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# Stories as Personal Coaching Philosophy

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## **ABSTRACT**

The importance of coaches developing and articulating a personal coaching philosophy which encapsulates their values and beliefs is widely recognised. Yet it is also acknowledged that many coaches resist what appears an abstract task or find it to be of limited use in their day-to-day practice. In this paper we explore the potential of an alternative approach to developing and articulating a personal coaching philosophy: storytelling. Following a discussion of the potential of stories, we present a story written by one coach which expresses her personal philosophy in a way that is firmly rooted in her coaching practice. Storytelling approaches, we suggest, can reveal the connections between abstract/general philosophy and the personal embodied experience of coaching. We reflect on the possibilities and problems of using stories as philosophy and offer some suggestions for how coaches may be supported in developing their coaching philosophy through storytelling.

**Key words:** Coaching Philosophy, Golf, Narrative, Storytelling, Values

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **COACHING PHILOSOPHIES: POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS**

The need for coaches to develop and articulate a personal coaching philosophy has been flagged by numerous of writers over the years [see for example 1-5]. Two related justifications for the importance of a coaching philosophy are often given in the literature. First, what coaches actually *do* in their coaching practice is understood as being unavoidably shaped by their personal values and views [5]. For those coaches who have not developed an explicit coaching philosophy, the influence their values and views exert on their practice is likely to be subconscious or unconscious. These individuals are therefore less likely to be aware of the reasons *why* they do what they do which might be expected to hinder, for example, their effectiveness when faced with new contexts, scenarios, or challenges. In contrast, the process of developing and articulating a personal philosophy is thought to help

coaches consciously and explicitly recognise the ways in which their values and views shape their practice and behaviours<sup>1</sup>. It is on this basis that a second justification for the importance of a coaching philosophy is given, namely that: “clearly articulating one’s philosophy is a prerequisite to good practice, as it provides direction and focus in relation to how one goes about doing the job of coaching” [4, p. 55].

Typically, an individual’s philosophy is defined in broad, general, and abstract terms (for some examples, see [2]). Abstractness has, of course, been a hallmark of philosophy and philosophising over the centuries in that the ideas which are discussed and debated – the subject matter and the modes of expression – tend to focus on the general rather than the particular. On the one hand this is useful as, some might argue, the point of philosophy is to explore general principles or ideas which can be applied or translated to a wide variety of possible contexts or scenarios. In keeping with this view, a coaching philosophy can be seen as a general set of statements that have the potential to apply to the wide range of contexts and scenarios in which a coach might work. This understanding tends to be widely supported and expressed within the coaching literature – in Cassidy et al.’s [4, p. 57] terms, for example, a coaching philosophy is “a set of principles that guide an individual’s practice.” Here, (general and abstract) *principles* inform (specific and particular) *practice*.

A prevailing philosophical focus on the abstract and general is not, however, without its problems. Chief among these, in our view, is that because of its general and abstract nature it can be difficult to establish, observe, and demonstrate clear links between philosophy and personal *experience*. Put another way, there is potential for a mismatch or disjuncture between (general and abstract) philosophy and (specific and particular) practice. One common tension is noted by Jenkins [5, p. 240]: “While coaches may state that their philosophy emphasises development and experience, their behaviour often instead exhibits an emphasis on winning.” It has been suggested that this kind of mismatch or lack of alignment – between philosophy and behaviour – is not unusual among coaches [6] and might therefore represent a limitation of how personal coaching philosophies are developed and expressed.

Cassidy et al [4, p. 58] suggest that all too often, “little account is taken of contextual pressures and constraints when writing philosophies. Consequently, when produced they lack the flexibility and credibility to be truly functional.” As a result, some coaches find the philosophies they have developed to be of little use in their day-to-day practice. We have also noticed how it seems to often be more experienced or mature coaches who have developed and articulated a personal philosophy, while others are at a loss to know where to begin. When we asked (during an interview) an experienced dance teacher if she had a philosophy that underpinned her work, she replied: “Yes, I do, but I don’t know how to even begin to put it into words!” [7, p. 134]. Although this individual enacted a number of clearly defined values and beliefs in her professional practice, she (like many others) finds it difficult to put these values and beliefs into an abstract verbal form.

Responses such as this should come as no big surprise: developing and articulating a philosophy is no easy task. But is there another way by which a personal coaching philosophy might be developed and articulated? How might we, as coach educators, better

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<sup>1</sup>The relationship between values, philosophy, and style is complex. To provide some clarification in the context of this article, we view a coaching philosophy as an articulated framework which organises one’s sometimes isolated and unconnected values in a relatively coherent fashion. In contrast, one’s coaching style is more of a practical matter, being the *way* we work. It is an action rather than an articulation – a method towards a desired outcome or aim. Coaching style is therefore likely to change (to some degree) according to context (e.g., coaching children, older adults, or professionals) whereas values will likely remain constant.

support students in this challenging but important task? It is to these questions that we now turn.

### STORYTELLING AS PHILOSOPHY

Lewis [8] presents a selection of stories which underlie his professional practice as a teacher, describing the stories as providing a reservoir of possibilities which help guide his actions when he is faced with a situation in which he does not know what to do. More recently, Jenkins [5] discusses the potential usefulness of stories in the context of developing and articulating a personal coaching philosophy and suggests that storytelling has a potential role to play in “clarifying values, articulating a philosophy and aligning actions with values” (p. 237). Through our research [see 9-11], we have experienced the ways in which the narrative processes involved in storytelling can play a valuable and perhaps unique role in education and professional development. While we do not see stories as a panacea for *every* problem or challenge in coaching and education, we have been impressed by the ways in which stories seem to hold much potential in terms of: i) providing an explicit link between the theoretical/abstract level and the practical level of individual lived experience; ii) allowing coaches the opportunity to reflect on and learn from events or moments in their own and each other’s histories [9].

For three reasons, we see the storytelling process as a way to produce personally relevant material which might be useful in the task of developing and articulating a personal philosophy. First, stories necessarily start with *personal embodied experience* in the form of specific events or happenings. Indeed, a story is not a story unless it is based around specific people (characters), places, and happenings at a particular moment in time. In this sense stories are *situated* in time and place. On our understanding, a philosophy inevitably originates from *somewhere* and with *something* – by starting with a situated story of the individual coach’s lived experience, the developing philosophy is grounded or rooted in the ‘real’ as opposed to the abstract and general.

Second, while stories are personal, they are at the same time socio-cultural constructions [12]. In addition to revealing aspects of the individual, stories can therefore also illuminate the ways in which an individual’s actions and experiences are shaped or constrained by social and cultural factors [13]. Thus, through preparing a personal story – and attending to the ‘completed’ story – it is possible to gain a greater appreciation of the social, cultural, and even political forces which exert an influence on the individuals concerned and the events which unfold. Much classic literature over the centuries explicitly explores these kinds of processes: not only are different characters presented in relation/conflict with each other, but individual characters are presented in relation/conflict with socio-cultural factors such as societal expectations, power relations, cultural norms, and so on. In a coaching context, this translates as a way to explore how an individual coach’s work is shaped or influenced by other coaches, the athletes s/he works with, the media, financial pressures, personal aspirations, and so on.

Third, and finally, as we have previously observed [9], stories provide a ‘freeze-frame’ through which past events may be reconsidered. Through the storytelling process, the kinds of lived experiences upon which a coach’s philosophy ought to be grounded can be recreated and made available for further reflection and discussion [9, 10, 14]. Without some kind of opportunity to re-present significant moments or events, it is difficult (or impossible) to personally or collaboratively explore and reconsider the meaning of those events or the lessons that may pertain.

It is on the basis of these three points that we would like now to explore the potential of

storytelling as an alternative form of *reflective exercise* [4] aimed at helping individuals develop and articulate a personal coaching philosophy. We begin by offering a personal story, written by Kitrina, which re-presents selected events surrounding her coaching practice with one particular ‘talented’ young sportsperson. Following the story, we: (i) reflect on how we think this story *shows* Kitrina’s personal coaching philosophy in action; and (ii) offer some suggestions on how coaches might be supported in using storytelling in the service of developing and articulating a coaching philosophy.

#### KITRINA’S COACHING BACKGROUND

Kitrina qualified as a Professional Golfer’s Association (PGA) level three coach in 1989, and was awarded “Master Professional” status by the British PGA in 2007, having coached at every level, conducted and published golf related research, and initiated the PGA Continuing Professional Development programme. Her coaching practice took place alongside playing golf, mainly on the Women’s European Tour, where for over a decade she was one of the most successful players, winning prestigious tour events and representing Europe in the first winning Solheim Cup team. During her evolution as a coach, Kitrina observed her own practice dramatically change in terms of how she came to understand the needs of clients, how she selected what the focus of the lesson should be, how she balanced inputting technical information with other more organic considerations (such as: What are this individual’s most pressing and immediate needs? How does this individual learn most effectively?).

#### FIRST TEA

Sometimes they contacted her by phone, but more so recently, by e-mail. Often, she noticed, it was a parent, worried about a son or daughter. Before they reached her doorstep, there had usually been lengthy attempts at sorting out the problem with the regular coach or through their own devices. The catalyst for the call had quite often been an emotional outburst where feelings of despair had surfaced, but these were often preceded by a plateau or fall in performance, which could have occurred over a long period of time and might be accompanied by mood changes or unusual and unexpected behaviour. Through word of mouth, recommendation, or through her column in *Women and Golf* magazine, some followed up and asked for help. The e-mail she received in early May therefore came as no surprise, and it wasn’t unusual: “... in a nutshell, we don’t know what to do, he’s a good kid, and his golf’s always gone so well, we don’t know what to do. Do you think you can help? Yours sincerely, Ian.”

Part of her felt like saying, “Of course I can!” – that arrogant and annoyed part of herself that thought, “Hitting a white ball *isn’t* really that difficult!” “What pressure are you under and is he putting pressure on himself? What expectations does he have? Where is the balance in his life?” At the same time, another part of her thought, “*Will* I be able to help? Do I want to *care*? Do I want to invest my time, energy, interest in this person I don’t even know?” She was less moved by the fact that the person needing help was talented, or had shown tremendous potential, or was a top pro, and more moved by how low and vulnerable, how deeply and emotionally traumatised so many ‘top pro’s’ and ‘budding young stars’ had proved to be.

The ways she went about trying to help the string of golfers and parents that knocked on her door were built upon her belief that, without a mutually caring relationship, progress wouldn’t be possible – and that would call *her* to invest *herself* in them. But, without them understanding the cultural influences on their own values and goals, and taking time to

reflect on their lives, being honest and open, progress wouldn't be possible either. It was a two-way thing, but it depended on them taking a step back and looking at a bigger picture.

But, she always had that nagging feeling that in the culture of golf, her ways of working were unusual. A coach would usually see a pupil on the practice ground, he or she would usually watch the pupil's swing and ask about performance decrement and when it occurs. Quite often the coach would wheel out some fancy video equipment and subsequently perform an advanced biomechanical analysis of the player's swing which would reveal how to make improvement. She could do that, but didn't feel that was the most important or pressing issue. Moreover, that route did not align with what she believed was the most supportive long-term way forward for the individual in a holistic sense. In short, her philosophy, of caring for the person first, meant even though she knew there was an expectation from the pupil for coaches to be and act in a particular way, those ways were not her.

#### CPD COACHING SEMINAR, DAY 1

"That won't work at my club!" Brian the head pro at Great Maddock Golf Club blurted out halfway through her sentence. The CPD seminar had been considering coaching philosophy and, at that particular moment, alternative methods for working with clients. Brian, a man in his mid-fifties, sat with his legs spread wide and arms crossed over his slightly pear-shaped belly. He wasn't at all enthused: "I talk to the player en route to the range, that's where I learn about them. I don't need to have coffee with them, I learn everything I need to know on the walk from the pro shop to the range. They want to hit balls, then after a few shots I begin to consider what should be done, that's where I analyse their game. Then, after the lesson, in the pro shop, I write down a practice and we get on with it." Brian was loud, and he shook his head every time she asked the group a question. Her aim in the CPD seminars mirrored her goals with all pupils: to support the development of each individual. So she didn't rebuke him in front of his peers for his rude interruptions or for his chortling exclamations of what would or would not work. Instead, she tried again.

"And," she said, although she suspected otherwise, "I'm sure you build trust and rapport and glean good information on that walk Brian, but that is just one way we can and might learn about an individual who comes for a lesson. What I'm trying to encourage you all to think about is: *why* do you do that? And how may another approach be better for *some people*? What happens when you get asked to teach the county squad or the national team – where do you start with them?"

"I'd tell 'em not to spend so much bloody time in the bar and get to the range!" he laughed, looking round at the group, his belly wobbling as he chortled. "That's what our team needs!"

#### KITCHEN TIME

Her dissatisfaction, however, with the way she had been taught to teach began when she reflected on the types of issues her clients seemed to need to discuss. Commonly, it was a tearful player who called her up, at an emotional low, vulnerable, and often for tour players, with their income, way of living, on the line. Seldom was it *just* a technical issue that needed correction, instead it was often a complex mix of fears and performance problems. Over the years, she reflected more on what types of methods and information she drew on to help solve players' dilemmas. Through her clients' letters of recommendation and thanks following sessions, she began to understand more fully why she had faith in working the way she did. By looking beyond the "Thank you so much" and the "You have been so helpful"

she began to explore *what exactly* it was that the individual had found so helpful.

Although as a newly qualified professional coach she had begun to work like Brian – by going straight to the practice ground, looking for swing faults – it was clear from conversations with clients that their immediate needs were for something more than technical advice. Often, it was confidence building that was needed, or emotional support. At other times, players had needed help to gain greater understanding of their anxieties, tensions, fears, apprehension and worries. The research she had embarked on taught her that there was no one way, and that by helping players to look at alternatives they may become better placed to make the choices that suit their lives and values, to be empowered and, eventually, to not need her.

Over the years therefore, she began to realise that what most clients needed wasn't best delivered by being on the practice ground during the first meeting. In contrast, sitting in her kitchen, players' games miraculously improved, to the extent that a trip to the range or course wasn't even needed for some players. It also seemed that the better the player, the more kitchen time was required.

## BREWING TEA

The door bell rang and she opened the door to a heavy-set, tall male, with dark brown eyes, white cropped hair, and hairy arms, next to an equally tall male, built like a bean-pole, spiky jet black hair and a beautiful smooth complexion. "Puberty has been gentle on him," she thought looking at the young man's spotless, radiant face.

She held out her hand. "Hi, I'm..." But the father dived in: "Oh, we know who you are! My wife takes *Women and Golf*, we read your column every week, we think you talk a lot of sense." She beckoned him through the door and down the hall and as he walked past she held out her hand to the second male. He made brief eye contact then looked at the floor. His hands were wide, with long fingers and smooth skin, his grip not too firm and slightly clammy. "I think he's nervous," she thought, disliking the wetness of his hand on her dry skin as she led them through to the kitchen.

"Please take a seat," she said smiling and going to the fridge. "I have some lovely berry smoothy if either of you fancy something cold or I'll make a pot of tea if you fancy something hot."

Prepping the drinks allowed her time to watch them together, to observe who spoke for who when she asked what might have seemed innocuous questions like: "How was the drive?" "Which way did you come?" "Have you been down here before?" She noted whether there were jokes between them, how open they appeared, what they looked at, and how they sat, their clothing, its neatness, their shoes and aftershave. These two seemed comfortable, she thought, the son answering and being allowed to speak.

"The satnav's broken and I asked Tim to navigate," Ian mused.

"Yeah, but I fell a sleep at a critical moment," they both laughed, "and we missed the turn!" Tim finished.

"Ah... we had a nice stop though, eh, in that little pub?"

"Yeah, Dad's very good at finding good food and pubs even if he can't find his way!" They both laughed again. She sat down and placed the tea pot on the mat.

For the Chinese, tea is more than a bag in a cup, and for her too this first tea told her a lot about these two men who had asked for her help. She allowed her relationship with them to brew, like the tea in the pot, and then, when she felt it was time, she poured, and they too, poured out their worries.

As she has seen too often, the young man before her so wanted to please his father, he

wanted to gain his respect, he wanted to make him proud. As she had seen too often, this father loved his son, but had neglected to tell him. He was so proud of him, loved him so much, but was tied by his masculine ways, his muscled male body, and was used to acting the hard dad. And so the two, though appearing close, and though having great respect for each other, never opened up to each other. The father would get frustrated because he wanted his son to do well, but, more than that, he just wanted his son to embrace life and enjoy it. As the pressure to perform grew and as the son tried to live up to what he felt his father expected, every shot on the course grew more and more important, until every non-perfect shot was an arrow to his soul – he threw clubs, broke putters, became moody, sulky and eventually apathetic. They talked about performing, she talked about her golf, winning, losing, the best bits and the bits the newspapers said were the best bits. She shared stories from her research, stories from the tour, she talked about different ways to practice, blending technical information with more relational issues, about how to find and maintain balance. She asked about their goals, family life, friends, other interests, she made another pot of tea, and Ian told his son “I love you.”

“That was the most amazing day of my life, and my golf is back on track” the e-mail the following month read. She felt humbled, but this wasn’t the first e-mail that had said such a thing. She felt incredibly sad that these issues were not picked up on more often by other pro’s and she felt he over-estimated her input. “I haven’t really done anything,” she thought.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE STORY

Previously, we offered a three-point rationale for why it might be useful to explore storytelling approaches in the context of coaching philosophy, and would like to reflect now on the way that these three points are demonstrated in *First Tea*. First, and perhaps most strikingly, rather than operating at the level of the abstract and general, the story prioritises the particular by focusing on a series of specific events drawn from Kitrina’s lived experience. This is evident repeatedly throughout the story (for example: by briefly reproducing the initial e-mail which asked for help; by describing in detail Kitrina’s first meeting with Ian and Tim in her apartment). While, for reasons of confidentiality, certain identifying details have been changed, the events in the story are events which have actually happened in Kitrina’s work as a coach. In this sense, the story is rooted in *embodied experience* rather than opinion, speculation, or conjecture. This distinction is, we believe, important as this increases the chances of an individual’s developing philosophy being aligned with what s/he actually *does* in her/his professional practice. It is this quality of stories, therefore, that provides one way to get round the observed problem of articulated philosophies which do not align with demonstrated coaching behaviour [5].

Second, we noted that (by virtue of being socio-cultural constructions) stories have the potential to illuminate social, cultural, and political phenomena which influence an individual’s practice. These processes are revealed in the story at several points. A clear example is evident in Kitrina’s account of her public interaction with Brian during a CPD seminar. Here, Brian adopts the position of a ‘traditionally-minded’ golf coach and attempts to ridicule and discredit Kitrina’s alternative way of working in front of his peers. By doing so, he resists change, striving instead to maintain the status quo of the technically-focused ways of working with which he seems most familiar and comfortable. To do so, Brian draws on social structures (i.e., he seeks support from his peers by looking round at them), cultural tropes (by suggesting that British sportspeople under-achieve and spend too much time in the bar), and political discourse around gender (through an attempt to discredit and/or marginalize a female seminar leader in the environment of an all-male audience of coaches).

The effect of all this – within the story – is a sense of pressure which Kitrina must actively and deliberately resist in order to remain authentic to her personal values and beliefs.

Third, we noted that stories can provide a platform for reflection and discussion through ‘freeze-framing’ or ‘replaying’ previous events which may have occurred in a blur [9]. It should be self-evident that the story demonstrates this process in that events which happened in the past now ‘exist’ in the present in textual form on the page. *First Tea* also, however, demonstrates personal reflective processes in action. At these times, Kitrina’s storytelling shifts from recounting concrete events from her lived experience towards reflecting on the meanings and/or subjective effects of those events. For example, after briefly quoting from the e-mail she received from Ian, Kitrina presents three paragraphs in which she shares her personal responses to this email and makes links between: (i) her emotional response to the request for help; (ii) her previous experiences as a golfer, coach and researcher; and (iii) the dominant culture of golf and coaching more generally. These three paragraphs are *reflective* in that Kitrina is seen consciously thinking about different ways of responding to Ian’s request, and *reflexive* because by sharing with the reader ‘internal’ processes of thinking, feeling, and decision-making, Kitrina reveals the processes through which her philosophy and course of action came to be. This kind of detour from the objective events upon which the story is based are, we think, an important stage in developing a philosophy and are processes which can beneficially (from the perspective of education and professional development) be continued and expanded through dialogue with others after the story has been written [for examples of this process, see 9, 10, 14].

At one point in the story, the coach explicitly declares a key aspect of her personal philosophy. She articulates it as: “caring for the person first.” This statement is comparable in form (i.e., general and abstract) to what we might expect to see expressed in a typical coaching philosophy. Yet this kind of statement – a five word phrase on this occasion – is merely the surface of a bigger picture. While this statement signals an affiliation with an athlete-centred approach [15], it says nothing of the broader context or webs of connection that might influence and be implicated in its enactment. It does nothing to shed light on important and relevant *practical* questions such as: What does it really *mean* to “care for the person first”? What kind of actions does this imply? How do these actions shape interactions and relationships with others? How might behaviours of others threaten or derail these actions? In what ways might it be necessary to *work* to sustain actions and behaviours which stay true to this statement? What compromises or sacrifices might this philosophy require/demand on the part of the self and others? How might the consequences of this philosophy affect oneself? Others? How might one’s current practice and behaviour need to be considered, modified or revised to fit this philosophy?

Answers to important questions such as these are rarely (if ever) generated within expressed coaching philosophies but *are*, we suggest, generated through the storytelling process. Through general statement alone, the reader has no real sense of the degree to which the individual coach *acts* in ways that care for persons. Likewise, a *stated* value/belief gives the reader no information whatsoever about the *consequences* of this value/belief for the coach and her/his day-to-day practice. The story, in contrast, offers vivid descriptions which provide the reader with practical and (hopefully) provocative demonstrations of the how this particular coach achieves a ‘care-for-the-person’ way of being and the consequences of these actions on the coach and those around her/him. Re-reading the story, we find ourselves seeing a bigger picture – we are able to witness the broader context and webs of connection [16] that are implicated by this particular philosophical position. We think this is important and highly relevant when it comes to an individual coach developing and articulating a

philosophy which aligns with her/his professional practice. Without this kind of ‘real world’ material – rich in context and connections – we fear that coaching philosophies are likely to remain at best only loosely connected to what individual coaches actually *do*.

A final point we would like to raise here is that, as Evans [17] observes, not all stories are ‘good’. We agree: there is no inherent goodness or value in something simply because it appears in story form. Stories are chosen, created, shaped and filtered through the lens and aims of the teller. Stories hold the potential to support oppressive regimes, as well as help liberate those who are oppressed. Stories can also misrepresent, stigmatize, or slander groups within society, while allowing them no opportunity to ‘defend’ themselves. It is therefore clear that writing and sharing stories necessitates taking responsibility for the stories we use, create and share as some stories coaches might tell have the potential to be damaging to the individuals concerned, to other coaches, or to other sportspeople. This concern signals the need to consider the ways in which the stories a coach may produce about her/his practice are used. If the aim of writing is to deepen one’s philosophical understanding, certain stories may be best kept private and used solely by the coach concerned in a personal process of professional development and critical reflection. Other stories (such as *First Tea*) may necessitate identifying details being changed or removed prior to sharing with others. Still other stories may be suitable to be used verbatim because they do not implicate or identify others who may be harmed in any way through the process.

Despite these risks, we consider that storytelling can be a useful approach to developing and articulating a coaching philosophy in part *because* stories provide a unique way to learn from or be transformed by personal experiences (which may be challenging or sensitive in nature). For example, in some work [10, 18] we have explored how stories can recast certain actions as ethically questionable, thereby presenting ‘in a different light’ potentially harmful values and beliefs which are too often taken for granted in sport culture. In other work [9, 19], we have shown how sharing personal stories can contribute to learning, professional and personal development, and the development of empathy. Narrative theory suggests that it is through communicating local, emotional, and embodied forms of knowing (as opposed to abstract, general, propositional, or logico-scientific forms of knowledge) that some of the most important learning and change takes place [see for example, 7, 9, 18-21]. While the processes involved are inevitably complex, it seems that through writing one’s own stories – as well as reflecting on the stories of others – an individual has a means of considering ‘where I stand’ in relation to current issues, problems, and ethical debates in coaching.

## **SUPPORTING OTHERS IN USING STORIES**

So, what might the interested coach educator do to support students in using stories as an approach to developing and articulating a coaching philosophy? How might a coach who has no experience of writing stories since attending primary school begin to utilise the storytelling process in the service of developing a personal philosophy?

A good place to begin when writing, we have found [see 16, 22], is to identify a specific incident or event that is clearly remembered – this will provide the subject matter for the story. As Wolcott [23] observes, it is easier to write when one has something to say: the happenings of a vividly remembered event are most likely to provide accessible story material. One might choose to pursue a ‘big story’ (i.e., a critical incident or epiphany in one’s life) or a ‘small story’ (i.e., an everyday, run-of-the-mill event) [24] as the focus of the story. Valuable insights, we believe, can be gained from either of these approaches. From here, the task in writing is to relay in rich, descriptive manner the essential details of the story such as: *What happened? To whom? Where? How did it feel? What were the consequences*

*for the character/s?* We have found that stories which *show* the event unfolding through detailed description and evocation are likely to be more useful than stories which *tell about* the event through opinions and statements. As Sparkes [25] suggests, *all* the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) might beneficially be called upon in the task of writing about the kinds of embodied experiences which characterise coaches' work.

There is no doubt in our minds that writing a 'good' story is no easy task – it is something we both work hard at achieving yet rarely feel fully satisfied with what we produce. A relevant question, when using storytelling in the context of developing and articulating a coaching philosophy, is: *Does the story have to be good to be useful?* We tend towards the view that the *outcome* of the writing (i.e., whether or not the story is adjudged to be a 'good') is less important than the process. In other words, it is in attempting to produce an honest story (which the writer feels is a fair representation of her/his experience) that many benefits of a storytelling approach are likely to be realised. Because we believe that many coaches are 'natural' storytellers, we suspect that most will be capable of writing a story that will prove to be of use. An alternative tack - for those who are unwilling or unable to engage with writing a personal story – might be to facilitate telling/sharing opportunities through which moments of an individual's lived experience are explored verbally in a (pairs or small groups) workshop environment.

Through previous work, we have come appreciate the importance of further (structured or unstructured) discussion around key moments in the story *after* a story has been written and/or shared. A key task of the 'audience' (whether this is an individual coach educator or a group of other coaches) during these discussions is to *notice and then begin to wonder* [14]. Through asking questions about the story or making observations on the story, the audience can help the storyteller to 'deepen' her or his knowledge through further reflection and consideration. This process, it has been suggested [14], can help move the storyteller from being a (passive) 'victim' of her/his experience to a (active) 'reader' of the experience. In so doing, the storyteller has the opportunity to think and identify where choices and alternative courses of action existed, as opposed to seeing the events as pre-determined or inevitable in some way.

## **LEARNING, UNDERSTANDING, AND WISDOM**

The French Philosopher Michel de Montaigne had this to say on learning and wisdom around the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century:

I gladly come back to the theme of the absurdity of our education: its end has not been to make us good or wise but to make us learned. [26, p. 749]

We readily enquire, 'Does he know Greek or Latin' 'Can he write poetry or prose' But what really matters most is what we put last: "Has he become better and wiser?" We ought to find out not who understands most but who understands best. We work merely to fill the memory, leaving the understanding and sense of right or wrong empty. [26, p. 153-154]

As coaches, we might also reflect on the extent to which our practice contributes to learning, understanding, and wisdom as described by Montaigne. We might also ask whether the education with which we engage – as well as that which we offer others – has become more open to exploring philosophical questions and moral dilemmas. Have 21<sup>st</sup> century education systems endowed students with the ability to reflect on the implications of their actions? In coach education, do we place more value on knowledge which is easier to collate and

evaluate while relegating or ignoring the more artistic, caring or creative elements of understanding that are more challenging to define, instil and evaluate? Do we “fill the memory” with technical knowledge without provoking students to consider what their actions mean?

Michel de Montaigne was not only noted for pointing out the differences between learning and wisdom, but he also questioned the basis for accepting embedded social practices merely on the basis that they were more familiar. Exploring and developing a coaching philosophy is indeed unfamiliar and a trail less travelled when compared to evaluating technical problems in a sport movement.

## CONCLUSION

What we have attempted to achieve via *First Tea* is to widen the trail and contribute, in a modest and hopefully practical way, to debates and discussions which centre on how we put our personal philosophy into practice in our work as sport coaches. Our aim was that through a storied approach we might be able to shed light on those things which go unseen or are most difficult for a coach to articulate because *in practice* the coach is focussing on the pupil/s and how best to meet the aims of the coaching session, not questioning why they do what they are doing. As one of a number of tools a coach educator may use, we have suggested storytelling offers some potential. Through creating accounts which elucidate what we do and why we do it, a coach may begin to understand more fully some of the political, cultural and value-laden influences that shape his or her coaching practice.

While we do not see our role here to be judging the moral or ethical decisions of coaches – or their values and beliefs – it is the role of scholars to question ‘accepted practice’ and to provoke coaches to consider how and why one course of action is taken over another. We should ask: *What is your philosophy and how does this inform practice?* We should ask: *Why do you value this and not that?* And we should explore what individuals’ answers to these questions mean for pupils, sport, and the communities we live and work in. We hope this story will be considered in the spirit it was written: as a window to one individual’s coaching practice and philosophy. It is not necessarily a better way, and it may not be the right way – but it is one way that one coach found to achieve personal alignment across the gulf that often seems to exist between practice (what we do) and personal beliefs and values.

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