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International virtual sport coaching exchange: A mechanism for exploring pre-professional coaches' interests and issues

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this practice paper is to share our experiences of, and reflections on, facilitating an international virtual exchange for pre-professional sport coaches, in a higher education context. Between January and May 2024, for 12 weeks, 21 coaches from both Leeds Beckett University (UK) and James Madison (USA) participated in a pilot project to supplement an internship experience which they were engaged in as part of their coursework. Using Flip, a video-based discussion app from Microsoft, coaches were encouraged to share and explore their problems of professional practice with others as they emerged. By doing this, we hoped that coaches would contribute to each-others' framing and developing understanding of authentic and meaningful coaching issues, begin to form networks of support, become increasingly independent learners, and develop a more global outlook. From our position as internship architects and facilitators, we hypothesised that with a greater appreciation of coaches' issues and interests we could more meaningfully offer timely and bespoke support. As we reflect on this novel project, we deliberate over the practical value of some of the underpinning ideas, limitations to supporting pre-professional coaches in this way, and future directions.

1. Introduction

Within sport coaching bachelor degree programmes across higher education (HE) globally, it is common that learners will participate in an internship. Couched within experiential learning theory (e.g., Kolb, 2015) and other ideas about work-based learning (Mott, 2000), they are perceived to be an essential element of pre-professional training (Dieffenbach et al., 2011). Internships, in the context of this article, typically take place over a defined period of time (e.g., six months), have a minimum hourly commitment (e.g., 120 h), and are designed to expose the learner to authentic practice environments in a way that is well-supported by both HE institutions (HEI) and internship providers (e.g., school, community sports club, or professional sports team). For the HEI there are typically a series of intended outcomes associated with such a formative experience including: (1) to shape and influence participants' interests and ambitions (i.e., make decisions about the domain(s) and population(s) in/with which they would most like to work upon graduation); (2) to present practical problems which require novel solutions - thus encouraging the participant to develop their own epistemology of practice (Schön, 2001); and (3) to develop participants' reflective capabilities (Knowles et al., 2001) along with a wider repertoire of metacognitive skills (e.g., self-monitoring) as they become increasingly self-directed learners.

Such are the perceived benefits, for any programme to be endorsed by the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE)

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against the standards for HE sport coaching bachelor degree programmes, there should be a comprehensive internship experience which is appropriately supported (International Council for Coaching Excellence, 2023; Lara-Bercial et al., 2016). The same is true for those in the United States of America (USA) seeking NCACE accreditation for their coach education programme (USCCE, n.d.). In the USA alone, Gano-Overway and Dieffenbach (2019) identified that of 308 coaching education programmes 59% incorporated this. Additional examples of these ‘academic coaching education internships’, as termed by Zakrajsek and colleagues (2015), can be found in Australia (Weldon & Ngo, 2019), Brazil (Milistedt et al., 2014), Canada (Demers et al., 2006), Portugal (Gomes et al., 2018), and the UK (Crisp, 2020). While it is not within scope for us to explore, in detail, the plethora of internship opportunities available as part of sport coaching HEI programmes, we do hope to impress upon the reader how common and valuable they are.

On that basis, the purpose of this practice paper is to: (1) briefly outline the difficulties inherent in facilitating a meaningful and learning-oriented internship experience; (2) offer a tentative solution by describing what we, as architects and facilitators of internship experiences at HEIs in both the UK and USA respectively, have done to address these difficulties; and (3) reflect on our experiences of doing this work and the extent to which we achieved positive, desirable, outcomes (or otherwise). In all of this we appreciate that, as an authorship and project team, we bring particular perspectives and resources to our work that influence the way in which we see and attend to issues. At this point, as part of the introductory scene-setting, it seems appropriate to very briefly situate ourselves within the practical example.

The first author has expertise and experience, nationally and internationally, in the design and delivery of programmes to support the professional development of sport coaches, across all domains and with a variety of stakeholders. They are an alumnus of the ICCE Nippon Sport Science University Coach Developer Academy. The second author is responsible for employability in the sport coaching subject group at Leeds Beckett University, alongside co-leading courses that have internship requirements. Having benefitted from studying abroad (Canada and the US), they see value in creating opportunities to engage in international collaborations where possible and have specific experience with collaborative online international learning (COIL; see here: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/collaborative-online-international-learning-coil-in-uk-higher-education-reloaded>). The third author is the director of, and instructor in, a coaching education minor programme at James Madison University with background in curriculum design and instruction, teaching pedagogy, and programme evaluation.

2. Practical problem

Against this backdrop, and as scholars currently working on sport coaching bachelor degree programmes in the UK and USA which include internships, we recognise the difficulty of leading and facilitating these important learning opportunities. In this section, we position that as the central practical problem which we seek to resolve through our work. The challenge of meaningfully supporting large numbers of pre-professional sport coaches (from herein, coaches) with the multifarious and unique problems of professional practice that emerge over time, is a significant one. We are not the first to note this. In 2020, Trudel and colleagues attributed a *lack of adequate* support from university facilitators as one of many factors impinging upon the effectiveness of internships. Prior to this, in 2015, Kucklick and colleagues made the case for internship facilitators (in this case, us) to *become more knowledgeable about coaches’ experiences and issues*, to better prompt learning in and through the experience (reflection).

We recognise that efforts to support coaches in wider educational contexts (e.g., national governing body development programmes) can be inhibited by limited knowledge of their issues and interests too. On this matter, North and colleagues (2020) succinctly signalled that “there has been no research attempt that identifies the coaches’ voice on their issues and problems and its influence on coaching policy and programme development” (p. 283). We posit that this is not dissimilar to other similar industry domains (the ‘minor professions’, to borrow from Schön [1987]), where professional practice is characterised by instability and ambiguity (e.g., nursing, hospitality, and tourism). Getting a fix on the individual practitioners’ interests and issues can provide the facilitator with an entry point to promote learning (Muir & North, 2023). For instance, of teaching, Kennedy (2016) writes: “as the distance between the teacher and the student grows larger, teachers must make a more concerted effort to ferret out the unique interests, perceptions, and interpretations of their audiences.” (p. 12). Therefore, we contest that there is wide appeal and interest in this practical problem and much to be learned from attempts to resolve it.

The case for becoming *more knowledgeable about the issues and interests that coaches’ find most meaningful* through their internship experience, to better support, is made stronger by considering the nature of these problems. We draw on the work of Rittel and Weber (1973) when describing problems of professional practice in this context as ‘wicked’ rather than ‘tame’. They are not easily defined, every solution is a one-shot operation (since problems are meshed with context and time), and every problem is the symptom of another. Addressing such a problem would benefit from time spent in dialogue with others, yet we note that coaches often spend time ruminating alone, or not at all! This is not dissimilar to nurses (Williams, 2002) and teachers. On the latter, Zhang and colleagues (2011) describe how “teachers are often isolated in their own classrooms, with few opportunities to interact with other teachers to discuss and solve problems of practice” (p. 343).

3. An evidence informed approach

3.1. Existing similar work

There are several examples of teaching projects that have attempted to engage coaches in discussions about their practice with peers using Web 2.0 tools (Stoszowski & Collins, 2014; 2017; Stoszowski et al., 2021). Web 2.0 tools encompass a range of technologies which can facilitate collaboration, communication, and networking among learners (e.g., Google Docs, YouTube, and

WordPress); they are cited to be beneficial for and popular in HE environments due to their effectiveness in supporting digital crowdsourcing and curation (Advance HE, n.d). These previous works demonstrate both the utility of such tools and provide practical guidance in their application, helpful in our work. Predominantly, Stoszkowski and colleagues have used both blogs (2014; 2017) and Flip (2021) as platforms to promote reflective practice and peer collaboration. Each of the studies included undergraduate student-coaches, and the blogs/Flip were used as part of a university module to increase student knowledge of reflective practice and structure engagement with reflective activities.

Using Hatton and Smith's (1995) reflective writing framework, Stoszkowski and Collins (2014, 2017) and Stoszkowski et al. (2021) assessed the quality of reflection from undergraduate students engaged in a series of teaching and learning projects within a HEI. Across the studies, authors moved from requiring students to create their own blogs and invite others to help generate feedback (2014), to creating smaller collaborative groups on a shared blog (2017), before a shift to using Flip (short video reflections, up to 150 s) in small groups (2021). The influence on reflective quality was significant, moving from 29.91% to 2.45% of blog posts in the dialogic and critical reflection categories respectively (2014), to 48.72% and 13.75% (2017), and finally to 78.6% and 5.57% (2021). Authors speculated that a small reduction in critical reflection in the Flip study (2021) can be attributed to a shorter project length (15 vs. 23 weeks) in comparison to the previous study (2017), alongside issues pertaining to participants managing identity and social anxiety in this format, which perhaps prohibited examining ideas in more depth. Yet, we are encouraged by the stark upward trend in dialogic reflection (from 29.1%, to 48.72%, and 78.6%) giving us confidence that Flip will be useful in facilitating our ambitions. These changes were proposed to have been driven by a combination of better scaffolding before reflection started, smaller closed-groups for discussion, and a greater match in the 'task-media fit' (McGrath & Hollinghead, 1993), allowing for a richer (Sins et al., 2011) communication method.

Stoszkowski et al. (2017) also used Web 2.0 tools to engage students across HEIs. Students in their first year of study at one institution (I1) provided weekly feedback to the reflective blogs of students in their second year at a second institution (I2). Meanwhile, students in their third year of study at I2 provided mentorship to the first-year students at I1 via a video analysis and feedback platform where students uploaded videos of their coaching. Tutor reflections indicated that participation was tentative and confirmatory, demonstrating a lack of confidence from the first year I1 students. Similarly, the final year I2 students viewed their role more as knowledge providers than mentors. It was suggested that informal learning approaches might require greater structure, and there needs to be opportunity to develop personal skillsets necessary to use Web 2.0 technologies, and enhanced dispositions for learning (these were explored further by Stoszkowski & McCarthy, 2018).

Overall, these scholars suggested that Web 2.0 tools have potential for facilitating reflective practice and developing peer collaboration within and across HEIs, linked to experiential learning. However, there is a need to prepare students for the experience (e.g., understand technologies, reflection, ground rules for engagement), arrange in smaller groups, allow for groups to experience and hold on to difference to generate discussion, and match the communication richness to the task. These examples are all situated within a single country (UK), yet our project aims to work with institutions across borders and aspires to extend this body of work further. By doing this, not only are we afforded the opportunity to test some of the ideas above as we seek to enhance the internship experience, but also to consider the ways in which cultural difference might act as a stimulus for learning through experience, with others. For this reason, we were led to the growing practice and study of virtual exchange (O'Dowd, 2023).

3.2. Virtual exchange

The advent of the internet and a desire for internationalisation in HE has facilitated a rapid growth in virtual exchange practice, research, and organisational support over the last two decades (O'Dowd, 2023). There have been several terms used to capture international online collaboration; for example, online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2007), telecollaboration (Belz, 2002), collaborative online international learning (COIL; Rubin, 2016). However, O'Dowd (2023) recommended virtual exchange (VE) defined as:

An umbrella term which refers to the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes and under the guidance of teachers or trained facilitators. (p.11)

Six key characteristics of VE are captured within this definition: (1) technology-based interaction; (2) engagement with members of other cultures/countries; (3) integration into curriculum and facilitation by educators or experts; (4) a strong focus on development of intrapersonal skills and intercultural competence; and (6) student-centred collaborative approach to learning (O'Dowd, 2023). VE allows students to continue at their home university with a focus on interaction and collaboration with students from partner institutions (O'Dowd, 2023).

While all educators will bring their own pedagogical principles and approaches to a VE, O'Dowd (2023) suggests two theories support the development of students through online collaboration. The first is that moderated, structured interaction with members of different cultures will reduce prejudicial thinking toward others, linked with contact hypothesis in online interaction (Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013). The second are concepts of learning as a social, learner-centred, active process to develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Vygotsky, 1978). These pedagogical theories highlight structured opportunities and the importance of social interaction to promote learning and the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes about course material and other people, cultures, and contexts in VE. Importantly, these conclusions align with those taken from previous works on coach learning using Web 2.0 tools (e.g., Stoszkowski et al., 2021), providing clear direction for our project.

There are several principles from across foreign language, initial teacher training, and business class-to-class VE approaches that were considered in our work with coaches (O'Dowd, 2023). For instance, there is likely benefit to students having the autonomy to

share problems of practice from their own coach contexts, similar to 'eTandem' foreign language VE (O'Rourke, 2007). Additionally, a VE could provide opportunities for students to experience and discuss culturally different practices, aligned to initial teacher training VE (O'Dowd, 2023). Finally, a VE could include collaborative means and ends to develop group work and cultural competence skills like business VE (O'Dowd, 2023), particularly as these skills are valued in HE (e.g., 'global outlook' as a Leeds Beckett University graduate attribute) and in coaching (ICCE bachelor degree standards and National Standards for Sport Coaches in the USA).

In a world where HEIs recognise the importance of developing global citizenship (Horey et al., 2018), VE and Web 2.0 technologies allow for the benefits of international travel and face-to-face communication for learning at scale, without the associated costs of travel. Aligning with previous work in coach learning and development in HE, VE can help frame the intentions and practices of international collaborations by allowing groups of students to work together to solve problems of professional practice.

3.3. Reflective practice

Within the VE framework outlined above, the internship experience demands that coaches begin to surface and explore their personal theories of practice and expose their ways of working. However, without sufficient intent to learn from these experiences – they are *just* experiences. When supporting coaches, a sensible point of entry is to work with their existing personal theories. That is, help them consider what they *actually do* and how helpful their ways of working are in achieving their desirable and intended goals (Muir & Lyle, 2024). Of course there can be resistance, as Brookfield (2017) noted:

Becoming aware of our assumptions is one of the most puzzling intellectual challenges we face. It's also something we instinctively resist for fear of what we might discover. Who wants to clarify and question assumptions they've lived by for a substantial period of time, only to find out that they don't make sense? (p. 5)

Current research has revealed that while coaches recognise the potential of learning from experience, they do not necessarily see reflective practice as beneficial (Nash et al., 2022). This suggests a need to help coaches see the benefit of reflective practice, support the development of reflective skills and capabilities, and position reflective practice as a habit of mind rather than a process to be followed. Schön (1983, 2001) noted that reflective practice is central to evolving one's professional practice; specifically of those in the 'minor professions', like sport coaching, who face a variety of problems that are not readily addressed by explicit knowledge but are often managed by competent practitioners through knowing-in-action. This knowing-in-action may be tacit but it also gets refined as practitioners are faced with "messy" problems in practice prompting reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983, 2001). Reflection-in-action involves noting an irregularity in practice or unexpected outcome prompting a practitioner to identify a problem, consider possible strategies, choose an action, and engage in on-the-spot experiment.

While reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action can evolve practice, Schön (1983, 2001) also acknowledged that there are challenges to growth and learning through reflection. These challenges could take the form of resistance as one may believe their current practice is unquestionably sound and not in need of revision (Schön, 2001). However, challenges can be more nuanced based on how reflection-in-action, specifically, is executed. For instance, the reflection and associated learning is determined by: (a) the formation of the problem, which is based upon what the practitioner notices or attends to in the situation; (b) the strategy choices may be limited by the experience and education of the practitioner; and (c) the implementation of a strategy may be influenced by individual factors (e.g., disposition, experience, education) and situational factors (e.g., athletes, context). Some of these challenges have been highlighted within the coach development research. For example, Gilbert and Trudel (2001), exploring the reflective practices of exemplar youth sport coaches and Kuklick and colleagues (2015), exploring the reflections of undergraduate students in a coaching internship, both identified a coaches' role frame as influencing what was noticed and what strategies were tried during their reflective practice. Nash and colleagues (2022) also noted that coaches engaging in a reflective practice intervention began to see the benefits of reflection as it assisted them in "making sense" of practice as they were questioned and began to question their own practice during stimulated video recall events. Thus, the challenges raised by Schön and the current research findings suggest that coaches may benefit from guidance in identifying, framing, and critically considering strategies to resolve problems of practice.

4. Tentative solution: explanation of practice

So far, we have carefully staged an argument which articulates the importance of an internship experience for coaches in their pre-professional training and signals the difficulty in doing this well. As facilitators with 'skin in the game' we have consulted a range of perspectives, principles, and practices, which may aid us in improving the situation, which were outlined in the previous section. Within this current section we describe our specific response to the problem, providing some insight into our collective reasoning.

Between January and May 2024, we facilitated an international VE for 21 undergraduate sport coaching students from Leeds Beckett University (n = 7) and James Madison University (n = 14). Of this total cohort, nine members were female (43%) and 12 (57%) were male. This is skewed by a heavy male representation from Leeds Beckett University, despite their underrepresentation overall. Students ranged in age from 19 to 25 years old. Each coach was engaged in an internship as part of their degree studies. To initiate the 12-week project, all participants first met each other in a live whole-group virtual meeting where they were introduced to the project and supported to learn about Flip – the video-based discussion app where all future asynchronous interactions would take place. In the following weeks, coaches were prompted to produce short (e.g., 2-5-min) videos to introduce themselves and describe their internship context. Throughout the remaining weeks, coaches shared problems of professional practice; by this we mean, they were prompted by a facilitator to post regular videos introducing an authentic issue that led to increased curiosity, puzzlement, surprise, or/and uncertainty (Muir & North, 2023). Within this video, coaches were encouraged to invite a response from their peers in the form of

text-based comments. Responses typically ranged from questions seeking further clarification, validation that the issue was interesting and that other coaches were curious too, and/or offers of support in terms of signposting to materials/resources or new ideas.

The expanded international peer group was curated in a way which would broaden the variety and volume of interests, experiences, and expertise beyond each institution's own cohort. Linked to our attempts to enhance the internship experience, the project had a number of specific aims: (1) leverage the benefits of Web 2.0 technology to add value to an existing internship learning opportunity; (2) specifically, provide a targeted opportunity for coaches to develop and draw upon a network of support; (3) foreground the generative (versus transactional) nature of feedback as coaches surface and share issues that are important and interesting to them; and (4) aid us, as facilitators, in more meaningfully supporting coaches as a result of improved awareness and understanding of their issues.

While we appreciate there might appear to be many synergies between this VE and the concept of communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1999), in that there is mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, we cannot faithfully claim to have set out with that intention. As Culver and Trudel (2008) and Occhino and colleagues (2013) point out, not all socially-oriented learning opportunities represent a CoP and this is no different; that is not to say we don't find those associated ideas helpful in the practicalities of our work. Indeed, we have been influenced by a patchwork of ideas connected to the broader social learning theory literature (e.g., Adams, 2006; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). What's more, we have increasingly concerned ourselves with the published literature examining the important role of support networks and the ways in which coaches learn with and from each other (Erickson et al., 2008). Consistently, 'other coaches' are cited as both a preferred and actual source of knowledge (Woezik et al., 2021). In some cases, coaches with greater levels of experience are perceived to be more valuable (Occhino et al., 2013) and in other cases peers within different areas of expertise were viewed as being desirable. Encapsulating all of this, we have been influenced perhaps most by the work of Muir and North (2023) and stayed faithful to the notion that: "Learning occurs through direct engagement with lived experience, through practical tasks, through social engagement and interaction ... learning designers can play an important role in co-creating situations that support learners to notice things that might otherwise go unnoticed." (p. 2).

5. Reflections

The design and ongoing facilitation of this international VE for coaches was positively intended and well-informed; however, it was not unproblematic. Through this closing section, we draw on insights from the experience to inform others who may wish to set out on a similar expedition. To make a fair assessment of the project's success, we have structured our reflections against the original aims (see previous section). Importantly, however, it is beyond the scope of the article format and purpose to discuss data here, nevertheless we do intend to publish an empirical review in due course. Specifically, we will explore coaches' data, following a content analysis of verbatim video transcriptions and textual commentary on videos, to identify the nature of coaches' problems of professional practice in detail (i.e., issues that are most interesting) and degree to which the coaches became increasingly sophisticated in examining those with others over time.

Our ambition to leverage the benefits of Web 2.0 technology was met by (what we perceived to be) some apprehension from coaches to engage deeply (depending upon maturity – older, more experienced coaches did better) and express vulnerability with their peers. Although 85 videos were shared, with a running time of 122.4 h, the video response rate and comment rate declined over time. However, those who *did* continue to participate fully in the VE notably managed to introduce their problems of professional practice with increasing sophistication, deepened their reflections, and became increasingly critical (through the ongoing dialogue). We note the importance of context here, too; while coaches at James Madison University were mandated to participate should they wish to succeed in assessment, this was not the case for coaches at Leeds Beckett University. Yet, this should not be confused with instrumental engagement by the former. We take a position laid out by McCarthy (2024) that all assessment activities are learning opportunities (i.e., where learning is foregrounded, and the activity is meaningful, authentic, and embedded in coaches' day-to-day reality). Indeed, in future iterations we anticipate more heavily integrating the VE with assessment at both HEIs and adopting the principles of good assessment practice set out by McCarthy and colleagues (2022). Aligned with the assessment process, we also recognise the potential need for a heuristic device to facilitate how we frame the prompts, temporally space the prompts, and provide meaningful feedback on responses to facilitate reflective practice.

Our second and third aims, to foster a network of support among coaches and (re)position feedback as 'generative', were limited by the temporal dimensions of our work. In short, we reflect that this stuff really does take time and that was a resource we did not have much of. Identifying confidantes in a community-oriented learning opportunity, as Occhino and colleagues (2013) noted, can be a lengthy process. Slowly developing relationships combined with fast-paced internships and an urgency to produce videos and catalyze conversation (somewhat, admittedly, driven by our demands), meant that coaches would often talk past each other or move on to secondary or tertiary problems before a response was sought to the primary issue. In future iterations, we will extend the VE duration (beyond 12 weeks), invest more in early relationship-building, consider pairing coaches to increase accountability, and develop an even more supportive environment to facilitate the openness and vulnerability necessary to share problems of professional practice.

Lastly, we aspired to learn more about the coaches' issues and interests so that we could more meaningfully support. In many ways we used the VE to, in the words of Kennedy (2016) "ferret out the unique interests, perceptions, and interpretations" (p. 2) of coaches and in our view, this was a success. A more detailed knowledge and understanding of their 'coaching world' provided more entry points to learning, adopting Muir and North's (2023) 'in-to-out' strategy. On multiple occasions coaches were more inclined to seek support from facilitators at their home HEI, than they otherwise would, knowing that there already existed a shared understanding and ongoing dialogue around the issues of greatest importance to them. Generating more information, more often, led to a sense of coaches feeling more supported and more inclined to seek out support when necessary.

6. Conclusion

Helping coaches to learn in and through internships is a persistent challenge for facilitators in HELs. Here, we have put forward a practical example which addresses the challenge directly and revealed the underpinning ideas which were of greatest influence. Our VE for coaches in the USA and UK was a success, in that coaches who persisted in their engagement were perceived to be able to think more deeply and critically about their problems of professional practice; were afforded the opportunity to develop a network of support; were exposed to the notion of generative (versus transactional) feedback; and undoubtedly provided facilitators with insight about them, and their issues and interests, that could be used to offer more and better support. Yet, there were clear issues with the VE related to duration, organisation and structure, and the extent to which we targeted the development of reflective skills and capabilities required to maximise the benefits (i.e., the gap between challenge and support was too significant for some). That said, we believe there is considerable potential in continuing to pursue VE as a mechanism for coach learning, on the basis that: (1) greater care is taken in framing and staging the process, with more time afforded to develop a shared sense of purpose, accountability, and network of support; and (2) frequent, sustained, and deliberate support from facilitators in developing coaches' reflective skills and capabilities.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Liam McCarthy: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Ian Cowburn:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Lori Gano-Overway:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

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