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Abstract

Coach Development Programmes (CPDs) are important, but significantly under-researched or understood, elements in the preparation of sport coaches. This paper draws upon experience of carrying out five programme evaluations of CDPs in the United Kingdom. Each of the programme evaluations was based on an evaluation model that focused on relevance, fidelity, and intermediate outcomes; logic models incorporating each programme's intentions were devised and informed the evaluation. Evidence was gathered from interviews with coaches, coach developers, mentors, and other stakeholders, supplemented by questionnaires to coaches. Issues discussed include: the relevance and impact of particular delivery modes, the incorporation of coaches' practice, the enhancement of future capacity versus current performance, the emphasis on personal development and interpersonal skills, the degree of embeddedness, and the degree of alignment between programme elements and personnel. The lessons learned have implications for similar mid-career adult education, both formal and non-formal, in Canada and more widely.

Lessons learned from programme evaluations of Coach Development Programmes in the UK

A need for programme evaluations

Education for sport coaches is normally delivered at a post-school stage and with a blend of formal certificated qualifications and non-formal CPD opportunities (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). There is a significant body of research that suggests sport coaches value initial certificated training, but learn much more from mediated experience and workshop-type programmes (Cushion, 2011; Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne, & Llewellyn, 2013; Purdy, 2018). Partly as a result of the perceived inadequacies of formal coach education programmes and recognition of the very varied educational experiences and qualifications of adult coaches, sport's regulatory bodies have established semi-formal education programmes for experienced mid-career coaches. Over the past 10 years, I have conducted programme evaluations on five such coach development programmes in the UK. This paper offers reflections on the lessons learned from conducting these evaluations. There were a number of initial challenges to overcome, including the absence of a suitable programme evaluation model, the absence of an extensive supporting literature on which to base expectations or comparative outcomes, and, in all cases, the invitation to evaluate the programmes was issued after the programmes had begun. An appropriate evaluation model was devised, but the evaluation options were limited to post-event studies.

The literature base that supports the evaluations was fairly modest, and fails to situate the findings within an appropriate appreciation of the purpose and scope of formal coach education and less-formal coach development (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle & Rynne, 2009). We might speculate that in an occupational grouping such as sport coaching with a fragmented and often limited professional preparation, post-experience coach development programmes assume a greater significance. The process of acculturation and occupational socialisation is eased by recruiting coaches from elite athletes in that sport, but this has potential limitations of taken-for-granted assumptions about practice and perhaps devaluing the development process (Blackett, Evans & Piggott, 2018). Put another way, the balance of formal and informal learning that is a constituent element of occupational socialisation and the development of expertise for coaches (Chambers, 2018) is tilted towards the informal in the case of performance coaches (Rynne & Mallett, 2014). Structured post-experience coach development programmes help to remedy that balance, in addition to their professional upskilling role.

The term coach development programme (CDP) is used by Evans, McGuckin, Gainforth, Bruner and Côté (2015) in an all-embracing way to capture learning activities, but with assumptions about being focused on specific domains, and contrasts longer-term certification programmes with shorter-length non-formal interventions. In a follow-on paper, Lefebvre, Evans, Turnidge, Gainforth and Côté (2016) classified development programmes in sport coaching using domain forms (i.e., content) and organisational context. These conceptualisations offer too broad a compass for CPD. For the purposes of this paper, coach development programmes are understood to refer to longer-term development programmes with an integrated package of learning activities, usually with a manifest emphasis on the coaches' practice, and directed to high-performance coaches.

These programmes have a multi-element series of structured activities, most often including residential experiences, observation of experts, workshop programmes, and mentoring support. Such programmes are characterised by analyses of coaches' practice and interventions designed to address the coaches' particular needs. The key feature is an intention to embed the programme in the individual coach's existing practice context, but with recognition of the role demands arising from a particular place within the coaching workforce. The programmes are generally orientated towards performance or high-performance coaching. These may be contrasted with research-based interventions or episodic workshops. Similarly, they are not normally part of the more limited Continuing Professional Development demands associated with re-validation of coach education qualifications (Nash, Sproule & Horton, 2017).

There was a very limited research base on which to scaffold an initial understanding of CPDs. Evaluations of coach development initiatives have tended to focus on research-led interventions, to be targeted on specific, largely interpersonal, aspects of coaches' behaviour, and to be centred on youth sport (Allan, Vierimaa, Gainforth & Côté, 2018; Evans, et al., 2015; Langan, Blake & Lonsdale, 2013). There are few, if any, reported evaluations of multi-element, large-scale programmes designed to enhance the effectiveness of the coach's practice and no critical analysis of findings in the context of coaches' practice or intervention parameters. There are a number of partially relevant prescriptions for 'good' practice in development initiatives (Araya, Bennie & O'Connor, 2015; Jones & Allison, 2014; Paquette & Trudel, 2018). In an earlier paper, Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, and Côté (2008) acknowledged the idiosyncratic nature of coach development, but also found that coaches would prefer more guided and less self-directed learning. Sawiuk, Taylor and Groom (2017; 2018), having interviewed mentors on elite coach mentoring programmes in the UK, questioned the formalisation of outcomes and associated evaluation methods in mentoring. The aggregated findings from this literature are too diverse to constitute a solid basis for evaluating larger-scale CPD programmes.

There is, therefore, a fragile literature base within which evaluation findings might be contextualised. Unfortunately, the academic literature has paid little attention to coach development programmes as defined in this paper. Perhaps not surprisingly, the literature consists of retrospective accounts from high performance athletes about their learning experiences and preferences (Walker, Thomas & Driska, 2018), and research-derived empirical studies, largely based in youth sport. These studies reflect the relative ease of narrowly focused research, and the parameters of acceptable journal-based publications. The challenges of impact evaluations of complex programmes are made evident by their absence.

Conducting the evaluations

The overall purpose of the evaluations was to facilitate improvements in subsequent delivery of the programmes, or to learn lessons for future programmes. A brief overview will illustrate the means through which these reflections have emerged. It was necessary to devise an appropriate programme evaluation model with which to conduct the evaluations. The model used had been devised by me for a project for Sports Coach UK (Sports Coach UK, 2007). Following an extensive review of literature for that project, it became evident that the applicability and appropriateness of existing models were related to and restricted by the content and purpose for which their use was intended; the key driver was the purpose

for which the evaluation was to be designed and implemented. In the context of coach learning and development, this meant favouring an improvement goal over that of accountability. There were convincing arguments in the literature that the myriad interactions within the programme should be emphasised, programme fidelity was essential evidence for programme evaluation, programme theory (e.g. logic models, theory-based evaluation) was a necessary stage in the process, working with 'gross' outcomes rather than 'nett' outcomes at the impact stage may be necessary (Chatterji, 2007), and procedures based on multi-method, pragmatic, and participant-based approaches were appropriate. It therefore emerged that the emphasis would be on the earlier stages of the evaluation process. In the absence of an extensive longitudinal study, the more distant 'downstream' outcomes are difficult to control, have many parallel influences (particularly in complex programmes), and are evidenced in gross effects other than nett effects (those outcomes resulting only from the coach development intervention).

The evidence to populate each evaluation was garnered from documentary analysis, interviews with relevant stakeholders, and questionnaires to participating coaches. Although some quantitative responses were obtained, the value of the coaches' questionnaires lay with the open-ended responses they provided. From initial discussions with programme managers and the scrutiny of associated documentation, logic models were created for each evaluation; these were based on the evaluation model and populated with that programme's particular characteristics. The 'focus points' and issues to arise from this modelling were then used to guide the evidence required and the substance of the questionnaires and interviews. A total of 68 interviews were conducted across the development programmes and additional narrative feedback was received from 48 coaches. The interview themes were specific to the issues identified in the logic model, to the concerns of the Programme Managers, and to the role of the interviewees. There was also an attempt to focus on more general development principles and, in the context of an improvement agenda, to identify perceived but remediable shortcomings.

Five CDPs were evaluated. In the first two, programme evaluations were conducted on a professional development programme for high-performance coaches from four sports. It consisted of a one-to-one intervention programme for coaches not already on a UK Sport development pathway, and who were preparing athletes for a major event. Coaches were able to access support on an individual, face-to-face basis with an expert facilitator to help them reflect on and develop their expertise. This phase of the programme complemented a series of generic and sport-specific professional practice-related workshops in which expert contributors raised awareness of specific issues and related these to the coaches' practice. The facilitator assisted the coaches to reflect on their practice and introduced additional resources to enhance practice. The third programme was designed to accelerate the development of 'emerging' coaches from six sports, who were already working in the high-performance system, but with limited coaching experience, enabling them not only to have an enhanced impact in the short term, but also to prepare to become the elite coaches of the future. The programme was based on the technical development of core coaching skills, and peer and mentoring support over a two year period. In addition to a structured residential workshop programme and a designated mentor, coaches were apprenticed to a master coach within their sport for 'on the job' training. Evaluations four and five were conducted on a coach development programme for (primarily) full-time Olympic programme coaches, across eight sports, involving over 50 high-performance coaches. This was a large-scale, complex programme with a delivery approach and structure to suit each

sport. The basic premise was that an individually tailored series of development opportunities, within a framework of communal workshops, would lead to a beneficial Community of Practice in each sport and a furthering of the individual coach's expertise. The coaches taking part had a needs assessment exercise, which identified relevant development opportunities and mechanisms and resulted in a personal development plan. Typical activities included lunch/breakfast clubs/workshops, 1:2:1 interaction with a mentor, observation and analysis of practice, interaction with external experts, and individualised programmes (visits, apprenticeships, Higher Education courses, training courses, conferences).

Personal reflections and lessons learned

Clarifying programme goals

The evaluation exercises resulted in a body of evidence and experience from which it was possible to synthesise the features perceived to have contributed to successful or less-successful coach development practice. It is important to appreciate two background factors in reflecting on the findings: first, the majority of the participants had existing, usually intensive, coaching commitments on which interventions could be based, or which could provide a reference point for reflection and application (indeed, this was an assumption across the programmes). Second, as the term 'programme' implies, these were multi-element, often multi-deliverer, programmes in which there was a combination of organisational and personal goals. Although each of the coaches involved could be treated, and evaluated, as individual cases, there was also a programme-level ambition, design and delivery that formed part of the evaluations.

Programme Managers attempt to balance the achievement of organisational goals with flexibility, context specificity, and individualisation. Development programmes, therefore, have an issue of 'control'. Where, for example, programmes are relying on mentoring or master coach partnerships with coaches, it is important to ensure, through regular monitoring, that suitable structures have been put in place and are functioning appropriately. Individual coach outcomes are based on improvements in personal practice, not, in my experience, on pre-determined measure of acceptable or desirable practice. The workshop programmes can be 'controlled' (meaning 'assured delivery') and therefore are well organised and delivered. Non-contextualised training can be 'controlled' and this again refers to the workshop programmes. In the context of these evaluations, there is a danger that coach developers emphasise 'what can be controlled', but the difficult (perhaps crucial) practice-based elements (dynamic, complex relationships and priorities between facilitators, mentors, coaches, master coaches, objectives and the demands of the coach's job) are less controlled and controllable.

The absence of clear expectations for coach development programmes was a limiting factor in these evaluations. Process evaluation of programme fidelity (how they had been conducted) showed that there were some limitations in the way that programmes had been delivered, and this could be easily remedied. However, outcome evaluations were limited by the absence of clear statements of expectations against which outcomes could be judged. For example, had programme objectives stated that coaches should be 'more confident and understand their strengths and weaknesses better', then the evaluation of outcomes was relatively straightforward. However, an expectation that coaches' practice in

relation to athlete preparation and performance should be 'better', in a number of identifiable ways, is perhaps a much more relevant and desirable outcome, but is a more challenging prospect for developers and Programme Managers.

The importance of practice as a reference point

There was a very clear message that the coach's practice should be the constant reference point for coach development programmes. This would seem to be an important feature of mid-career, as opposed to initial training, practitioner education. Given the contextual particularity of practice, this meant that individualised and one-to-one intervention activity was preferable. Coaches valued observation and analysis of their practice, and wished to have mentors who could comment knowledgeably on their practice. Coaches wanted more informed observation of their practice, with associated feedback, and a particular video-feedback project providing evidence-based feedback and analysis was well received. This emphasised the qualities of trust and credibility in mentors; this enabled critical analyses of practice to be generated as learning catalysts. It was often the case, particularly in workshop or group meetings, that the coaches' practice was mooted as a focus, but the presentation was not directly related to individuals' circumstances, and application was often left to the coaches. This also highlighted the issue of 'follow up' or reinforcement of interventions.

Developers and mentors

Considerable emphasis was placed on the quality of the coach developers and mentors involved in the programmes. The coach developers who led the programme interventions were generally well respected, albeit with distinctive approaches to their roles. Nevertheless, there was a common approach of using conversation and/or analysis, along with the coach's self-reflection, to identify priorities for development. Coach developers thereafter introduced ideas or supporting materials to improve practice, acting as mentors or relying on other mentors for reinforcement. Mentors generally could be classified in two categories: either advisers and sounding boards or learning mentors. Each had a role to play but it was important for programme managers to ensure that mentors were exercising the anticipated and appropriate role. Where mentors acted as 'sounding boards', an 'external' mentor was an advantage. This created a safe, risk-free, neutral relationship in which the coach could explore relationships and practice. The second type of mentor, the learning support mentor, normally evidenced a more structured intervention and played the role of reinforcing the interventions of the coach developer. In one-to-one relationships, of course, the roles of developer and mentor were most often combined.

The crucial role of developers and mentors highlighted the need to ensure that there was a sound working relationship with the coach. It was important that they were compatible, and programmes in which coaches had a choice of developer and/or mentor reduced the need for changes of personnel. Professional expertise was generally valued above internal volunteers from within the sport, despite evidence of mentor training. Coaches valued mentors who had empathy for and insight into their particular coaching role and circumstances, and who were able to offer informed opinions about their practice – and were able to challenge coaches' practice in relation to progression, climate and learning. The key factor was a positive alignment between all of the personnel, the coach's needs and goals, and the goals of the development programme. This was not always evident in the

evaluations. From the comments of coaches, an effective coach-master coach relationship is more likely when they come from the same discipline within their sport, operate largely in the same location, have an existing relationship, there is commitment from the master coach, a structured process and a shared understanding about intended development.

Delivery structure and programme goals

The emphasis within development programmes highlights the differences between one-to-one development and workshop-type programmes. This is underpinned by a distinction between capacity and performance; capacity is a generalised expertise, which is developed in the practitioner and can be called upon or applied when and as necessary. Performance refers to the application of expertise to a particular athlete or athletes and in a particular context and set of circumstances. Coach development programmes that are couched in 'personal development' terms are generally directed to the former (that is, generic capacity). This is evident in workshop programmes based on what might be termed 'facilitating elements' of practice, including examples such as reflective practice, problem solving, conflict resolution or coaching philosophies. In the evaluations conducted, coaches reported that they were aware of the challenge for presenters in demonstrating relevance and applicability.

On the other hand, one-to-one interventions were more likely to focus on core elements of the coaching process – planning, competition management, skill development, tactical decision making, and so on. The important message is that development programmes should be based on coaches and athletes operating in their usual environment (and this would apply to other practitioners). In the evaluations conducted, there was very limited attention to sport-specific 'technical' elements of expertise and a much greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships. In the one-to-one programmes, this may well have been identified as the most significant area for development (and this may be understandable in high performance sport). Workshop programmes also focused on interpersonal relationships and personal development, but it is not clear if this was an identifiable need or a 'easier' approach.

Evaluations identified the need for clear and, to some extent consensual, models of both development and coaching expertise to underpin programmes. The need was based, not on a desire to impose or regulate approaches to development, but to understand the implications of different approaches across multi-deliverer programmes. Coach developers will have different ways of facilitating learning and development. It is likely that the social element in learning, the role of feedback, the means of consolidating and reinforcing learning, and building on previous learning will be subject to an emergent blend of theory and practice for each developer. This variety is perhaps to be welcomed, but its assumptions should be made clear as this impacts the structuring of interventions and the follow up by mentors. There were instances in which learning was assumed to be taking place (particularly when coaches were assumed to be learning from more expert practitioners), but without any accountability or mediation of the learning. It was a similar picture with interpretations of coaching expertise. It did seem likely that alignment of objectives, resources, activity and priorities would be eased somewhat by a clearly stated approach to coaches' expertise and its development. In each of these cases - development and expertise - there was no suggestion that there was a right and wrong approach; merely that clear statements about each were an important part of programme design, forming a basis for a

shared language, understanding needs, facilitating communication, feedback, managing expectations about impact, and illustrating possibilities for change.

The rationale for each programme was that enhanced coaching expertise would impact positively on the quality of the coaching on offer and result in a situation in which the athlete's performance was more likely to be maximised. The factors that influence athlete performance are too complex to single out particular instances of specific coach development being a factor in improved performance. Nevertheless, there were many instances of a sport's Performance Director identifying perceived weaknesses in coaching performance that had been remedied. The question of impact was one that overshadowed each evaluation. In the absence of longitudinal studies, it was not possible to make strong statements about sustained improvements in practice. Coaches gave guarded responses about sustained changes to practice, but were almost unanimous that they had benefited from the interventions, and could identify improvements in their personal development or coaching expertise.

Creating a positive learning environment

There were a number of features of intervention delivery and structure that were identified by the evaluations as significant for facilitating learning and development. There was a very strong message that the social element in interventions is valued very highly. Within workshop programmes, the social interaction outwith the formal programme was a time for coaching-related interchange, and building networks. In less-formal settings, coaches valued 'breakfast clubs' or meeting as small groups. This was partly to share ideas, but also to receive a 'validation' of practice through peer evaluation. Although the term 'community of practice' was used in programme documentation, these occasions were more likely to produce small, active networks of coaches than true communities of practice. It was also the case that coaches preferred a structured series of interventions, perhaps despite, or because of, their busy schedules. There was some evidence of 'programme drift', where there was a less intensive or structured programme.

Although there was an ethos of self-direction and critical questioning by coaches as part of developers' approaches to learning, it was also clear that coaches valued a sense of 'direction' from developers and mentors. Coaches were comfortable with a guided learning approach but, when based on an informed insight into their practice, wished to have more direction. This may have been more evident in the less-experienced coaches. Another strong reaction from coaches was to the issue of 'follow up'. This was less evident in one-to-one partnerships, but in workshop programmes for example, coaches felt that ideas were presented to them, often by visiting 'external experts', with limited, if any, subsequent follow up. Workshop presenters may engage in exercises to familiarise coaches with the ideas, but this was a very limited means of translation into practice. In some programmes, it was intended that mentors would reinforce these messages, but there was evidence of poor practice in this kind of learning support. The notion that coaches on development programmes would be revisited at the end of the interventions did not arise.

Participation by coaches was normally on a voluntary basis; coaches were able to make judgements about the anticipated benefit of the programme. However, there were a number of coaches for whom participation was a required part of their contracts. This produced some variable 'buy in' to the programme. The factors at play in these instances were age, attitude to collective activity, previous lack of development opportunity, previous

poor experiences, different short- and long-term perspectives, internal competition, and perceptions of ‘what’s in it for me’. For these coaches, and, indeed, for all others, a needs analysis was a necessary first step in helping to identify development priorities. This was more appreciated when it involved observation of practice, but it was also important to present this as a self appraisal. Typically, this led to a personal development plan. It was relatively rare for this to be used as an active instrument of development, and there was potential for it to be used more productively.

The principle of ‘embeddedness’ was one that arose across the programmes. This referred to the extent that coach developers were either isolated from or integral parts of the sport’s coaching activities (remembering that on the majority of occasions the coaches were working with the best athletes in the sport). It was rare for developers to work entirely at-arms-length from the sport’s infrastructure, but it was also rare for developers to be completely integrated. For this to happen, developers would be present at coaching strategy meetings, active players in strategy formulation, in communication with performance directors and head coaches, and aware of objectives and policy on athlete selection and progression. In practice, developers held a middle position. However, there was very strong support for an element of embeddedness, particularly with one-to-one and small group development activity.

Summary

The lessons learned from the evaluation of the coach development programmes in this paper have a wider application. This stems from their more general adult education characteristics and also for their relevance to similar advanced development programmes in other countries. The programmes are designed for an adult population with varying previous educational experience (80% of active coaches in the UK are over 25 years of age [UK Coaching, 2017]), are post-experience and combine employment with an additional mediated learning experience. Perhaps more significantly, similar development programmes in sport coaching are in place across the globe (Callary, Culver, Werthner & Bales, 2014); these may be certificated or non-certificated but exhibit similar characteristics. Callary et al (2014) examined programmes in Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland. They identified experiential learning, mentoring, peer support, and on-going deployment.

These programmes also mirror the characteristics of the higher levels of formal certificated programmes, but are also relevant in countries and systems in which there is significant investment in elite-level sport - particularly Olympic sport – in which appointments are rarely based solely, if at all, on formal qualifications. Coach development programmes are viewed as a mechanism for ensuring a level of accountability of expertise for coaches who may have been recruited in an accelerated fashion into senior posts.

Canada provides examples of coach development programmes whose similarity to the programmes reported in this paper emphasise the generality and applicability of the implementation lessons that emerged. The Coaching Association of Canada’s Advanced Coaching Diploma is described as an ‘adult learning experience’ (see <http://coach.ca/advanced-coaching-diploma-s13778>). It is an extended multi-sport programme with peer support, mentoring, multiple delivery modes and a structured learning community. Another non-certificated programme in Canadian sport is Own The Podium’s Coaching Enhancement Programme (see <http://www.ownthepodium.org>). Own

The Podium was established to ensure adequate levels of support for Team Canada's high-performance Olympic athletes. The Coaching Enhancement Programme is an 'upskilling' programme and is concerned to ensure that the 'quality of the development experience is very high'. The programme has flexible development options, an intensive short programme, a workshop programme, mentoring and peer support. These examples serve to demonstrate that the lessons learned from the evaluations in this paper have a much wider resonance.

It is important to acknowledge that the evaluations that inspired these reflections differed from the research-based, mostly small-scale interventions that are the basis of systematic reviews. Such research-purposed 'development programmes' employ theoretically-sound treatments in controlled conditions and are measured by psychometric instruments or satisfaction studies. Typically, there is no attempt to transfer changed behaviour into the generality and context specificity of the coach's practice. That said, however, the almost omnipresent focus on interpersonal relationship skills and predisposing states is normally to be found in youth sport, in which it might be argued that the greater emphasis on communication, animation and climate setting by coaches makes such a focus more relevant. On the other hand, the evaluations illustrated in this paper are characterised by high-performance sport and the challenges associated with both the 'messiness' of intensive coaching practice and the fidelity of larger-scale programmes. There is more likely, therefore, to be flexibility in delivery, role specificity, attention to sustainability, and the involvement of athletes in active experimentation.

On the basis of experience of evaluating CPD programmes, and reflecting on both singular and aggregated findings, attention should be paid to (a) the strategic role of programmes, in relation to purpose, role, expertise, complementary qualifications and targeted developmental pathways; (b) placing the coach's practice at the heart of interventions; (c) coach developers operating with an element of embeddedness within the sport; (d) alignment of purpose between developers, mentors, programme managers, performance directors and coaching directors; and (e) clearly stated learning outcomes. With the benefit of experience, evaluation strategies for individual programmes should have an emphasis on robust rationales and closely monitored fidelity of delivery. This can be sited within a more strategic periodic evaluation of effective coaching and a cumulative assessment of coaching workforce capital within sports.

The evidence from the evaluations conducted on these coach development programmes suggests that effective programmes were characterised by strong practitioner commitment, purposeful facilitation, structured practice time, timely feedback and reinforcement, and social scaffolding. Well-received programmes were needs-led, role specific and individualised. There was a place for both workshop programmes and one-to-one evidence-based interventions, each of which are complemented by a social dimension in which informal peer support was important. It is crucial that the learning expectations from all elements of the programmes are clearly stated and understood by all concerned. Although derived from a specific educational and developmental context, the evaluations have provided insights into features of good practice that can be applied to the sport system in Canada, but also more widely to mid-career educational development programmes in other spheres..

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