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Becoming a Performance Analyst: Autoethnographic Reflections on Agency, and Facilitated Transformational Growth

Andrew's Story

I open my GCSE results. A letter C adjacent to Science confronts me. My (as yet unknown) journey to becoming an elite performance analyst nearly ends before it begins. I require a B or better to gain entry to A-Level PE. I am offered French or Design Technology instead, but have no interest in these. Much persuasion, and support from my family, later, I am given permission to undertake the PE course. Now I have something to prove; to a school and teachers who claimed I would fail. Earlier the same year I was encouraged to have extra maths tuition, having been warned that I would fail that GCSE too; but, I comfortably achieved a B. Subsequently, I prove them wrong again, in that instead of scraping along the bottom of the A-Level PE class as predicted, I end up a whisker away from an A. An acceptance letter for a Sports Studies BSc programme at University of Hertfordshire drops on my doorstep.

My rationale for choosing the course is simple; my life revolves around playing and watching sport. I play badminton for my school and county, and to this day hold a Leicester City FC season ticket (someone has to, right?!). However, my reasoning was questioned frequently by sceptical others. For example, my long term girlfriend also independently chooses Hertfordshire, as it is the only place to do her preferred course in the country, but we are perceived to have selected the same university for non academic reasons. This makes me determined to prove a point again. I arrive at Hertfordshire on my first day knowing no-one else, and a new journey begins. I quickly find myself in a group of five new friends. We stay together as a group throughout, supporting and helping each other along the way. By the end of the course three of the group graduate with jobs in performance analysis (PA) at an elite level.

My first year is nothing special. I am a middle of the road student; although well above the bare pass level that many of my peers seem content with. Second year rolls around, and a guest lecture on PA from a final year student who works as a Watford FC performance analyst. A catherine wheel of ideas is ignited, and spirals through my mind as a result. Do they do this in badminton? Could I combine my love for sport and photography together? (I completed GCSE and A-Level photography, and worked as an events photographer for two years). I am able to tap in to opportunities to learn the basics of PA, and soon I am well and truly out of my comfort zone, at a Hertfordshire Mavericks Superleague Netball match. I am there with another student (one of our group of five) from my course. We film the game, and attempt to code some centre passes and goals. That is about the limit to our netball knowledge at this stage. Something makes us want to go back, and we carry on until the end of that season.

Before long I am busy accumulating as much PA experience as I can. I find myself in a five star hotel in Birmingham, with the England Badminton team, chatting, and having breakfast with one of England's best known players. I am here, fully kitted out, as an assistant performance analyst, in my own sport. I fulfil the same role the next year, when a new head analyst is in charge. He, and the performance director of Badminton England, invite me to work more with the national squad in the lead up to the 2012 London Olympics. I end up travelling to Badminton England HQ at Milton Keynes twice a week as an England Badminton performance analyst. Other PA experiences come and go, some good, some bad. Eventually, I'm standing delivering a guest lecture to students on PA, twelve

months on from when someone was doing the very same to me. I hope that I too can inspire others to follow my path.

A new coach starts at Hertfordshire Mavericks, and I choose to go back and be more involved. I attend every game home and away (including long coach trips to Manchester and back in a day) and am proud to be part of the team. I learn the rules, some tactics, and the vernacular. A chance meeting at a game introduces me to the England Netball analyst, and editor of the *International Journal of Performance Analysis* – and we exchange contact details. I am now cramming in as much PA experience as I can manage in and around my university studies. I am also writing a dissertation examining if performance analysis could be used in badminton to a greater extent, and creating a unique embryonic system for PA in the sport. It attains the magical 70% line (first class equivalent. In fact, I ultimately end up with a first class degree classification overall), and is later published in the *IJPA* thanks in part to that chance meeting with the editor, who encourages a submission. By this time I am in addition working as an analyst for Olympic canoeing in the run up to London 2012. I then receive a phone call from the head coach of the England Netball team, asking me to be their analyst. I accept and will be working on a home series against Jamaica, and then on tour in Australia and New Zealand. Suddenly that work with Mavericks has paid off (both metaphorically and literally, as I am awarded a scholarship for my work with them). Two weeks later I am sitting in the Olympic Stadium as a performance analyst for Paralympics GB. Fast forward to November and I am sat on a plane down under, about to return home after an amazing six week tour.

It is 5 am on a cold frosty morning three days later, and I am still feeling jetlagged and groggy (my body clock is all over the place). “This train will call at all stations to Cardiff Central.” Couldn’t they miss a few out? Four hours later I arrive to be interviewed for a doctorate in PA. No sooner had I embarked on the long journey back to Hertfordshire than I get the call to say I have been selected from 12 applicants to be England Netball and Cardiff Metropolitan University’s Performance Analyst (fully funded) PhD student. I am delighted and apprehensive at the same time.

And so, as the music reverberates, I walk down the central aisle of St Albans Abbey as part of the academic procession at my Sports Studies BSc (Hons) graduation (I am now also a member of staff at Hertfordshire University, as a paid Performance Analyst). I take my seat on stage next to my lecturers, and look out to see the beaming smiles of my proud parents in the third row. Then it hits me. Three years ago I did not even know what PA was. Now I am here, I think back to opening those GCSE results; smiling to myself at those teachers who told me I would fail (they soon get wind of my achievements, and are suddenly keen to associate me with the school, and advertise my success on the website). I proudly shake the hand of the Vice Chancellor and return to my seat. Only at this point do I realise how far I have come, but more importantly how far I have to go. My journey as a performance analyst is only just beginning.

“This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is perhaps the end of the beginning.” Winston Churchill (1942)

David's Story

I stumble in to a hot and packed lecture theatre 10 minutes after the session is officially due to start. A bag of balls in one hand, lap top in another, and a guest national coach in tow. Due to the vagaries of the university timetabling system we have negotiated a mad dash through the winter darkness, and the growing rush hour, from one site to another in order to transition between a coaching practical and a delayed start theory based lecture, on a second year *Applied Sports Coaching* module. As I wrestle the cables and connections of the audio visual system, I quickly scan the room and take in those faces conspicuously absent from the preceding practical, and the more flushed features of those committed enough to attend both, as they hurriedly take their seats. I briefly remind our national coach about the remit for the presentation part of her input to the module, and load up her materials on the computer. As I do so I glance across to the side of the room, and spot my third year student, who is going to speak for the second half of the session. He is reading through his notes nervously, and looks up with a cautious smile.

It is about 8 weeks into the first term of another hectic academic year (my 25th as an educator). A precious interlude between the madness of getting everything up and running effectively on the Sports Studies degree (which I am Programme Tutor for), and the imminent battle with daunting piles of marking which will soon arrive. As module leader I have already covered a lot of theoretical content, mostly related to aspects of periodisation, and I have now arranged for guest speakers in an attempt to bring alive for students how these issues are implemented in real world practice. Ever vigilant for possible win-win situations, and setting up virtuous cycles, I have one of my third year students delivering on how he has used PA in his own coaching related practice. This will help him complete required coach education hours for the *Advanced Sports Coaching* module which he is undertaking, and may open second year students' eyes to the possibilities of PA; both in terms of theoretical applications to periodisation, and the possible kinds of work related experiences that they might undertake themselves.

I was initially employed by the university to put together the degree, and was keen from the outset to design a structure and philosophy that might encourage the development of balanced thinkers and doers. I wanted to produce graduates who were independent and autonomous; self motivated and having learned how to learn. Individuals who had been empowered and facilitated to make their own luck; to identify and grasp opportunities, and to leverage more learning out of their experiences. Persons who have come to know themselves well, and to appreciate their own specialised areas of interest. From the very first cohort several students responded well to this philosophy. In the initial year one student approached a local professional football club and asked if he could do voluntary work in PA in order to gain experience; by the second year he was being paid for part-time PA work; by the third year he was one of the senior analysts, and after graduation became head analyst at the club. At the same time he undertook a PA related final year project, and gained a first class honours degree overall. He also delivered a session to second years on PA, and offered some opportunities and contacts for them to get involved if they wished to. Now, some years on, this tradition was well established, and a number of students on the course had achieved significant impacts in PA, both academically and vocationally.

The third year student managed to deliver a polished presentation (holding up surprisingly well as a follow up act to the national coach), with an impressive balance of theory and practice. I particularly

liked his content on a day in the life of a performance analyst, and the details of his burgeoning CV, including work with national teams and performance sports clubs, which clearly caught the imagination of some students; particularly as his own journey as a performance analyst has only started after the corresponding guest lecture the year before. The brief message on his last slide summed things up nicely – take every opportunity. He rounded off by offering to discuss chances to get involved practically with individuals afterwards. As per most years, only a handful of students actually stayed, as the majority traipsed out. Some were merely curious about how they might write this up in theoretical assignments, or about related literature sources. But others were attracted by the possibility of gaining some hands on experience. Andrew approached me as the presenter worked his way through a short queue of enquirers. “I found this really interesting.” he said “But, I’ve never heard of it being used in badminton, so I’m not sure how I would start?” Andrew seemed to be a solidly performing but unremarkable student. Pleasant enough though, in my experience, and clearly accomplished in regards to badminton coaching. “Well, have a word with the speaker.” I advised “You never know. If it’s not used much in badminton yet, then you could be someone to help implement it!”

Fast forward a year, and Andrew is himself taking the guest lecture on PA. As I watch the presentation it strikes me how incredibly far he has come in such a short space of time. Firstly, his academic grades are now consistently excellent. Secondly, his accumulation of PA experience is extraordinary. Within the year he has worked with a Superleague netball team, a Premier league women’s’ football team, a county cricket side, an Olympic sport, and with the England Badminton team. As part of his presentation Andrew visually represents the Sports Studies community of practice that has now developed, showing an interlinked image that encompasses the students who have chosen to specialise in PA whilst on the course, and the various sporting contexts in which they have operated. Two critical questions occur to me arising from this. I wonder how it is that our students have generally had such success in this area, given that we do not actually even teach it on the course? We merely introduce them to the possibilities of PA, and provide links/contacts that can be followed up in order to gain experience if required. I also ask myself why it might be that Andrew in particular has made such spectacular progress, given that the initial opportunities available to him were merely the same, or similar to those available to all students?

Another year on and Andrew is about to graduate with a first class honours degree in Sports Studies. But even before he graduates we have managed to co-author a published journal article based on his undergraduate dissertation in the *IJPA*; he has gained full time employment at the Hertfordshire Sports Village (HSV), in a PA post that was effectively created for him from scratch; and he has secured a fully funded Doctorate place at a university specialising in PA. Furthermore, he is travelling internationally with England Netball as an analyst. Part of Andrew’s job at HSV, actually involves creating more opportunities for students to get involved in PA, so the virtuous cycle seems set to continue. I see him one day while having an informal meeting at HSV, and we shake hands and chat about various issues. He is wearing performance analyst branded matching kit, and it crosses my mind that over the last two years he has indeed transformed into a performance analyst at a personal level, deeper than just the clothing. PA seems to have become part of his life, and probably

part of him. At the same time he has evolved rapidly from a student to a valued colleague. We have reflected together on this remarkable journey, and his accelerated development. "I have an idea for our next paper." I say. "We should share your inspiring story, and explore what it might mean. Have you ever heard of autoethnography?".

David's Interpretations – What Might These Stories Mean?

As an educator I have found myself drawn to the metaphor of learning as becoming. When I reflect that there are still people struggling for the right to an education in some parts of the world, it genuinely saddens me to observe students who do not fully embrace their educational opportunities. One basic definition of learning I recall from my teacher training is a relatively permanent change in behaviour. But, some students do not seem willing to engage in the depth of learning that is required in order to promote meaningful personal growth and transformation. For me the highest form of learning is embodied in who we are and what we become in our interactions with a complex and dynamic world. This is perhaps best promoted by a blending of formal and experiential learning that effectively shapes our lives and constructs our selves, as well as promoting our further learning in response to inevitable ongoing change. An immersion in practice and study that essentially causes something altered and more agentic to emerge.

But what of my own becoming? I think I tend to encourage my students to make their own luck so strongly in part because I have not ultimately become fully what I wanted or intended to be. I now recognise that all I ever really wanted to do was to coach, and/or teach. But having survived so long in sport and education, and having been subject to the pressures of making a living, I have instead accumulated much responsibility, and become an educational administrator by default. I naively assumed that the job of being a lecturer in sports coaching would mostly be about coaching, teaching, and some research. But I find myself dealing with administration and bureaucracy for the majority of my time, while my interpersonal strengths seem woefully underplayed. At the same time education has, for me, not moved in a direction that I would have desired; becoming commodified, exploited, and depersonalised¹. And so, finding myself sidetracked, and the context shifting uncomfortably around me, mine has been something of a frustrating journey of unbecoming. Perhaps I need to become something different? To that end I am currently studying for an Educational Doctorate, and already feel somewhat changed and refreshed. Meantime, if I can make the occasional positive difference in helping others, such as Andrew, in their own journey of becoming, then that will be a rewarding consolation for now.

Andrew has become something of a standard bearer for my own educational philosophies, and an inspiring benchmark setter. How did he do it? Well, in my opinion, his initial awareness of the possibilities of PA was provoked by that guest lecture; probably made all the more potent through being delivered by a peer student. Then through a mixture of grasping opportunities, determination,

¹ These are of course merely my own reflections and perceptions, and in no way represent the views of University of Hertfordshire, nor necessarily the views of any of my colleagues. Nonetheless, readers may wish to access Bauman (2012) for a stimulating review of the possible effects of liquid modernity upon the nature of education.

luck, and being willing to get out of his comfort zone, he provoked rapid growth. At the same time he was able to tailor his academic assessments as they had been deliberately flexibly designed in order to allow students to pursue areas of personal and/or professional interest. Finally, utilising his accumulated experiences, understandings, and increasing engagements with communities of practice, allowed him to cultivate a discriminating awareness about the areas of PA that might best fit his personal ambitions and interests. It has been a privilege to be a humble part of his developmental journey thus far. In recent communication with me he indicated that although he recognises that there is hard work and difficulty ahead, he looks forward to becoming an expert in PA, or at least the best analyst he can be.

When I speculate on that question of why quite a few of my past and present students have become accomplished in PA, I believe that it may be due to the multi-thematic nature of the Sports Studies degree programme, combined with a built in capacity for agency. Hence, they could benefit from an appreciation of the place and meaning of PA within a broad contextual and conceptual framework, while simultaneously being empowered to select and develop PA as an area of intended specialism, promoting ownership that fuels high achievement in this specific field. I am genuinely amused that some people have come to think that I am some sort of expert in PA these days (far from it!), given the success of students such as Andrew. I look forward to facilitating others in becoming beyond their current capabilities in the future, and certainly in eclipsing mine! I believe the root word for the term education comes from the meaning to draw out. Thus, I have long used methods such as facilitative questioning and discussion to help students to uncover and appreciate what they actually already know, or have some grasp of. But perhaps this notion could be extended further, to consider how we as educators may help others to draw out and link to exactly what their own specific interests are, and what and who they might choose to become as a result of tapping in to revealed possibilities and passions?

"...learning is a process of becoming. Learning cultures, and the vocational cultures in which they are steeped, transform those who enter them." Colley, James, Tedder and Diment (2003, p.471)

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