

Sports coaches' mentorship: Experience and a suggested future framework

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Abstract

Introduction: Mentoring is widely advocated as an important component of coach learning, both informally and as a constituent feature of coach development programmes. However, despite its ubiquity, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence to support mentoring's use in practice. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to present an empirical case study of a formalised mentoring programme as experienced by the mentors, and to contribute towards a critical conceptualisation of mentoring in sports coaching.

Materials and methods: Eight mentors participated in the study, all being employed on a formalised mentoring programme. Data collection occurred over the 18-month duration of the programme to respect the longitudinal nature of the mentoring process. The data were analysed thematically.

Results: The results emphasised the need for a clearer conceptualisation of mentoring to successfully operationalise practice. Although the relational aspect of the role was deemed crucial, developing reciprocity was challenging. This was because of the limited shared or critical understanding of the role among the participants.

Discussion: Building on the portrayal of mentoring depicted in the results, we subsequently position mentoring as a relational and contextualized activity. In doing so, we claim a more realistic, coherent and effective pedagogy of mentoring.

Key words: Mentoring, sports coaching, coach education, coach learning.

1 **Introduction**

2 Recent years have seen mentoring given increasing credence in coach education. This is hardly surprising
3 given that experiential and contextually based learning have consistently been advocated as having greater impact
4 on coaches' development than any means of formal provision (e.g., Irwin *et al.*, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Nash &
5 Sproule, 2009). The case made has rested on the perceived capacity of mentoring to bridge the gap between theory
6 "and the practical application of that learning to the field" (McQuade *et al.*, 2015, p.318). Despite such advocacy,
7 there remains a paucity of supporting empirical evidence (e.g., Jones *et al.*, 2009; McQuade *et al.*, 2015; Sawiuk
8 *et al.*, 2017; 2018). This, however, is not a particularly novel standpoint as, more than a decade ago, Colley (2003,
9 p. 1) concluded that "existing research evidence scarcely justifies [mentoring's] use on such a massive scale,
10 [while] the movement has not yet developed a sound theoretical base to underpin policy or practice". It appears
11 then, that the rhetorical 'rush to mentoring' continues despite a lack of understanding as to its possible workings;
12 a recipe for continued ineffectiveness. In further developing his critique, Colley (2003) considered most models
13 of mentoring to have been based on a fairly crude and simplistic concept of empowerment. Similarly, Cushion
14 (2015, p. 155) was typically scathing in forwarding the view that mentoring within sports coaching "remains
15 largely unstructured, uneven in terms of quality and outcome, and uncritical in style, serving only to reproduce
16 existing culture and practice".

17 The problematic nature of mentoring, when viewed critically, was also highlighted by Sawiuk *et al.*
18 (2018, p.619), who challenged overly formalised mentoring programmes as creating forms of "social control
19 rather than being driven by pedagogical concerns". Bloom (2013) meanwhile, emphasised the haphazard nature
20 of mentoring instigations as simply being 'there at the time', while earlier work by Feldman (1999) cautioned
21 against such unconsidered arrangements as they hold the resulting possibility for ill-matched and, therefore, toxic,
22 dysfunctional relationships. Finally, in this context, Jones *et al.* (2016) found mentoring relationships hindered by
23 an inadequate understanding of scope and role by both mentors and mentees, thus severely hampering their
24 effectiveness. Despite such a critique, evidence exists that mentoring continues to be valued by coaches as part of
25 their educational journey. For example, the coaches interviewed by Nelson *et al.* (2013), whilst not blind to the
26 practical issues associated with its implementation, were generally supportive of the mentoring received on the
27 formal coach development course experienced.

28 Against this landscape, the purpose of this paper is to add to the empirical picture of mentoring in sports
29 coaching. Here, we aim to do more than simply report the collaborative experiences of those involved in mentoring
30 from a functionalist perspective. Rather, our purpose lies in constructing a critical analyses of the activity to help
31 further conceptualise it. In so doing, we position mentorship as a relational and contextualized endeavour, whilst
32 offering thoughts regarding the development of a coherent pedagogy of mentoring. In terms of structure, following
33 a description of the methods, the results section presents the experience of mentors on a top-level coach education
34 course provided by a UK National Governing Body. This was particularly in relation to how the mentors both
35 conceptualised and realised their practice. As opposed to allowing an 'open' reading of the data, the discussion
36 tentatively suggests a working framework for future mentoring practice within sports coaching.

37 **Materials and methods**

38 *Setting the context: The course structure and the official role of the mentor*

39 The coach education course within which the mentoring was framed, was recognised as the highest
40 qualification obtainable within the sport in question. The syllabus was principally constructed by the sport's
41 international federation, although the national governing body possessed a degree of agency and independence in
42 how the recommended components were delivered. The programme was 18 months in duration, with candidates
43 being primarily assessed against a competency framework. An overseas 'group visit' was also built into the course,
44 which involved candidates' observing and deconstructing both top-level coaching practice and sporting
45 performances. Of particular relevance to this study was that each candidate was assigned a mentor (on a ratio of
46 1:3) whose primary role was to support the former through the programme. The programme itself comprised four
47 key content areas: (1) communication; (2) leadership; (3) management; and (4) business and finance. These, in
48 turn, subsequently divided into seven sequentially spaced modules. Each module, excluding the overseas study,
49 was delivered during three-day 'residential' workshops. The time between the residentials was intended to allow
50 for reflection on received content, and for its practical application in context. The seventh and final module
51 culminated with an expected graduation from the course.

52 *Participants and data collection*

1 The participants (who appear in the next section as pseudonyms) comprised a group of mentors (n=8)
2 employed by the governing body to provide on-course learning support to the candidates. All participants provided
3 informed consent once ethical approval was gained for the project through the institutional research ethics process.
4 The principal research method used within the study comprised focus group interviews. These provided the
5 opportunity for individuals to express and relate their personal understanding of events, perceptions and context(s)
6 (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The central purpose of the interviews then was to engage in dialogue with the mentors
7 to elicit their descriptions and experiences of the learning that took place on the coaching course, and their role(s)
8 in generating it. In this respect, it was to gain a deeper understanding of the specific contextually defined
9 challenges faced, and how the mentors dealt with them. Being semi-structured in nature, the interviews gave a
10 framework of questions whilst allowing a degree of freedom to probe beyond immediate answers. This offered
11 the flexibility for gaining further information on issues deemed important, enabling both clarification and
12 elaboration to take place (May, 1999). Although focus groups were the main method of data collection, where
13 appropriate (e.g., where mentors were not collectively available), individual interviews were carried out.
14 Specifically, three points of data collection (i.e., focus group interviews) were selectively spaced throughout the
15 duration of the course. Each point comprised two focus group interviews containing, on average, 4 participant
16 mentors apiece. In total, therefore, six focus group interviews took place, which were supported by two individual
17 interviews with those who were unable to attend the group gatherings. In essence, the overall time spent
18 interviewing amounted to circa 10 hours. Once an interview was conducted, it was transcribed verbatim. The text
19 was then thematically analysed, with the primary themes emanating from the data contributing to the construction
20 of the next scheduled interview. In this way, the progressive nature of the longitudinal work was followed and
21 respected.

22 *Data analysis*

23 Inductive procedures were principally used to examine and categorise the data gathered from the focus
24 groups and individual interviews. The purpose here was to identify common themes as related to the aims of the
25 study, whilst also paying heed to any unexpected features (Charmaz, 2006; Seale & Kelly, 1998). Hence, a
26 ‘constant comparative method’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed to ascertain similarities and differences
27 within the data. More specifically, and in line with Charmaz (2006), a process of focused coding was undertaken
28 where earlier identified codes or signifiers were used to further examine the data, thus refining initial assumptions.
29 These were then used to build more generalizable statements that transcended specific instances and times
30 (Charmaz, 2006). This later phase also coincided with greater attempts to analyse what the data actually meant,
31 emphasizing the interpretive nature of the research. It is also indicative of the broader effort to develop the analysis
32 and engage in what Braun and Clark (2006) refer to as the shift from semantic to latent thematic analysis. The
33 idea of semantic versus latent themes is important in this study as it encapsulates a move beyond a descriptive or
34 literal account of mentoring practice to a critical examination of underlying ideas, assumptions, and
35 conceptualizations (Braun & Clark, 2006).

36 **Results**

37 The following section outlines the key issues from the research. It begins by examining those related to
38 the formalisation of the mentoring role, before going on to discuss what the mentors said about the relationships
39 established with the candidates, and the factors which impacted this particular component of their role. Finally,
40 issues of reciprocity, in terms of their presence and perceived necessity, are considered.

41 *Mentor role clarity*

42 Throughout the course and the associated project, the participants reiterated a desire for greater
43 professional development and consensus in readiness for their engagement in, and with, the mentorship role (for
44 example; “our staff development as a group is critical, absolutely critical” [John]; “coach educators need to be up-
45 skilled more” [Andy]; “I don’t think everybody understands it [the role]” [George]). Hence, it was a job for which
46 they obviously felt underprepared. Such findings support previous work (e.g., Marshall, 2001), identifying the
47 need for clearly defined roles within a strategic approach for any pedagogical practice to function as intended.
48 Given the seemingly ad hoc nature of their appointment, it was unsurprising that most of the mentors were unclear
49 about the job they were undertaking. Consequently, their initial practice in particular was merely based on
50 previous assumptions related to the position and what they perceived it meant to be a mentor. This perceived lack
51 of clarity was especially apparent during the first half of the course, where participants claimed not “to have a
52 clear idea of what I’m doing at all” (Clive) and of the need for “a clear understanding of what the role is” (George).
53 A lack of ‘preparedness’ was a heartfelt cause of concern, with other participants forwarding the view that “there

1 should have been more information...we should have been better informed as to what our role was” (Tom) and
2 others questioning “what am I supposed to be doing here? I don’t really know” (Wilf).

3 By the time of the final focus group, greater role clarity among the cohort was apparent; for example,
4 Tom identified that, “I think our understanding around the job is stronger now”. This improvement, however,
5 appeared a result of incidental or experiential learning rather than a consequence of systematic development. This
6 improved role intelligibility was principally informed by (1) the informal sharing of practice between the mentors;
7 and (2) the coaches’ (i.e., mentees) assessment being structured around the given competency framework. In terms
8 of the first, this was expressed through learning about, and subsequently sharing, personal practice. In the words
9 of two: “I’ve rung up people, and tried to meet them [and asked] ‘Tell me what you’ve done in this situation’”
10 (Andy) and “we learn as much from each other doing this stuff, chatting through these bits” (Sam). Some
11 expressed that this process could be better facilitated with a degree of formalisation, because “a little bit of prior
12 knowledge would have been good” (Nick). Here, the mentors conveyed a desire to meet as a group, so that practice
13 (and solutions) could be pooled and somewhat borrowed, because, as pithily captured by one, “I just don’t know
14 what you lot are doing” (Percy). The second source that provided the mentors with a degree of security and
15 confidence about their role execution was the given competency framework, against which the course candidates
16 were assessed. Although the competency framework was considered somewhat problematic (a point discussed in
17 more depth later), it nevertheless served as a point of reference for the mentorship role; that is, the mentors
18 understood and structured their role in relation to the framework. In this regard, mentors made statement such as,
19 “I definitely think the competency framework has helped shape my relationships [with the coaches]” (Clive).
20 What gave mentors reassurance here was their instrumental role in helping candidates deal with demonstrating
21 the competencies (and related evidence gathering). Where the mentors did feel they had clarity then, was in terms
22 of helping the candidates meet the competencies’ criteria, with mentors feeling “more comfortable doing that”
23 (John) and in being able to respond to the question “how do I get [them] to the finish line?” (Nick). Having said
24 that, statements such as “I don’t have a working knowledge of [the course]” (Percy) and “I just don’t know enough
25 about the course” (George) indicate that the mentors still lacked a depth of understanding regarding the course
26 content itself and, hence, the related competencies, which made their grasp of this task relatively ambiguous.
27 Consequently, despite welcoming the structure given by the competency framework, some of the mentors
28 appeared uncertain as to what counted as ‘evidence’ (in relation to the competencies), which made them further
29 doubt their worth, leaving them “feeling a bit lacking in confidence” (Andy). Nevertheless, as the mentors reached
30 a better understanding of the competencies this situation improved.

31 Although greater understanding of the mentoring role was evident by the end of course, the role continued
32 to be troublesome for a few who were subsequently unsure if they were performing well as mentors. In the words
33 of three: “I’m not sure whether I’m actually a very good mentor” (Sam); “...sometimes I just never feel as if I’m
34 in the right place” (George); and “I actually don’t think I’ve done that good a job overall” (Clive). Similarly,
35 although diminishing over the course, some mentors still harboured doubts about their suitability and expertise
36 for the role. An anxiety stemming from the fact that some of them, like Nick, had not been head coaches at the
37 same level as the candidates (“... bloody hell, they’ve been in the job longer than me...I feel uncomfortable in
38 that respect”). Such reflections are, perhaps, given credence by certain conceptualisations of the role that position
39 the mentor as a person of greater rank, or experience, in any given profession (e.g., Alleman *et al.*, 1984; Merriam,
40 1983). It was a conceptualisation certainly in evidence among the group under study.

41 Given the above, it is not surprising that the perception existed that the coaching course needed greater
42 structure to assist the mentoring role. This stemmed from some of the mentors being (initially at least) unsure of
43 the course’s aims and objectives, and consequently how to behave in their roles. In this regard, one suggested that
44 “there seems little planning, learning outcomes, objectives...so we can’t track that. That has to be set...so you
45 know what they’re trying to get out of it” (Sam). Thus, during the early stages of the process, the mentors were
46 ‘feeling’ their way through the experience, with no clear parameters to guide them, with one suggesting that “we
47 need to get an element of forward planning in” (John). Whereas the residential weeks could have helped in this
48 regard, there was instead the perception among the mentors that the content and structure of the sessions were not
49 helpful in supporting the development of their role. Thus, many considered that the information given to the
50 candidates had to be more work-place relevant, with one going as far as to say “there’s no connection” (Andy).
51 In this regard, the mentors were critical of the lack of transference between the more formal sessions the coaches
52 were introduced to during the residentials and what they were supposed to follow up with and on in practice.

53 *A relational activity: Issues of reciprocity*

54 At the outset of the study, there was uniform agreement among the mentors for the need to establish
55 positive working relationships with the candidates. What helped was the ‘study visit’ to another country where

1 the mentors generally agreed that “the relationships formed with everybody there were first class” (Andy). The
2 development of a ‘close’ relationship was considered vital for the mentoring relationship to succeed (e.g., “now
3 I’ve got to know them a bit better I can help them through the journey” [Tom]). This viewpoint was consistent
4 throughout, with mentors reiterating that establishing functional relationships with the candidates was crucial to
5 success in their role: “it’s the relationship thing...it’s about people” (Nick). As another mentor went on to say,
6 “you were better able to understand their needs and wants from the relationships built” (Sam). What was vital in
7 this development was trying to engage in frequent informal conversations with the candidates which involved
8 arranging recurrent visits to their work places. There was wide agreement about this, with mentors saying things
9 like: “meeting up with the guys widened my understanding of the role” (Nick); “we went out to see them a lot
10 more” (Percy); and, “what was most effective for me was definitely going to see the lads working” (Andy). Hence,
11 where mentors were able to observe the candidates in their working environments, they were able to gain a greater
12 sense of their contextually specific learning needs.

13 Whilst the mentors were cognizant of the importance of observing and working with the coaches in
14 context, they also understood that such visits were often difficult to organise and time consuming. In this regard,
15 the busy nature of both candidates’ and mentors’ work (i.e., other duties) posed challenges to such relationship
16 building and, hence, the mentors’ role in candidate learning (e.g., George: “time is the biggest [obstacle]”).
17 Subsequently, the infrequency of meetings (often done through phone contact), suggested that the tasks given on
18 the course to be completed in the interim periods between the residential had low priority for the coaching
19 candidates in the wider scheme of things. This was a point of frustration for most of the mentors, who felt that the
20 candidates needed to take a greater ‘ownership’ for their own learning and prioritise the work of the course to a
21 greater degree to gain the full benefit. Here, the mentors did not consider that the candidates were engaging in the
22 process in a way that met their (i.e., the mentors’) expectations. Conversely, the problem of busy workloads also
23 applied to the mentors themselves, hence, they were not always able to give as much as they wanted. For such
24 reasons, it was sometimes perceived as difficult to adequately fulfil the relationship-building mentoring role.

25 Throughout the project, the role of mentoring tended to be viewed in terms of responding to candidates’
26 needs (largely concerning the competency framework); that is, the role was seen as responsive in nature rather
27 than initiatory. In some ways, this was reflective of mentors’ relative uncertainty within the position; it being
28 functionally easier to respond to candidates’ perceived needs (i.e., requests) than decide on those needs. In the
29 words of three: “I’ve felt the responsibility to support more, and I’ve been more comfortable doing it” (Nick);
30 “...it depends on the candidate, and what they want” (Tom); and, “...we’ve done it this way to suit the candidates”
31 (Sam). Some candidates then, received much more support than others largely depending on how much they
32 asked, and the extent to which they and their mentor had time to spend. Thus, the stated mantra of ‘helping them
33 as much as they need’ only seemed to stretch to “how much they asked”. Building on this idea, the mentors
34 considered themselves very reactive in nature; for example, Sam stated; “I’m getting better at fire-fighting, while
35 Clive claimed “I think we are just feeding off what they are saying, rather than mentoring them”. Whilst initiatory
36 thinking was rare, a couple of the mentors did assume more pro-active roles, as exemplified by Tom (“it’s also
37 about introducing new ideas and concepts, planting new seeds”) and Percy (“it should be more than just getting
38 them through the course work”). There seemed then, to be a variety of role conceptualisations, which impacted
39 on the nature of the reciprocity experienced within the mentoring relationship and how the mentors were ‘used’
40 by the coaches.

41 In order to maximise the usefulness of candidate site visits (where mentors visited the candidates in their
42 ‘home’ clubs), which in turn were not easy to organise, mentors felt they needed a firmer grasp of their role and
43 the course-required competencies. This was, however, seen to develop as the course progressed, and was perceived
44 as being predominantly linked to a growing urgency among the coaches to complete and evidence the said
45 competencies; a development which gave the mentors a sense of “now they need us”. The competency framework
46 then, was simultaneously used to secure relationship development and impart a feeling of usefulness among the
47 mentors, while also somewhat proving a barrier to such relationships in terms of the mentors being seen as
48 enforcers of more-than-often ‘irrelevant’ material. Consequently, although efforts were made to help candidates
49 use the given knowledge in practice, the nature of the competencies and their perceived (ir)relevance by candidates
50 (over and above what was needed to ‘pass’ the assessment) was deemed problematic.

52 Discussion

53 Having problematized and deconstructed the mentoring process from the case investigated, we now
54 proceed to suggest ways forward. Consequently, drawing on the study presented, in addition to extant literature,
55 we propose a framework for progressive structured practice. Naturally, we are not presenting a grand theory of
56 mentoring here, a one-size-fits all model to unproblematically follow. Rather, what we advocate is a considered

1 scaffold that takes account of the ‘living, breathing world in question’ (Blumer, 1969); a framework which
2 presupposes that the essence of mentoring lies in facilitating mentee learning within a complex and non-linear
3 process. Such learning necessarily occurs in a particular socio-pedagogical arena with a crucial function of the
4 mentor being to help the mentee develop an understanding of (structural) context and their imaginative agency
5 within it.

6 Within our developed perspective, the mentor is not attempting to make the learner independent. Indeed,
7 the idea of independence is at odds with viewing the mentee as working within social networks, where
8 collaboration, obligation and dependency are normal features of coaches’ working practices. Rather, the mentor
9 should focus on building the mentee’s capacity to operate within social systems and linkages, whilst helping the
10 latter take responsibility for learning and actions (and the consequences of such actions). Thus, emphasis is given
11 to the relational, as opposed to the individual (Crossley, 2011). Additionally, credence is given to considered
12 theoretical (pedagogical-coaching) frameworks (e.g., Jones, 2019) to both explore and develop coaches’ agency
13 within the complex social landscape and the inevitable power dynamics at play. In this respect, a suggestive re-
14 construction of mentoring practice is advocated, where an element of disequilibrium and insecurity is considered
15 as a catalyst for subsequent learning.

16 *Towards an ontology of mentoring: Developing understanding, agency and responsibility within a complex socio-*
17 *pedagogic context*

18 Similar to the mentors in our study, Armour (2015, p. 19) identified “the potential for problems [in the
19 mentoring relationship] where the nature and purpose of the activity are not wholly clear to all participants”. This
20 is not, however, to imply that easily articulated, (often superficial) understandings of the mentoring process should
21 be promoted. On the contrary, attempts to overly sanitise and simplify the relationship are likely to lead to
22 frustration and dysfunctionality between the actors involved. This is because mentoring is inherently difficult, and
23 to treat it otherwise is likely to create cognitive dissonance. Consequently, as Chambers (2015) claimed, there is
24 a need to undertake the uncomfortable act of standing back to reflect on the unpredictable and chaotic nature of
25 mentoring, where consistent process and results are rarely, if ever, attainable. Failure to adequately engage with
26 this complexity leads to the adoption of under formed reflexive frameworks that diminish the sense-making
27 capacity of those involved. No doubt then, both mentor and mentee require the time, space and intellectual
28 attributes to develop a (somewhat) shared, conceptual understanding of the process with which they are engaged
29 (Armour, 2015). Clearly, the standardised, universal approach that has often been adopted by those developing
30 mentoring programmes is not the answer (Chambers *et al.*, 2014). Alternatively, both the mentor and mentee need
31 to develop and negotiate a shared sense of what mentoring is and is not; an understanding that is necessarily built
32 on strong ontological foundations. This, however, does not mean that ‘anything goes’; a decision left up to the
33 vagaries of context. Rather, there are important and relatively consistent features of the process that must be taken
34 into account.

35 A key component of our argument rests on what the term ‘ontological foundation’ is taken to mean. In
36 this respect, it is perhaps useful to first provide an example of where ontological agreement is not satisfactorily
37 achieved, and the consequences for those involved. In the data reported earlier in this article, the mentors were no
38 doubt searching for a degree of security in their role, a feature consistent with related previous work (e.g., Jones
39 *et al.*, 2016; Sandford *et al.*, 2010). Here, to alleviate some of the insecurity and feelings of resultant inadequacy,
40 it was common for the mentors to default to the competency framework given by the National Governing Body
41 to operationalise their work. There was, however, a sense that both mentees and mentors found this unsatisfactory.
42 This was principally due to the perceived irrelevancy of the given tasks particularly from the former group; tasks
43 based on a crude behaviourism, which reduced complex and ambiguous activities to a set of observable actions.
44 Thus we argue that the ontological abyss between the competency requirement and the everyday reality of the
45 coaches was a factor that frustrated the engagement of the mentees.

46 This is not to say that under such conditions the mentoring process is always devoid of value. As Armour
47 (2015) highlights, even when mentoring is directed to a predefined end, there is still space for individual agency
48 where useful learning may occur. It is, however, obvious that a generic competency framework or assessment
49 criteria is not a substitute for a coherent and critical ontological understanding (of both coaching and mentoring)
50 to guide practice; that is, there has to some intersubjective agreement between those involved in mentoring about
51 the nature of the activity and its purpose in relation to the context in which it takes place.

52 Armour (2015) identified mentoring as definitively linked to the social conditions in which it occurs. In
53 the neo-liberal, performative culture this means that that the mentee is likely to be considered as someone to be
54 ‘guided’ within the given managerialist and accountability structures. Such a situation creates challenges in the
55 way mentoring is conceptualised because, whilst there are similarities in the processes and relational components
56 evident, the overall focus is directed as much towards audit compliance as learning (Sawiuk *et al.*, 2018). Such, a

1 conceptualisation of mentoring is at odds, ontologically, with what we are advocating. Rather than reducing the
2 mentee's agency, we support Maier and Seligman's (1976) idea that a mentor should develop and encourage the
3 learner in understanding and developing their agency, consequently helping them take greater responsibility for
4 both actions and learning. Additionally, and further building on Chambers *et al.*'s (2015) work, we propose that
5 a key aspect of the mentor role is to help the mentee apprehend the social structures within which he or she
6 operates in order to understand the possibilities (and limits) of action. It is a perspective that places both the mentor
7 and the mentee into a social landscape, necessitating that a key function of the mentor is to help the mentee
8 understand and navigate the inherent contextual power structures and relations at play, in order that intended
9 outcomes are better achieved.

10 *Developing praxis through the use of ontologically consistent conceptual frameworks*

11 Whilst it may seem simplistic to say that learning should always be at the heart of the mentoring process,
12 this understanding has important implications. If learning is conceived as a complex, non-linear phenomenon that
13 occurs within a particular social and cultural context, it creates a clear ontological foundation on which related
14 practice can be built (e.g., Bowes & Jones, 2006; Cassidy *et al.*, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Indeed, it is imperative
15 that such practice be explicitly grounded in and consistent with the nature of the activity (an alignment that was
16 absent in the data reported in this study).

17 A range of theoretical lenses have been adopted in the coaching literature over recent years; theories that
18 have enabled both academics and practitioners to make-sense of the activity (Cassidy *et al.*, 2015). Whilst we do
19 not advocate one particular theoretical perspective, taking into account coaching's social essence (e.g., Jones *et al.*,
20 2011), the sense making framework employed should align with such (interpretive) foundations.
21 Subsequently, the decided upon affiliated coaching theory should be selected from those considered contextually
22 appropriate to both further and respond to the mentee's learning needs. Whilst a key part of the mentor's role then,
23 should be to select relevant knowledge sources that can help support the mentees' learning, this on its own is not
24 enough. Mentors must demonstrate the quality of mind to deal with the vagaries of practice. This would include,
25 for example, their capacity to facilitate the mentees emergent and developing understanding of theory to the
26 requisite level to enable it to be of use in ways that are contextually relevant (see Hemmestad *et al.*, 2010). Whilst
27 this framing asks a lot of mentors in terms of both knowledge and skills, given the complexity of the mentoring
28 task as advocated, and the assumed professionalism of those who might undertake it, such high expectations seem
29 reasonable.

30 A challenge for mentors and those constructing mentoring programmes is to develop role clarity and
31 confidence within the relationship thus allowing mentors to act as described above. For many of the mentors
32 whose experiences were described in this paper, an important manifestation of their role insecurity was a
33 reluctance to take the initiative within the learning process. They alternatively preferred to stay on safer ground
34 responding to the learning needs claimed (or assumed) by the candidates. Whilst clearly there is a role for mentees
35 to identify their own needs, there is also a danger that this limits their learning to slow incremental change, simply
36 revisiting what they already know through experience. Rather, we support others' views that a mentor should take
37 a pivotal role in helping a mentee make significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking (Clutterbuck, 1991;
38 Clutterbuck & Megginson 1999). This offers a particular challenge, because, as was raised by Jones *et al.* (2015,
39 p.153) most of the mentees seemed more interested in knowledge that "they could easily relate to.... a wish for a
40 general re-affirmation or incremental development of existing beliefs as opposed to any conceptual shift in
41 thinking". As such, added importance is given to Armour *et al.*'s (2013) redefinition of mentors in teaching and
42 coaching as lead learners; a term that reflects the primacy of mentors in shaping the learning process for mentees.

43 The concept of phronesis is of relevance to discussions of mentoring, in terms of understanding both the
44 landscape in which the learning occurs, and the related outcomes that should be prized (Flyvbjerg, 2001; for a
45 review of phronesis and its application to coaching see Hemmestad *et al.*, 2010, and Jones & Hemmestad, 2019).
46 This is because the act of mentoring should look beyond technical rationality, towards "a reflective analysis on
47 personal-value judgements in relation to (contextually appropriate) future actions" (Hemmestad *et al.*, 2010, p.
48 450). This action orientation is crucial, as the purpose of mentoring is not (only) to help mentees develop
49 theoretical knowledge, but to contribute to their practical wisdom (that is, the judiciously considered use of that
50 knowledge). This is a view that is ontologically aligned with the complex and contingent positioning of coaching,
51 and thus is highly relevant to the mentoring process for coaches. Here, the central constructs of phronesis could
52 be used by mentors to guide their interventions. For example, mentors might usefully consider how their actions
53 can be informed through adopting a position that conceptualises coaching (1) as a 'genealogy' (Foucault, 1971),
54 (2) as contextualist (not relativist) in nature, (3) as being imbedded in the minutiae of action, (4) as ethical practice,
55 (5) as emergent in nature, and (6) as requiring situational literacy (Jones & Hemmestad, 2019). What we are
56 essentially arguing for here is greater recognition of intellectual (prudent, judicious) work by coaching mentors,
57 thus conceptualising such work as a cerebral as opposed to a technical activity. It is work that also demands the

1 mentor accepts the guiding responsibility of the role as a ‘more knowledgeable other’ (Vygotsky, 1978) in
2 suggesting ways forward while simultaneously being able to judiciously read the unfolding contextual landscape
3 before deciding on the most appropriate course of action (Jones & Hemmestad, 2019).

4 5 *Valuing security and insecurity: A critical feature for a pedagogy of mentoring*

6 A highly risk-averse culture will inevitably influence both mentors’ and mentees’ understandings of
7 acceptable levels of challenge in a mentoring relationship (Armour, 2015). Here, we support Cushion’s (2015, p.
8 160) assertion that mentors should “systematically challenge coaches with the intention of forcing them to
9 constantly evaluate their whole understanding of the coaching role and their position within it”. This, however, is
10 not sufficient in and of itself. Rather, and as alluded to above, there is a need for forward, or inferential, thinking
11 that creates the possibility for new, and creative, actions (both on behalf of mentors and also for mentees/coaches)
12 (Jones, 2019). Through engagement in such challenges, coaches’ knowing and practice is deconstructed before
13 being reconstructed. This chimes with the work of Heaney (1995), who identified transformative learning as being
14 more likely to take place in the dynamic and chaotic spaces when learners are ‘on the edge’ of their current
15 knowledge bases. This concept of being ‘on the edge’ might usefully be characterised as relating to the new
16 (something not yet perceptible, understood, engaged with or acted upon), and the oft accompanying uncertainty.
17 In this way, the idea of inference again asserts its relevance; the call (or need) for forward thinking and action by
18 mentors that aims for possibilities not yet invoked by mentees. It is a strategy of experimentation with ideas and
19 practice; an attempt to realise what is suggested or imagined (Jones, 2019).

20 A necessary precursor for inference is reflexivity. Whilst in coaching there is clearly a need not to be
21 limited by what has gone before, decisions and actions must be grounded in a deep and intuitive understanding of
22 the self, of coaching, and context. Thus, reflexivity is a necessary step that must be coupled with coaches’ use of
23 (new) knowledge and ideas to create opportunities for acts of innovation and creativity. Through careful, reflexive
24 grounding of such inferences, and the decisions and actions that follow, in the history of the wider structures in
25 which they are situated, criticism of crude relativism can be rebuffed.

26 The linked processes of reflexivity and inference, as outlined above, should be highly valued by mentors
27 and actively fostered through their practices, despite the uncertainty and difficulties coaches might experience as
28 a consequence. As earlier noted by Cushion (2015) such engagement with uncertainty must occur within a
29 supportive framework, where the mentee feels a level of security with the mentor, understanding and accepting
30 that the mentor’s actions are undertaken in their best interests. This point is central; the intentionality of mentoring
31 is both to support and challenge the learning of coaches. It is a dual function painfully absent from the examples
32 outlined in the results of this paper, where both parties’ absence of role and task understanding made it very
33 difficult to accept, let alone actively seek, the important learning experiences desired when learners are ‘on the
34 edge’ (Heaney, 1995). Through engagement with the ideas expressed in this section of this paper, it may be
35 possible to develop the level of security experienced by mentors (and mentees) to the point that they can push
36 boundaries, offer challenge, and even engage in conflict, which may be most useful for mentees’ learning and
37 development, despite the likely discomfort caused.

38 When considering how this can be achieved at the micro-level, a useful departure point could be
39 Vygotsky’s (1978, p. 86) zone of proximal development (ZPD) defined as “the distance between the actual
40 development level [of a child] as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential
41 development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable
42 peers”. In searching how to better conceptualise and structure action in this respect, Jones and Thomas (2016)
43 located the notion of pedagogical scaffolding within a ZPD. Interestingly, they chose to consider the ZPD as a
44 ‘zone of uncertainty’ with scaffolding being the means through which order could be placed upon this uncertainty
45 of learning. There are lessons to be learned here for mentoring, as learning (in both coaching and mentoring) is
46 presupposed to be a social, non-linear process characterised by complexity and ambiguity (Jones *et al.*, 2010).
47 From this perspective, the mentor must provide sufficient supports (scaffolds) to encourage the mentee to attempt
48 new challenges (as related to a particular intention) where learning may be experienced and internalised. As Jones
49 and Thomas (2016, p. 68) continued, this level of adaptation highlights and confirms “the relationship between
50 contingency, challenge, teacher response and student learning”. Clearly, the idea of the ZPD as a zone of
51 uncertainty helps both mentor and mentee accept that both challenge and discomfort are a normal and necessary
52 part of the learning process, whilst the idea of scaffolding provides a metaphor that can help to inform the process
53 of mediating learning within this pedagogical zone.

54 *Closing remarks*

55 Throughout this paper, the relational nature of the mentoring process has been positioned centrally, where
56 mentors must both support and challenge mentees to see their practice anew and engage in creative future actions.

1 All the while, coaches must be encouraged to know and respect the social landscape in which they operate without
2 foregoing their agency to shape it in desired ways. To indulge in some forward thinking of our own, one way
3 which these ideas could be further developed is through an examination of the mentoring relationship in terms of
4 trust. Here, Meyer and Ward's (2009, p.3) definition seems a good fit, where trust is described as "the optimistic
5 acceptance of a vulnerable situation which is based on positive expectations of the intentions of the trusted
6 individual or institution". Such an idea may be a useful departure point for future research, focusing, as it does,
7 on the interaction between the relationships of the individuals involved and how perceptions of intentions shape
8 the tendency to take an element of risk; a component that we see as a fundamental in any useful mentoring
9 partnership. The future task then, is to experiment with such a notion, and the general framework advocated in
10 this paper, in practice; the next step in reconstructing realistic, useful mentoring practice for coaches.

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