

Student-as-producer: Reflections on a 6-week trial aimed at producing scientist-practitioners in sport coaching

To be clear from the outset, the ideas I trialled this term were ones I think (or hope) I would have implemented without necessarily being aware of the student-as-producer (SAP) agenda. It's an important point because I suspect many academics will be improving and modifying their teaching practices in ways that are consistent with SAP, without necessarily claiming that label. After some useful input from Mike Neary, a little reflection and tinkering produced a plan that was at least partially reconcilable with SAP, and suddenly I found myself being given an opportunity to write for the website and contribute meaningfully to the university's SAP agenda.

In another instance of (hopefully disarming) honesty, my reasons for seeking a new approach to teaching this group of 2nd year 'Sport Development and Coaching' students stemmed from a clear feeling of discontent following last year's module. The students wanted applied, real life and exciting coaching experience; but the point of the module is to ensure that their coaching practices are informed by scientific principles and research evidence. Hence, they hated being forced to sit and listen to 'the science bit', especially where they failed to perceive the relevance or importance of this, and I probably resented being criticised (formally in feedback, as well as informally) and ignored (certainly in terms of attendance) and, in all honesty, I don't cope well with failing. At anything. It's why I don't play golf.

In the 2009-10 module – taught using the traditional format of 'stand-and-deliver' lectures, illustrative seminars and recommended readings – the keen students remained keen, and worked

hard to get to grips with the psychology content. The ‘too-cool-for-school’ students did not engage at all, and the battle to win the ‘convinceables’ was ostensibly lost. The results were modest, and in particular the quality of some of the exam answers in the psychology section suggested very little enthusiasm or engagement with the material. In my opinion, I had to do better; I couldn’t simply dismiss these results as ‘a bad cohort’ or ‘bad attitude’.

Don’t get me wrong though, I clearly explained exactly what was required in every single lecture, I gave extensive typed feedback on the assignments (although this appears to have been viewed as ‘justifying the mark’ rather than constructive feedback), and I gave each lecture a consistent structure: 1) define key terms; 2) illustrate relevance to sport; 3) introduce key theories on the topic; 4) examine the research on the topic; and 5) end with evidence-based practical recommendations. This is exactly what I wanted the students to do, so I thought it was a perfect ‘template’. I was wrong.

What I found in the assignments and exams was that many students never progressed beyond the apparent certainty and security of basic definitions in their answers. Others chose to only include old and discredited theories, perhaps due to their simplicity or apparent longevity. Yet others felt a theory was flawed if it predicted failure, as well as success – which was not an impression I had ever conveyed. Overall, however, I cannot recall more than a handful of responses where the difference between theory and research/evidence was really grasped. I realised that as well as ‘content’, I had to convey a way of thinking about psychology before I could expect to see it being incorporated into coaching in a considered, analytical manner.

I cannot take credit for any of what followed: my influences include the other tutors on this module, the course leader, the students' feedback, the SAP agenda and Mike's thought-provoking insights, an extremely committed and reflexive teaching instructor, and even a brief period of helping to design a course for real-life coaches seeking to gain their next 'badge'. Sitting at the centre of this maelstrom of good ideas, considered opinions and intelligent arguments, I could not help but begin to see a potential solution to the problems I had experienced (and arguably caused).

I needed to de-emphasise the 'content' of the module. I realised that anxiety, confidence, motivation etc. should not be the 'big show' of the module, but rather the vessel through which critical and analytical thinking are conveyed. To achieve this, I delivered all my standard 'stand-and-deliver' lectures online, using either video/youtube or ultimately, the narration function in PowerPoint – at the end of the day these were effectively the lecture I'd given for the past two years. I explained clearly that I would never physically give that lecture in class, as the online format meant that students could view the lecture any time, at their own convenience, as many times as they liked, and pausing for cups of tea or Jeremy Kyle. One student smugly pointed out that perhaps this means they don't have to attend, and I would concede that it allows non-attenders to pick up the content despite their apparent lack of commitment. However, I was able to argue quite effectively that the 'content' was not the point; the critical and analytical thinking we were to engage in during lectures can only be learned through experience, and the lectures would provide a small sample of this experience.

In those precious 50-minute lecture slots, I decided to have a conversation with the students; stimulating them to think for themselves and talk to me on an even footing. I asked quite simple questions such as “How would you spot an anxious athlete in your team?” or “As a coach, how can you tell when your athlete has lost confidence/motivation?” Such simple questions quickly became quite awkward and complex, but ‘playing’ with the topic in this way seemed to generate interest in the students, and it demonstrated very effectively the need for clear conceptual definitions and a scientific approach. In one lecture we simply viewed videos of famous ‘motivational speeches’ and asked: “Why is that motivating?”

It’s a cliché to say there were ‘no wrong answers’ in these lectures, but there weren’t. Everyone’s input was valued and appreciated, especially as many of them had overcome quite serious hangovers in order to attend and/or contribute. Without their input there wouldn’t have been a session, so of course I appreciated it very much. However, the lectures were not about the material or content; the lectures were about the way of thinking, *supported by* that week’s topic.

The seminars were also substantially different in 2010-11. We went to great lengths to generate a cast of fake athletes who, coincidentally, were experiencing all the problems we were studying. Half a page of description was usually enough for small groups to analyse, and each group was asked to present back their ideas on 5-6 key points: What is the problem being experienced by this athlete? Which theories are relevant to this problem? What solutions does the theory suggest? What does scientific research say about the likely effectiveness of these solutions? What considerations/advice emerges from these studies, to try and give your solution the best chance of working?

Sound familiar? You've guessed it: that's exactly what I was trying to promote last year. Except this time round we were using plausible real-life examples and, more importantly, the students owned the whole process and could see how each step builds on the last in creating a scientifically-informed coaching solution.

An added benefit of these problem-focused seminars was that by listening in to students' conversations and presentations, we as teachers could easily ascertain their current level of development. There was a clear development over the 6 weeks, explicitly facilitated by us, from "pointing out what's wrong" (which could easily have been guessed from the title of that week's seminar), towards using theories to help derive intervention ideas, and finally using research to assess these ideas prior to using them with an athlete.

In response to each week's joint reflections, the teaching instructor and I planned the next 'problem' for the group. When it became clear that the students were comfortable 'diagnosing' but were not happy trying to contextualise their problem in relation to a theory, we designed a seminar which focused on this step. When the importance of assessing ideas before implementing them was not being grasped, we put together a very simple cue-cards task wherein all the key thought-processes were listed and students simply had to 'put them in the right order'. There was incredible consistency in what the students produced, with very little guidance, and yet there, at the end of this open-ended task, was 'assessing scientific evidence'; neatly in context between 'having a promising idea' and 'implementing your idea'.

Open-endedness became a real theme of the seminars, with the conclusion to several seminars being: “This problem isn’t solved by any means. You are welcome to keep working on it and perhaps discuss it with me at a later date. Your work on this doesn’t end when you leave this room.” I worried that this may not feel like a satisfying conclusion, but after the first few instances it became the norm. It also reinforced the key messages that we, as staff, do not have all the answers, that significant independent work is required, and that real-life coaching problems are not neat and discrete but, rather, complex and evolving.

The final seminar involved setting up a debate around the best course of action for another imaginary athlete. The scoring system was published in advance and focused on performing all the key steps in deriving a coaching intervention, and the quality of execution at each step. There were also points clearly assigned to spotting problems in your opponents’ arguments. The case study, scoring system, and links to key readings were all published in advance on blackboard. The level of engagement in this session was perhaps the most encouraging aspect of the module, with students genuinely trying to make use of scientific theory and evidence in their arguments, and – in stark contrast to last year – intuitively seeing the relevance of these considerations in improving their case. Some of the arguments and criticisms in these seminars were genuinely very good.

With SAP in mind, the continuation of the analytic and critical processes which made fleeting appearances in this final seminar would lead to coaches who were ideal candidates for high-level coaching qualifications and who were genuinely good, effective, scientifically informed coaches. In this respect, the students were the producers. We as teachers simply laid

out the course, which the students attempted to run: each in their own way and each with different degrees of success – but *they did the work*. I haven't asked them yet, but I would imagine no students in this year's group would feel 'spoon-fed', which is a claim I could not have made last year.

At this time, these are only my own reflections and I do not have objective assessments of performance, nor do I have any clear access to the students' subjective experiences and perceptions yet – although I am hoping to be able to organise some focus groups very soon. The only data I have at this time is attendance, which hovered between 75-80%: still the lowest amongst the modules they are taught this year. On the plus side, the approach taken meant that attendance is not the be-all-and-end-all of this module, as students can catch up on any missed content. From my own perspective, I could also point out several students who I know would not have enjoyed (or attended) last year, but who engaged fully this year and made a real effort in the final debating seminar (although they did resort to swearing once or twice!).

Overall, whilst I am increasingly aware of the socio-political context of student-as-producer, my initial reasons for adopting this approach were arguably quite pragmatic. Adopting the SAP approach improved the students' experiences, it improved my own experience, and I would speculate that more learning took place (as well as less 'disengagement'). The ideas that evolved during this modification process (perhaps accidentally) exemplified key aspects of the SAP agenda: progressive ideals, openness, democracy, sharing, giving over some of the 'control' to the students, and caring about their learning, enjoyment and development. If changing one's teaching style to reflect the SAP agenda improves student experiences (and feedback), improves

my own enjoyment and motivation, and offers a good chance of improving results (in terms of assignments and the 'end product'), then maybe there is something in this?