"I thought we were supposed to learn how to become better coaches": developing coach education through action research

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Published in:
Educational Action Research

DOI:
10.1080/09650792.2019.1605920

Publication date:
2020

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):
Voldby, C. R., & Klein-Døssing, R. (2020). "I thought we were supposed to learn how to become better coaches": developing coach education through action research. Educational Action Research, 28(3), 534-553. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2019.1605920

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Download date: 15. Sep. 2023
“I thought we were supposed to learn how to become better coaches”:
Developing Coach Education Through Action Research

Abstract

Youth coaches play a crucial role in the development of young athletes and their physical, psychological and social well-being. Therefore, it is important to foster and develop youth coaches’ ability to govern and act effectively in their coaching practices. Sports organisations facilitate the development of youth coaches through formal coach education. However, research has shown this to be with limited effect. The purpose of this action research study was to involve youth coaches in developing a new and more effective coach education practice.

The coaches developed their practices through both dialogue and reflection with each other. A shift in the mindset of the coaches resulted in a more reflective and analytical approach in their way of thinking and talking about their practices. The most effective tools for improving the coach educational practice was the active management of the relations between the participating coaches and assisting the coaches’ reflection and dialogue through the use of scaffolding. In order to engage coaches in the educational practice, alignment between coaches’ expectations and both course content and form was crucial. These findings provide further insight into how coaches can develop their practices and how sports organisations can develop more effective coach education practices.

Keywords:
Action Research; Coach Education; Sports Coaching; Coach Development; Practice Development
INTRODUCTION

Scholars have emphasised the crucial role youth sport coaches play in the experiences of young athletes (eg. Wylleman 2000, Vella, Oades, and Trevor 2011, Larson 2000). Furthermore, youth sport coaches have great influence on young athletes’ social, physical and emotional well-being (Gould and Carson 2008, Horn 2002, Bruner et al. 2017) and some studies define coaches to be catalysts for promoting the positive effects of sport participation such as learning social and moral skills (Bailey 2006, Bailey et al. 2009). By way of contrast, it has also been shown that youth sport coaches’ behaviour can be abusive or in other ways harmful for young athletes’ well-being (Baker, Côté, and Hawes 2000, Kerr 2013).

The crucial role that sports coaches play in youth development emphasises the need for competent coaches who effectively master the coaching process (Cushion et al. 2010) which can be described as the in-situ coaching behaviour (Lyle 1999). Furthermore, Cushion (2007) describes the coaching process as structured improvisations which are embedded in coaches’ practices. Thus, coaching practices are complex phenomena in which the coach is constantly engineering and re-engineering his/her practice according to the athletes and the surrounding environment (North 2013). It is important that coaches can navigate effectively in this complexity, in order to deliver high quality practices, as this may lead to greater learning experiences and well-being among youth athletes.

Several studies of how coaches learn and develop their practices have been conducted (Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac 2004, Gilbert and Trudel 2001, Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers 2016). Cushion et al. (2010) distinguish between three different types of learning for coaches: formal learning, informal learning, and non-formal learning. Informal learning is considered a life-long process, where coaches accumulate knowledge and skills from based
on every-day experience with the sport activity. These experiences create a basis for how
coaches’ approach the coaching process in any given context. This is why coaches’ may have
a tendency to base their coaching on their own experiences as an athlete (Jones, Armour, and
Potrac 2003, Lemyre, Trudel, and Durand-Bush 2007). Other types of informal learning
happens when coaches observe and imitate the behavior and attitudes of their role-models
(Cushion 2001). Non-formal learning occurs in ‘any organized educational activity carried
out outside the framework of the formal system (Cushion et al. 2010). This could be
conferences, seminars and workshops that are arranged through local governing bodies (eg.
the coach’s own sports club). Both informal and non-formal learning are significant elements
in the development of coaches (Cushion et al. 2010, Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2003).
Contrary to this, formal learning, which is mainly facilitated through coach education
programmes arranged by national sports organizations, only plays a minor role in the
development of coaches’ practices (Gilbert and Trudel 2001). This is supported by other
scholars (eg. Gilbert and Trudel 2001, Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers 2016, Cassidy,
Jones, and Potrac 2004) who argue that traditional coach education may not have the desired
effect on the development of coaches’ practices. Some coaches experience formal coach
education setting as indoctrination (Nelson and Cushion 2006) while other coaches simply
reject the methods advocated, as these were not seen to be relevant and applicable to their
actual coaching contexts (Potrac and Jones 2010).

As pointed out by Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers (2016) there is a need to develop a
more practice-oriented coach education, which takes the specific contexts and backgrounds of
the coaches’ practices into account. This corresponds with Clements and Morgan (2016), who
suggested that action research should be utilised in order to develop better and more effective
coach education. Action research may enable scholars and sports organisations in co-creating
practice-based knowledge that could make a difference for both the practices of coach education and consequently the practices of coaches.

The purpose of this project was to develop two different practices; the coaching practice of the participating coaches and the coach educational practice in which both coaches and researchers participate. Therefore, this study seeks to answer two research questions: How can coaches develop their own practices? And; how can coach educational practice be developed to better facilitate the development of coaches’ practices?

**ACTION RESEARCH**

In order to answer the two research questions, we (the two authors) adopted an action research approach. The origin of action research has been widely attributed to the original work of authors such as Kurt Lewin (1946) and Paulo Freire (1970).

Action research is a transformational social science (Reason and Torbert 2001) and as such, it is an orientation towards inquiry in the service of human flourishing (Reason and Bradbury 2008). Action researchers attempt to improve the capacity and effectivity of current and future practices rather than producing general knowledge (Elliott 1991). This is achieved by collaborating with participants and linking together action and reflection in a process of normative-pragmatic knowledge creation (Bradbury 2015). Therefore, improving practices is the key mission in action research projects (Elliott 1991, Kemmis et al. 2013).

Kemmis et al., 2013 defines practice as a socially established human activity, which shapes and is shaped by practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2013). Practice architectures consist of sayings, doings and relatings of actors involved in the practice, which together form and are formed by the history and traditions of the given practice (Kemmis et al. 2013).

This definition of practice is similar to the understand of the coaching process as a complex and contextually shaped social activity that is evident in several newer studies (eg. Cushion 2007, Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2006, Potrac and Jones 2009, Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac 2007, Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2006, Potrac and Jones 2009, Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac
The coaching process may therefore be referred to as *action-in-context* Evans (2017). We argue, that the definition of the coaching process as action-in-context calls for research that is able to provide insight into – and challenge – the practice architectures of both coaching practices and coach education practices. Action research provides a framework for this.

As Marshall and Reason (1994) point out, good action research should create value for both the scientific community, participants and researchers. Consequently, action research must engage different levels of practice (Torbert and Taylor 2008). In this study, we worked with two different levels of practice: The development of the coaches’ own practices and the development of a coach educational practice in which both coaches and researchers participate.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The action research project spanned over 9 weeks with a total of four workshops. One workshop was completed every two weeks during the process. This gave us time to complete three iterations of what Coghlan and Brannick (2014) describe as the *action research cycle.* Each cycle contains activities linked to constructing the workshops, planning experiments in practice, acting out these experiments and reflecting upon the experiments.

We *constructed* the workshops in collaboration with the coaches based on numerous phone calls both before and after each workshop. In the beginning of each workshop, the coaches *reflected* upon the last weeks’ experiments before planning new ones. The experiments were planned in collaboration between us and the coaches and were based on the content and various themes, which were presented during the workshops. Before the next workshop, the coaches would *act* out these experiments in their own practices.
All workshops were created in accordance to the principles of Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry (CDAI) (Torbert 1991, Torbert 2013). This school of action research draws upon the principles of Action Science (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985) and focuses on enhancing the validity of the information upon which practitioners act, while seeking to improve the effectivity of these actions. Thus, we consider developing practices a normative concept, in which practitioners improve their ability to act effectively and desirably (Friedman and Putnam 2014).

A fundamental claim of CDAI is that human action and behaviour is determined by three territories of experience; intentions, plans, actions (Foster 2014). The territory of intentions represents the coach’s motives and visions regarding his practice. The second territory of plans is closely connected to intentions and refer to the strategies and plans the coach employs when striving to achieve his intentions. The third territory, actions, represents the tangible action and behaviour of the coach in practice.

To develop their practice and improve the effectivity of their actions, practitioners must reflect upon the correlations between these territories (Torbert 1991). Thus, when constructing the workshops, we prioritised activities that would help the coaches explore and reflect upon their three territories of experience. Activities such as role playing, critically interviewing, and observation

The setting and the participants

Based on our personal experience with coach education, both as a participant (first author) and coach educator (second author), we believed that coach education could be improved substantially. Several studies suggest the same (eg. Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac 2004, Clements and Morgan 2016, Cushion et al. 2010, Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2003, Gilbert and Trudel 2001, Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers 2016) and therefore, we decided to
challenge the traditional approach to coach education in cooperation with a Danish sports organisation.

We collaborated with ‘The Danish Gymnastic and Sports Organisations’ (DGI). DGI funded the operational costs, booked locations for the workshops and assisted in the recruitment of participants. We, both authors, facilitated the workshops as researchers/coach educators. A total of 13 coaches from various sports disciplines were recruited. The coaches were between 21 and 65 years of age and had various amounts of coaching experience. Most of the young coaches had the least amount of experience (one or two years) while the older coaches had many years of experience (some 20 years or more). The coaches participated voluntarily and their motivation for participating was a desire to become a better coach and to improve their coaching practices. Table 1 showcases the demographic information of the coaches.

Table 1. The demographic and attendance of participating coaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Sport and age-group</th>
<th>Previous education</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rifling 6-18 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Drop-out after 1st workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Rifling 6-19 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Rifling 7-12 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended 3 workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gymnastics 18 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended 2 workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Soccer 11 year olds</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Swimming 12-15 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>Rifling 10-15 year olds</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Rifling 10-16 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Drop-out after 1st workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rifling 5-15 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended 3 workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>Workshop Engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Rifling 8-16 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Soccer Senior</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>Drop-out after 1st workshop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Soccer 14 year olds</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Two participants dropped out of the project after the 1st workshop due to time constraints. One dropped out due to an injury.

**Data production**

To produce detailed and contextualised data, we employed various methods of data collection both before, during and after the workshops.

Telephone interviews were conducted between each workshop, focusing on evaluating the previous workshop and the construction of the next workshop. These telephone interviews were held in order to produce empirical material related to each coach’s individual experience of the previous workshop while also providing an important opportunity for the coach to participate in co-constructing the following workshop. A total of 23 telephone interviews with a duration of 10-45 minutes were conducted.

During the workshops, we utilised participant observation (Thorpe and Olive 2016), writing reflective field notes when not facilitating the workshop. Our observations were broadly focused on how the coaches engaged with the content of the course and how this affected their engagement, reflection and interaction.

After each workshop, a focus group interview was conducted with coaches willing to participate. The focus group setting provided an opportunity for coaches to continue reflecting upon their own practices and the way they engaged in the workshop (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). All focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed ad verbatim as this allowed us to produce highly contextual and detailed evidence of coaches’ learning process both retrospectively (when coaches discussed the workshop) and in-situ (when coaches reflected upon their practices).
After the final workshop, one longer and more elaborative focus group focused on evaluating the project in its entirety, was conducted with all coaches participating. All focus group interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions (see Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), focusing on how the coaches experienced the workshop. All interviews, both telephone and focus group, were utilised to facilitate reflection, which is a key concept in the data production of action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). Furthermore, we incorporated our own reflective journals (Bolton 2014) as a part of the empirical material.

We produced qualitative data, as we sought to produce and create thick descriptions (Geertz 1973). Our data production was based on a pragmatic approach or what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) refer to as the work of a ‘bricoleur’; or what (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) refer to as ‘the traveller’. Both concepts underline that data production is an emergent process in which the researcher produces and discovers a detailed and complex empirical landscape in collaboration with the participants. For example, we had to divert from our original idea of coaches working with reflective writing between the workshops. The coaches did not find the reflection logs to be relevant or worthwhile. Instead, the phone interviews were utilized as an important room for reflection, where some coaches were able to not only reflect upon the previous workshop, but also on their experiments in their own practices. Therefore, we did not employ a structured interview guide for the phone interviews. Instead, we were able to ‘join’ the coach and ‘travel’ together, investigating whatever aspect of his/her experience (related to either their own practice or the workshops) that the coach would find most relevant.

All empirical material was recorded in Danish and the quotes and transcripts provided in this article have been directly translated by the authors.

While progressing through the action research cycles (Coghlan and Brannick 2014), we concurrently analysed the produced data. We analysed the empirical data using a data-driven
thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) in order to identify occurring themes and possible
correlations between these. Data analysis was conducted in qualitative data analysis software
(Nvivo) focusing on both the explicit and latent content in the data (Braun, Clarke, and Weate
2016). Data was coded line-by-line using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo).

Table 2 provides an exemplar of our coding process. This example illustrates initial coding
of latent content as the code is primarily based on our interpretation of the coach’s statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw transcript</th>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The invitation made it clear, that YOU were to teach US. And not that you were going to extort us into telling you how we coach!</em></td>
<td>Frustration with mismatch between invitation and workshop</td>
<td>Expectations are important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our initial interpretations of latent content in the data was validated by the coaches during the focus group interview at the end of the workshops. For example, after carrying out the initial analysis illustrated in table 2, we utilized the following workshop to discuss the theme of ‘expectations’ with the coaches.

**FINDINGS**

A total of six primary themes emerged from the data. As shown in figure 1, each theme relates to either the development of coaches’ practices or the development of coach education practice.
Figure 1.

Development of coaches’ practices

The role of reflection
Reflection is a contested term, and we employ a broad definition of reflection based on the work of Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) who argues that reflection is the intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to gain new understandings.

This type of reflection was found to be an important element in the process of coaches developing their practices. This finding corresponds to the fundamental concept of CDAI, in which critical reflection acts as the primary driver of learning and development of one’s practice (Torbert 1991).

Numerous of the activities were designed with the purpose of having coaches reflect upon their own practices to which the coaches responded differently. Some coaches had difficulties with the reflectional activities and others found it easier to benefit from these. Despite this, most coaches stated both explicitly and implicitly that the reflectional activities were valuable. Even John, who initially had been sceptical, ultimately concluded the reflectional activities to be valuable:
The part about watching yourself and the way that you coach. That’s not stupid.

It makes you think about the way you act.

John, telephone interview (post workshop 3)

Reflection helped coaches explore and understand aspects of their own practices. Through reflection, another coach, Frederik, realised that he, himself, had been an obstacle in the implementation of a more collective and involving practice:

I mean. I had been working against myself in a way... That eh.. That was kind of a punch in the kidney. It was really something that required some deep thoughts.

Frederik, focus group interview (post workshop 2)

When the second author asked another coach about a possible discrepancy in her feedback methods, Eva went through a process similar to Frederik’s. This is the second author’s account of the situation:

I asked Eva, why she thought the feedback that she was giving was not focused on the results of the athletes. She looked surprised. Her face grew red, and she did not reply for some seconds [...].

Rasmus (second author), observational field notes (workshop 2)

In the post workshop focus group interview, Eva reflects upon how the situation affected her:

It was like.. “Oh no. I just never thought about that. I was not aware of that at all. What do I do now?”. And you’re not able to answer that. [...] And you know deep inside that something is wrong - that you should be able to give an answer. [...] So in a way, after this workshop I feel more like.. “aarr [indicating pain] ”.

It’s.. Eh.. I mean it’s kind of tough, and it hurts a little bit. But on the other hand, it’s also a really nice opportunity to develop myself.
Both Frederik’s and Eva’s situations are examples of what Argyris and Schön (1974) describe as double-loop learning, which can be the result of coaches comparing their explicitly stated ideas and reasoning behind their practice (espoused theories) with their observable actions and the reasoning behind these (enacted theories) (Putnam 2014). However, it requires coaches to critically assess and reflect upon their own intentions, beliefs, and actions (Russell 2005, Knowles 2001).

The significance of double loop learning has been underlined by Argyris and Schön (1974). As such, these situations represent the most significant and positive learning experiences, that some of the coaches experienced. While only a few coaches experienced what can be regarded to as double-loop learning, all of the coaches were able to engage in what Argyris and Schön (1974) would refer to as single-loop learning, where coaches merely adjust their ‘technical operationalization’ of their plans and intentions without questioning the validity of these plans and intentions.

One re-occurring theme was that coaches gained value from reflecting upon previously unknown details about their practices and possible misalignments between their intentions and actions:

*You may see things about your practice, you have not seen before. As I have said earlier: you dig deep into stuff, which you have not considered before.*

This quote is one example of many and represents what we consider the most significant finding of our study: When reflecting upon their own practices, coaches may discover previously unknown details, contradictions or inadequacies in the intentions, plans, actions...
and outcomes tied to their practices. Inspired by Piaget (1972), we refer to these discoveries as *disturbances.*

During the workshops, we noticed how these disturbances provided powerful opportunities for coaches to develop their practices. The coaches underlined this both during and after the project:

Eva: You’re left open, and thinking: ‘oh god, I’m just doing like I always did - I’m just adapting something that I saw someone else do’. So yeah. You’re kind of unveiled [laughs]. And like.. You were unaware of it and completely unprepared.

Frederik: But this also creates so much learning in the end.

Eva: YEAH! It really does.

*Focus group interview (post workshop 2)*

**The role of dialogue**

Most of the workshop activities were collaborative processes, where dialogue between coaches was an essential part of the activity. The coaches stated that these activities were beneficial. In particular, the coaches emphasised the important role of coach-to-coach dialogue, and the *questions* they were asked by other coaches. The coaches would eventually come to refer to these questions as ‘good questions’, and it became evident, that these ‘good questions’ proved valuable in facilitating the previously mentioned disturbances.

However, not all questions were equally valuable. As we progressed through the action research cycles, it became evident that pairing coaches across different sports disciplines would often stimulate and increase the amount of valuable questions:

* [...] the dialogue between us participants. [...] It should be between coaches from different sports. So not the same sport together. Because then you’re going to be*
like “well this is how we do it” and then “yeah we agree”. [...] You have to get out of that line of thinking by getting fresh eyes on it, where you think: “oh, why am I actually doing this?” because.. Yea.. It’s that part about asking the right questions.

Frederik, focus group interview (post workshop 2)

Even when pairing coaches across sports disciplines, we observed a widespread degree of relevance and quality in the dialogues. When evaluating their experiments, some coaches were able to reflectively discuss and assess these, while other coaches explained what they had done, followed by defence or rationalisation of their actions.

Nonetheless, most coaches agreed that dialogue was one of the most valuable parts of the workshops. Our findings hereby substantiate, that coaches do indeed develop their practices through social interaction. The important role of social interaction in learning has been underlined by numerous scholars such as Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (1998). Social interaction and dialogue, according to Vygotsky, is a mechanism and resource through which our understanding of the world is mediated (Säljö 2001). Social interaction and dialogue therefore become a mediator of the reflection process, in which the coach is able to (re)shape his/her understanding of a given practice or experiment.

\textit{The role of an analytical and reflective mindset}

Our analysis showed one very important change in most of the coaches’ attitudes and use of language. We identified this as a change in the mindset of these coaches: They seemed to understand how and why an analytical mindset could help them develop their coaching practices. The following quote illustrates the newly gained analytical and reflective mindset of one coach:
The thing about discovering who you are and how others perceive you. And how you can use tools to analyse what you are actually doing. That I... “How do I coach?” “How do I evaluate?” And that’s not something that makes you better right now [...]. It’s something that you have to try again, and again, and again. And then go back once a week and think about: “Am I still doing it right or?”.

John, focus group interview (post workshop 4)

Being able to reflect analytically and critically can be a difficult task for coaches (Knowles et al. 2006, Knowles 2001) but has also been widely recognised as a key ability in the development of practices; both for professional practitioners (Schön 1983) and for coaches (Collins, Carson, and Collins 2016, Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2003). Therefore, we considered this to be significant evidence of the development of the coaches’ practices. But even though we as researchers believed that this analytical and reflective mindset was a clear indicator of the coaches’ development, one coach stated:

I don’t feel like [the workshops] have made me a better coach right now, but [...]
I’m sure that I will be in the future. There’s not really a lot of it that I think...
That works at this very moment.

William, focus group interview (post workshop 4)

And made even more clear by another coach:

We’re just learning about how you analyse and evaluate practices. I thought we were supposed to learn how to become better coaches.

John, telephone interview (post workshop 3)

Evidently, some coaches do not associate a reflective and analytical mindset with becoming a better coach per se. This reveals a discrepancy between how we, as researchers, think about reflection as an important element in developing coaches’ (e.g. Gilbert & Trudel 2001;
Cushion et al. 2003; Jacobs et al. 2016) and how some coaches think about the role of reflection in developing their own practices. Reflective practice is by scholars ‘accepted enthusiastically and unquestioningly, and assumed to be ‘good’ for coaching and coaches’ (Cushion 2018). Not all the participating coaches shared the same enthusiasm for reflectional activities. And while we as researchers found this frustrating, we now realize, that we might have been ‘guilty’ of what Cushion (2018) describes as the ‘taken-for-granted value’ of reflection as a way of developing practice. The fact that reflective practice is uncritically considered the ideal in coaching practice results in practitioners being (at least initially) extrinsically motivated (Huntley et al. 2014). It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss whether or not the reflective practitioner should be considered an ideal. Our analysis does however confirm that some coaches do not associate reflective practice with a better practice.

In accordance to the fundamental principles of CDAI, we argue that reflection is indeed an important tool for developing practice. However, we also agree with Cushion (2018), who raises concern about the way that reflection and reflective practice can be turned into a means of normative control of coaches’ identity and practice. Were we to re-run this study, we would, together with the coaches, carefully discuss and reflect upon the potential of reflection as a means of developing practice.

**Development of coach education practice**

**Managing expectations**

The expectations of the coaches heavily influenced their experience of the first workshop. The evaluations of the first workshop were divergent and some coaches stated that the workshop was not what they expected it to be. The coaches had expected a more “traditional” coach education course with instructor-driven processes and minimal self-activation. However, we constructed the workshops
focusing on co-creation, reflection and dialogue. We enacted several of the principles behind CDAI (Torbert 1991) and consequently, we wanted the coaches to explore and reflect upon their own practices. One of the coaches’ reaction to this was:

*I expected more theoretical inputs from you [the researchers] including the newest knowledge and research about relevant topics. I really expected another approach to the workshop.*

Anders, focus group interview (post workshop 1)

Clearly, some of the coaches’ expectations leading up to the workshops were different to our intentions and ideas behind the project. Those coaches showed clear signs of frustration. Furthermore, during the first workshop, we observed what Knowles (2015) refer to as a low readiness to learn. Some coaches would primarily engage in what (Larrivee 2008) describes as non-reflective behaviour. Non-reflective behaviour is described as practitioners not being willing to scrutinize their own practices, while attributing questionable events to external limitations or constraints. Coaches would operate with ‘knee-jerk responses’, defending their practices while explaining why they should not be changing what they had already been doing. As John explained:

*When expectations are not met] then you automatically go into defence-mode and you think: “What is it exactly that have I agreed to participate in?”*

John, telephone interview (post workshop 3)

Following the first workshop, three coaches decided not to continue in the project. All three stated that the first workshop did not meet their expectations. John, who was equally frustrated after the first workshop (but continued in the project) stated that:

*I really was not impressed when I came home after the first workshop. I was on the brink of saying: “I really do not want to be a part of this”*
This indicates that misaligned expectations do indeed affect coaches’ willingness to participate in coach education and can ultimately result in dropouts. As pointed out by the coaches, it is a necessity to manage expectations before and during coach education programmes. They emphasised the need to prepare coaches for what they considered a new and radically different approach to coach education:

*I think [coaches] need to know that it is a bit different - another way to think.*

*They should not go into this with their old experiences in mind [...] They have to be introduced to it. It will give them a better basis for working with this [type of coach education].*

In order to improve coach education practice, it is important to manage expectations. This could create better experiences for participating coaches, which potentially could increase their willingness and capacity to learn.

*Managing relations*

As we outlined earlier, the coaches’ learning processes are fundamentally a social activity (Vygotsky 1978, Wenger 1998) mediated (amongst others) through dialogue between coaches (Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers 2016). This is most likely why Adams, Cropley, and Mullen (2016) suggest that involving coaches in problem-solving, critical discussion and shared reflection should play a central role in coach education programmes. However, our experience with the collaborative activities was not solely positive and varied throughout the course of the project. Some coaches expressed difficulties collaborating with coaches from a different sports discipline. Especially, the coaches from individual sports emphasised the difficulty and irrelevance in sparring with coaches from team sports. They
felt that their sports were too different in terms of norms, rules, arrangements and basic
assumptions.

Furthermore, the difference in age between the coaches posed a challenge for some coaches.
One coach emphasised the difficulty in understanding some of the younger coaches at the
workshop:

It is difficult to follow and understand the young coaches who are also studying.

We come from two completely different worlds.

Mary, telephone interview (post workshop 1)

This quote illustrates how the relation between the coaches can act as a barrier for
constructive dialogue. This is one out of many examples that emerged from the first
workshop. Consequently, we changed the organisation of groups for the second workshop,
where group work was replaced with coaches working in pairs.

At the same time, only six coaches participated in the second workshop due to tournaments
and other obligations. Initially, we were concerned about how the low number of participants
would affect the group dynamic in the workshop. However, the second workshop would
eventually pose a significant turning point in the way the coaches were relating to each other.

This is underlined by the following quote:

Rasmus (Second author): What was the most informative activity?

Frederik: “I would say the dialogue with different coaches. And my personal
opinion is that it should be done with two coaches from different sport
disciplines.”

Focus group interview (post workshop 2)

Furthermore, Mary, who had earlier been concerned about the dialogue with other coaches
expressed:
It [dialogue with other coach] gave some new and different inputs when we were discussing in pairs. It was truly a pleasure to go through this [activity]. It really was.

Mary (as noted in the second author’s observational notes, workshop 2)

It appeared that the comfort or solidarity helped the coaches to engage in meaningful dialogues with coaches from other sport disciplines. The coaches felt safer and more comfortable as the workshops progressed and as they got to know each other:

Well, I think the difference between the first and the second workshop was the fact that I had seen the people before. I wasn’t nervous in terms of meeting the same people again.

Josephine, focus group interview (post workshop 4)

We argue, that a more safe and private atmosphere, where coaches have some degree of familiarity with each other, was an important catalyst for the greater openness and increased engagement that we saw during the second workshop. This was an important turning point, as the feeling of safety is crucial when working with the learning of adults (Knowles 2015). In fact, Rogers (1969) argues that feeling threatened will prevent transformational learning from taking place.

With fewer coaches participating in the workshop and with coaches working in pairs instead of groups, we (and the coaches) experienced an increase in comfortability and openness. Consequently, managing relations to help participants feel more safe and comfortable becomes an important part of any coach education programme. It has even been suggested, that the ratio between participating coaches and coach educators should be 4:1 (Adams, Copley, and Mullen 2016). This would create better conditions for educators to
manage the relations between coaches and as such, could prove a unique opportunity for developing coach education practice.

Scaffolding

Another very important element in the facilitation of coaches’ dialogue were the tools, models and frameworks that we introduced to the coaches in order to facilitate their discussions. These would help the coaches maintain direction in their dialogue and facilitate critical shared reflection:

*It has been relatively straightforward to overcome these kinds of tasks and conversations which normally can be quite erratic without these tools and guidance.*

Anders, focus group interview (post workshop 1)

This type of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976) is guided assistance, which helps the coaches maintain meaningful dialogues and reflections on their own. Scaffolding has been known as an effective way to support learners (Vygotsky 1978, Moll 1990) and has been applied as a tool to help learners in developing critical reflections (Coulson and Harvey 2013, Ryan and Ryan 2013).

Throughout the course of the project, we would increasingly elaborate and add details, explanations, guiding statements and visual aids to the models and frameworks that the coaches were using in their dialogues.

An example of scaffolding was the use of printed posters to guide the coaches’ evaluation of their experiments. These posters helped facilitate the reflection and dialogue of the coaches, by presenting questions such as: “*what was your experiment?*”, “*what were the positive effects from your experiment?*”, “*what were the negative effects from your experiment?*” and
“what did you learn from your experiment?”. Coaches emphasised how these posters were valuable:

“The work we did here [pointing at the poster hanging on the wall] gave me a better opportunity to be critical upon the things I am doing in my practice.”

Eva, focus group interview (post workshop 2)

At the same time, we attempted to help coaches expand their reflection and more critically explore their practices. We did this by introducing a modified model of reflectional levels inspired by Larrivee (2008) during the first workshop. However, we failed to properly reexamine this model until the fourth and last workshop. One coach underlined the need for scaffolding by emphasising how the model should have been reexamined earlier:

“It [the model with the levels of reflection] should have been reintroduced in workshop two [...] I think we could have had an even bigger effect of that tool than we did. I mean, we did have a big effect of it but we could have had an even bigger effect.”

Klaus, focus group interview (post workshop 4)

As such, scaffolding was applied both as a processual and theoretical aid to both guide and inform the reflectional processes. This was a significant help for the coaches, who felt better equipped to carry out valuable reflectional processes and dialogue on their own. Therefore, we argue that the use of scaffolding should be a fundamental aspect in coach education programmes where coaches are involved extensively.

DISCUSSION

Action research is a complex endeavour involving a multitude of voices and practice. Torbert (1991) argues, that the validity of an action research project is based on the extent of which the project integrates these different voices and practices. Therefore, in order to increase the
validity of our study, we will discuss and reflect upon how our, the two authors’, voice was a
determining factor for the direction and design of the action research cycles. Following this,
we will discuss to which extend the practice of this study have impacted both the practice of
the participating coaches and the practice of coach education.

The researchers’ role in the project

It is important that we, as action researchers, reflect upon the unstated and often unconscious
attitudes and beliefs that guide our behaviour and choices (Bradbury 2015, Coghlan 2010)
Based on both our experience and recent literature (eg. Larsson, Linnér, and Schenker
2016) we entered the project believing that both the coaches’ practices and coach education
practices were bound in place by tradition rather than rationality. And as such, these practices
would have a great potential for development, if the coaches were able to realise the need for
change.

However, we realise how we may have unintentionally sought to impose our desire for
change onto the coaches. This is in contrast to one of the key aspects of critical action
research; that participants themselves must feel a concern or a need for change in their
practices (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). On the other hand, (Kemmis et al. 2013)
argues that practices are bound by practice architectures and are difficult to change.

Therefore, our aim as action researchers was to help coaches understand how their practices
are constructed, in order to empower them to propose and enact the change that they,

themselves, deem desirable.

Did the coaches develop their practices?

Coaches’ practices are constructed by both sayings, doings and relatings bound in time and
place to their specific setting. In order to adequately assess whether or not a given practice
has been developed, we would need to access empirical events related to each of these above-
mentioned dimensions. Inquiring into coaches practices requires the researcher to be present in-situ over a longer period of time (Cushion and Partington 2016). This would make it possible to inquire into both the *sayings, doings* and *relatings* of a given practice.

However, as our empirical material is limited to the coaches’ own verbal accounts of their practice development, we are only able to examine the differences in the coaches’ *sayings* about their practices. These *sayings* were, however, divergent.

Some coaches were explicitly certain that they *had indeed* developed their practices, but some of their implemented changes were directly incongruent with the recommendations of the coaching and sports psychology literature (e.g. Hendry et al, 2015; Henriksen, 2011; Epstein, 1987).

On the contrary, some coaches explicitly stated that they *had not* developed their coaching practice. While, at the same time, these coaches showed clear signs of having developed a more analytical and reflective approach towards their own practices. Schön (1983) argues that this reflective approach is a key element in the thinking and acting of effective professionals. And Collins, Carson, and Collins (2016) state that this is also the case for coaches. Therefore, the reflective mindset could very well indicate a significant development in coaches’ practices.

Ultimately, we must underline that the coaches *may not* have developed their practices, even though they, themselves, feel like they did. And at the same time, we must recognise that the coaches’ practices *may very well* have been developed based on their turn towards a more reflective mindset, even though they stated otherwise. Consequently, it becomes challenging to adequately assess whether the coaches *actually* developed their practices. Therefore, the findings of this study should be critically assessed with this in mind.

In order to more effectively develop coaches’ practices and properly evaluate this development, future action research could favourably be carried out in the setting of coaches’
own practices. This would not only provide empirical material that would help better
determine if coaches actually improved their practices, but also make possible the
engagement and involvement of both athletes, parents, co-coaches and other actors.

Is action research valuable for improving coach education?

Clements and Morgan (2016) argue that action research could be utilised in order to develop
better and more effective coach education. We agree that well designed and elaborate action
research has the potential to develop coach education practices. We realise now that our
design of this project may not have been sufficiently elaborate, as we did not involve coach
educators or other actors in coach education practice. Instead, our project was primarily
focused on developing the practices of the participating coaches. And even in terms of the
coaches’ practices, the depth of our inquiry has been limited to each coaches’ cognitive
representation of their practices. Instead, inquiring into coaching practices should be based on
the in-situ presence of the researcher in the coaches’ practice (Cushion and Partington 2016).
This poses a significant logistical challenge for the action researcher who would be required
to set aside a considerable amount of time and resources in order to adequately participate in
each coach’s practice.

Despite the methodological limitations of this study, we argue that regarding the development
of coaches’ practices, this study contributes with two types of knowledge; mode 1 knowledge,
which is academic and focused on being universal and intellectual and mode 2 knowledge,
which is focused on solutions to particular and local problems in specific practices (see
Gibbons et al. 1994).

However, in regard to the development of coach education practices, this study primarily
contributes with mode 1 knowledge, as we did not involve the important stakeholders, who
develop and run coach education programmes, sufficiently. We argue that the practical
impact of mode 1 knowledge is limited and thereby agree with scholars such as Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) and Reason and Torbert (2001).

Therefore, we suggest that future action research in the field of coach education should involve both coaches, coach educators and stakeholders (sports organisations) in order to produce more significant change in coach education practice. Nonetheless, we hope that our findings will help develop coach education practice by inspiring coach educators to critically analyse and reflect upon their own practices.
Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the coaches who participated in the project. This project was for you and would not have been possible without you.

Disclosure statement:

Both authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


Table 1. The demographic and attendance of participating coaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Sport and age-group</th>
<th>Previous education</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rifling</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Drop-out after 1st workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Gymnastics</td>
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<td>Attended 2 workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Some formal education</td>
<td>Attended all workshops</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Two participants dropped out of the project after the 1st workshop due to time constraints. One dropped out due to an injury.
Table 2. Example of analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw transcript</th>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The invitation made it clear, that YOU were to teach US. And not that you were going to extort us into telling you how we coach!”</td>
<td>Frustration with mismatch between invitation and workshop</td>
<td>Expectations are important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Main themes emerging from the analysis.

- Reflection
- Dialogue
- Reflective and analytical mindset
- Development of coaches’ practices
- Managing expectations
- Managing relations
- Scaffolding
- Development of coach education practice