisation and Practice'*, Churchill Livingstone Elsevier, pp. 119-134

Potrac, P., & Jones, R., (2009) 'Power, conflict and cooperation: Toward a micropolitics of

coaching', *Quest*, Vol. 61(2), pp. 223-236

Rynne, S. B., Mallett, C., & Tinning, R., (2006) 'High Performance Sports Coaching: Institutes of Sport as Sites for Learning', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, Vol. 1(3), pp. 223-234